



metro PLUS

THE HINDU

The art of growing bonsai plants on display at this workshop-cum-exhibit P3

VINEETH SREENIVASAN KEEPS A SECRET P4



Out of land, out of sea

Porombokkiyal, a lecture-fest by Chennai Kalai Theru Vizha, is back with answers to riveting questions about access, public spaces and what it takes to create a 'good city'

Sanjana Ganesh
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The *karuvattu kozhambu*, now being served as an amuse bouche on gourmet menus, is made of the poor man's humble anchovy. The process of curing this tiny, oily, silver fish, involves days of cleaning, gutting, salting and drying. Conditions must be ideal for the fish to be caught in bulk. Much of the fresh fish must be sold at markets by fisherwomen. They must then part-take in the labour-intensive

process of drying the anchovy on the coast by the beach until the saline stink wards off and a wonderfully crisp dried fish remains.

"For the amount of work put into drying an anchovy, the fisherfolk barely get their due. But it is a fascinating process of understanding the use of fishing land – the sand and the sea – both common lands. Both *porombokku nelams* [empty lands]," says K Saravanan, fisher rights activist. Much of this knowledge is hardly accessed by members of the upper echelons of society although it is essential.



Anchovy archives Conversations around occupation and land access will take place on September 28. KR DEEPAK

Especially since it documents the way of life of a large, essential community from Chennai. That is why Porombokkiyal, part of the Chennai Kalai Theru Vizha, is back with its third edition. Here, over five panels, speakers from realms often not platformed in academic venues, will take part in a lecture series that documents their work.

In this edition of the festival, expect to catch a conversation on palm tree climbing and toddy tapping by D Pandian and his daughter Harris Karishma, both toddy tappers from Villupuram; S Saratha and V Thangamani, fisherwomen from Urur Olcott Kuppam chatting with K Saravanan on the making of the *karuvadu*; Kannamal Soriyan and Pappal Jikkam, members of the Irula community speaking to Uma Maheshwari, an educationist, on their connection with divine rituals; and mridangam maker Antony Sowriyar talking to singer and curator of the event TM Krishna, on what goes behind creating the instrument.

This will be followed by a play titled *Oru Oorula Oru Aaru* by children from the Arunodaya Centre.

Krishna, who began the first edition of the event back in 2019, says that the intention was simple. The idea was to ask what it took to

create an ecologically and socially conscious city. This began with a need to understand its people better. Civic and cultural conversations hence became essential.

"We don't have a place where people with different kinds of knowledge can speak or share their insights. There's a certain amount of appropriation of that knowledge from the people in academia who use the voices of people from the community as a second voice. How do we change that? In academic spaces, we flip the roles. Those who are second voices are now your lecturers," says Krishna.

He adds that although it was unintentional, this year, the team seems to have touched upon *poromboke* or common spaces in all the five Sangam Tamil landscapes – *Kurinji* (mountains), *Mullai* (forests), *Marutham* (agricultural lands), *Neital* (coastal regions), and *Palai* (desert or arid lands).

The event promises a full day of riveting conversation on occupation and its dynamic socio-economic-cultural and environmental layers. "This is one of the events under the Chennai Kalai Theru Vizha ambit but we are looking to continue hosting several events including the Urur Olcott Kuppam Vizha," the curator says.

On September 28 at The Learning Community at Quest from 10.15am. Write to chennaikalaitheruvizha@gmail.com for details. Entry is free.

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Exciting prizes to be won



The athlete as musician

Reji Varghese

For nearly a decade, Somdev Devvarman was India's face on the international tennis circuit, winning laurels such as the Arjuna award and a Padma Shri in recognition for his service to the country. Now, nearly a decade after retiring from professional tennis, Devvarman unveils a different side of himself – one that has less to do with blistering forehands and lightning quick footwork and everything to do with emotion. His album, *Infinite*, is the sound of an athlete shedding his armour and leaning into vulnerability.

"It's been years in the making," Devvarman says. "My songwriting has always been a canvas of my experiences. At different stages of life, different songs arrived. Some took endless hours; others were born in a moment."

The slow burn of a second life

A lesser known fact about Devvarman is that he has been playing the guitar almost as long as he has been playing tennis. Devvarman says, "For as long as I can remember, I was obsessed with the guitar. When I was eight my siblings and I shared an acoustic guitar. When I was 18, my parents gifted me my own beauty. I still have it at my parents' home in Agartala."

"From my first pay cheque, as a student, while teaching tennis in summer camps in America, I bought a guitar. From my first paycheck as a pro, I bought a Black Takamine. Played it for most of this album," he adds.



Songs and shadows

The 10 tracks on *Infinite* are like diary entries, coloured by

Even while on the ATP tour music was never far away. "I'd travel with a guitar as often as I could," Devvarman recalls. "After losing in five sets at Roland Garros, I went alone to watch Clapton in Paris. After another early exit at Wimbledon, I caught Dave Matthews. Those were my great European summers."

moods of all hues – doubt, worry, hope, wonder. Devvarman says, "The song 'Not an Alcoholic' popped after a party with friends, 'What'll They Say' emerged in the lonely, disconnected quiet of the pandemic and 'Feeling That September' was a fragment of melody that refused to go away until it finally coalesced into the album a year later."

Then there is 'Bullet Through My Heart,' inspired by his dog Bullet, who lost her vision a few years ago.

"I was learning Joni Mitchell songs and just doodling with picking patterns, and suddenly the idea arrived," Devvarman says. Other

Record play

Former Indian tennis player Somdev Devvarman. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Together, they turned poetry into songs, mapped dreams into symphonies. The result is an album that feels intimate, like overhearing someone whisper secrets in their room, but with the warm accompaniment of a band wrapped around.

For Devvarman, *Infinite* is not a reinvention so much as it is a continuation. The same discipline that carried him through brutal five-setters shows up here as patience with the song writing process. The same curiosity that once drove him to research opponents now pushes him to explore sounds, textures, and moods.

Where once Devvarman's job was to never give up till the last point was played, now it is to let the music speak what words cannot. He says, "I think it's about staying honest with what you feel. And then just letting the song do its thing."

Infinite premieres at Aura Studio, T Nagar at 11am on September 28. To register for the event contact 9092310822.

Strings and cinema by candlelight

Chennai's historic Museum Theatre will trade the spotlight for candlelight as the internationally acclaimed Candlelight series returns to the city. The evening unfolds in two parts: a programme of sweeping film scores and Hollywood epics, followed by a tribute to AR Rahman, performed by The Sunshine Quartet of the AR Rahman Foundation. Cinema and composition will meet under a glow that feels both intimate and monumental. @The Museum Theatre, Egmore. September 28, 6pm and 8pm. Tickets at [livyourcity.com](#)



Prajwal Parajuly

When we first spoke of my writing a column about life in Sri City, my editor and I decided I'd pen eight installments. The idea was that this wide-eyed Himalayan kid would chronicle the wonders of living in rural Andhra Pradesh. There would be ruminations on idli and chutney, Japanese restaurants and Korean menus, monkey infestations and house parties. Eight pieces became 10. Ten became 12. Twelve became 15. I don't even know what number this story is, but it's time for the weekly column to gracefully bow out. The editors at *The Hindu* have become friends. They now know exactly when to expect a message from me.

Week after week, I look forward to the word play in the headlines and decks they concoct. Week after week, I look forward to Saai the illustrator's rendition of me in glorious caricature.

The past four months, I have greatly enjoyed letting you into my little slice of Sri City and Chennai, both of which have become homes in that strange way I wouldn't like to give much thought to. This weekly column is, by far, the most disciplined thing I have attempted. I become insufferable when I write against deadlines. When the deadline is weekly, the self-righteousness compounds.

To be honest, I had initially thought I'd give up after a couple of weeks. What, after all, was there to write about a city few knew existed? I surprised myself.

Yes, I wrote about luxuriating in home deliveries in Sri City and about my quest for the perfect dim sum in Chennai. I wrote about finding a cook who doesn't understand my oil rationing

and about getting my Hindu on at the Kapali temple. I deliberated on clubs and restaurants. I knew declaring the Madras Club the best club in the country would wound half the world, but I had little idea that a story listing what I loathed about Chennai would be better read than all the other pieces combined. At the end of the day, I guess we are all a tad masochistic.

The best part about the ample love and some derision that came my way was encountering emotional

songs are lighter, like 'Monkey and the Elephant', a playful ode to his son and his stuffed animal. The title track, 'Infinite', perhaps best sums up the album's mood: a mirror of vulnerability and a willingness to bare his soul.

The leap from scribbled notebooks to a fully produced album might have seemed daunting, but serendipity played its hand. Devvarman met national award-winning music director, producer, and bassist Aravind Murali at a gig. "I told him I wrote some stuff and asked if he'd listen," Devvarman recalls. "Luckily, he didn't turn me down, and I took my wife Shivali along for moral support to the studio. Little did I know that, that first session would become the foundation of 90% of the album."

Aravind's openness brought in unexpected textures – a whistle in 'Easy Love', an accordion in 'Not an Alcoholic', and even a tabla – suggested by Shivali – in the track 'Worry'. The band assembled was formidable: drummer Dhina, guitarist Vikram Vivekanand, Aravind on bass, and hovering in the background, Devvarman's guitar teacher, Michael Dias, a constant sounding board.

Together, they turned poetry into songs, mapped dreams into symphonies. The result is an album that feels intimate, like overhearing someone whisper secrets in their room, but with the warm accompaniment of a band wrapped around.

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SOUTHERN LIVING

Exit, stage left

Author Prajwal Parajuly ends his weekly despatches with just enough mischief to make you miss him

and about getting my Hindu on at the Kapali temple. I deliberated on clubs and restaurants. I knew declaring the Madras Club the best club in the country would wound half the world, but I had little idea that a story listing what I loathed about Chennai would be better read than all the other pieces combined. At the end of the day, I guess we are all a tad masochistic.

The best part about the ample love and some derision that came my way was encountering emotional

readers, invested readers, meticulous readers, the kind who found holes in stories. Take, for instance, the gentleman who decided that I had misrepresented the size of the gap between my bathroom wall and ceiling. He stated – correctly, I must confess – that the wall separating my two bathrooms didn't go only three-quarters of the way up but four-fifths of the way. Or that one poet who told me that the Chennai airport was like his mother – mother! – and that no one

should insult his mother. Or the genius who declared, with the conviction only a South Asian male can muster, that I wrote about all the partners of *The Hindu* as though Tulika Books and the Kapali temple and Murugan Idli ran ads worth millions in the paper. Just yesterday I was accused – good-naturedly, I hope – of making a story out of something as trivial as my beloved driver's sneeze.

For every heartfelt reaction, well-meaning

Smart serve

Meet Chennai's Vimalraj Jayachandran, the newly-crowned Tennis Esports champion

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Virtual victory Vimalraj with the trophy in Las Vegas. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

have to run as much, but how you move your upper body, the hip-drive shots are all the same," he says.

"All one needs to start playing this is to have a VR headset like Meta Quest and download the Tennis Esports app where they can play single or multiplayer VR tennis games. This is the beauty of it all; it doesn't really matter where you are or what your fitness levels are. Anyone can play and steadily get better at it," Vimal adds.

For his triumph, he walked away with \$10,000 as prize money.

Having won several national and international pickleball tournaments, Vimalraj, has shifted from playing professional tennis to pickleball over the last few years, and plays and coaches students in Chennai now. He has also been drafted for the Global Sports Pickleball Pro & Challenger League for two seasons in a row and is scheduled to play for Chennai in the upcoming season, and is among one of the two players from South India to be drafted for this league.

He says, "Pickleball is booming the world over and it truly is an exciting time to be a part of the sport."

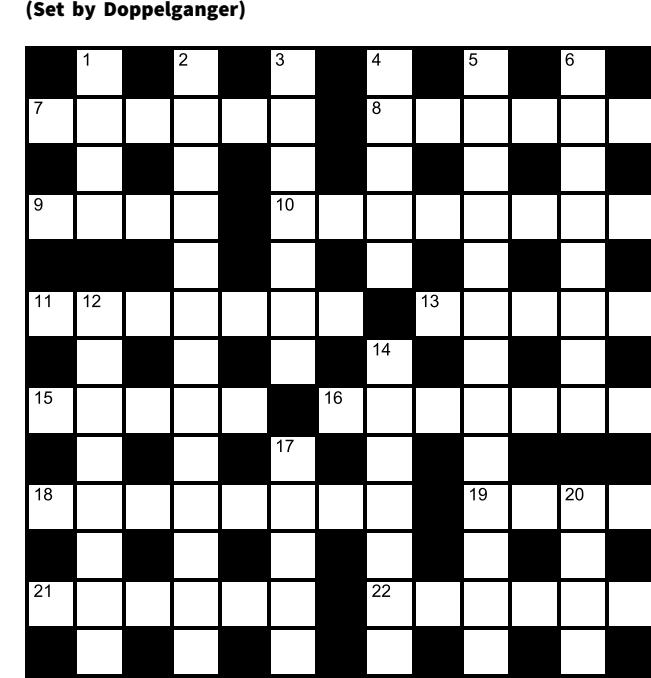
people wondered if writing about the competition between Japanese restaurants in a town no one cares about was judicious use of space. "You need to talk about politics," a friend said. "You could comment on what's happening to our country." I could, yes, but why would I want to do that? The chase for the perfect dosa stuffing keeps me up at night. The rave reviews some restaurants receive fill me with wrath. I don't want to be friends with anyone who doesn't feel strongly about Kappa Chakka Kandhari's cloud pudding. I am offended that it hasn't yet found a place on our State-dinner menu. I want to give the light-hearted and the happy-making stuff its due. If you'd like to read about all the evils plaguing the country, there's always Twitter.

For now, though, it's goodbye. Thank you for the love. I shall soon resurface on these pages (and the Weekend pages). I will likely continue writing about southern living, if only slightly less frequently. But I'll also write about my life in the Himalayas and my life in New York and my life up in the air, all of which can't be justifiably encompassed under the "Southern Living" umbrella. I am particular about mundane matters like that. If you'd like me to address topics close to your heart, dear reader, please talk to me. You aren't one to mince words, I know. Until then, re-read all the Southern Living pieces like you will be quizzed on them. Vanakkam.

Prajwal Parajuly is a novelist. Karma and Lola, his new book, is forthcoming in 2026. He teaches Creative Writing at Krea University and oscillates between New York City and Sri Lanka.

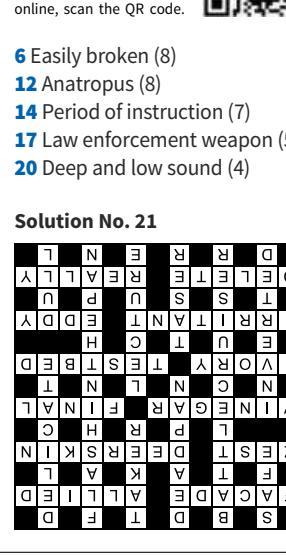
METROPLUS QUICK CROSSWORD #21

(Set by Doppelganger)



Across
7 Superficial appearance (6)
8 Joined by common cause (6)
9 Part of orange rind (4)
10 Type of leather (8)
11 Bad temper (7)
12 Occurring at the end (5)
15 Walrus tusk material (5)
16 Platform for engine development (4,3)
18 Agent that stimulates a response (8)
19 Reverse current (4)
21 Excise (6)
22 Expressing surprise! (6)
Down
1 Better ___ than sorry (4)
2 Large warship (6,7)
3 Poker player's expression (7)
4 He accepts an offer (5)
5 Short-lived popularity (5,2,3)

Solution No. 21
To play The Guardian Quick Crossword, The Hindu Cryptic crossword, Sudoku & other puzzles online, scan the QR code.



Carnival by the sea

The first edition of the Pickleball By The Bay and Music Festival is all set to take place on the ECR

Priyadarshini Paitandy
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Pickleball is the new posterchild of the sports world. This fast growing sport that was started by Joel Pritchard, William Bell, and Barney McCallum in 1965 in the US, now has fans all over the world. In Chennai, this game attracted more players post the lockdown phase. The growth spurt can be measured by the number of pickleball courts that have popped up across the city.

And now, Chennai gears up for the Rise Up Championship, which brings together pickleball players from all over India, with a side of music and food. Titled Pickleball By The Bay and Music Festival, the three-day long event, on the lawns of VGP Golden Beach from September 26 to 28, is organised by the Rise Up Championship (RUC) foundation in association with the Indian Pickleball Association (IPA), Tamil Nadu Pickleball Association, Dynamic Universal Pickleball Rating (DUPR) and Pickleball World Ranking, making it one of India's first PWR 1000 sanctioned tournaments.

"Launched three months ago, the foundation aims to provide a platform for players across sports who have achieved a lot but don't get the support they need it infrastructure or basic facilities or brand association," says Selvakumar Balu, founder, RUC foundation.

With pickleball being all the rage now, the team at RUC decided to go with this sport for their first-ever tournament. So this seemed like a good choice to begin with, he says. Next, there will be an e-sports and golf tournament.

Seventy two players have registered for the championship that begins on Friday. While there are participants from Mumbai, Lucknow, Delhi, the majority is from Bengaluru and Chennai. The players – in the 17-52 age category – have been selected by the



Serving trends A pickleball enthusiast at play. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Indian Pickleball Association, based on their DUPR rating.

A temporary court, with a view of the sea is being set up for the event. The 12,000 square feet air-conditioned, indoor area will have two courts and can seat 800 spectators. It will also have VIP lounge areas.

The organisers want to create a carnival atmosphere. The games will begin in the morning and continue till evening. By 7pm the lawns will come alive with the sound of bands and DJs and chatter from the food stalls. Day one will have DJ Lash and Aishwarya, Day 2, DJ Sparrow, Vinaitha and band, and Pineapple Express and Day 3 will feature Sublashini and band, Masala Coffee, and DJ Veekay.

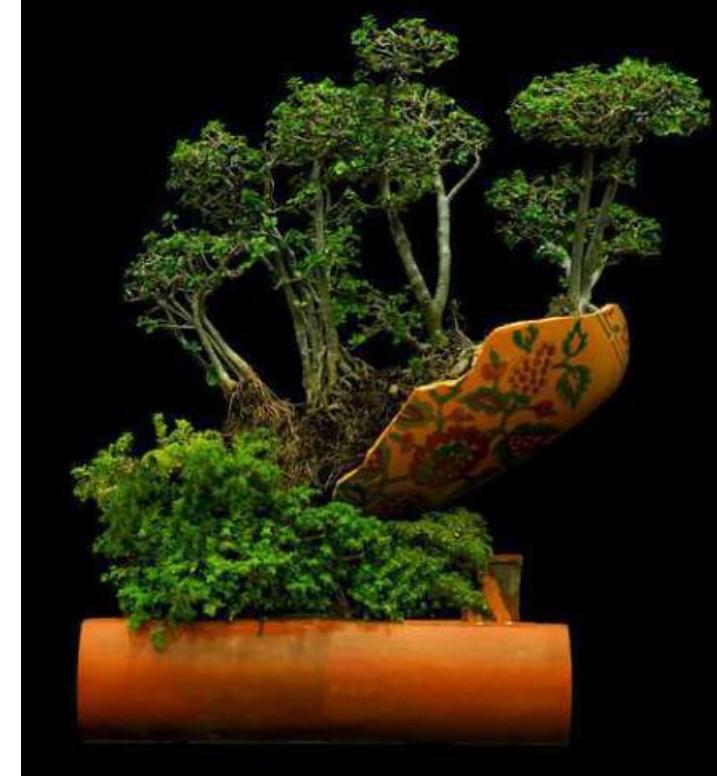
"You know what IPL did for cricket. We will be doing a similar format for other sports," says Selvakumar, adding that, "The idea is to make sure everyone picks up a sport; and if from the spectators attending even if five people take this up, it's good," he adds.

Passes are priced at ₹499 per day. Available on [in.bookmyshow.com](#). For details, log onto [riseupchampionship.com](#)

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Bon-saiyonara

Years of snipping and shaping go into creating bonsai plants. Catch a glimpse of a green oasis in Chennai at Bodhi's annual bonsai exhibition



bonsai enthusiasts, has been attempting to educate people in the city with such facts. For years now, they have been meeting on the second Saturday of every month, where information on shaping and correction of plants is exchanged through demonstrations and lectures.

After years of contemplation, Bodhi with its passionate community of about 35-odd members, began an annual

A glance at the Chennai Bonsai Association's well-maintained blog showcases how keen this community is

showcase of bonsai plants back in 2018. It is back for another edition between September 30 and October 2 at Lalit Kala Akademi. T George, an executive member of the association, says that about 120 plants will be on display. Plants of different heights with a variety of themes can be seen at the show.

They will include plants from his own extensive collection of about 80-odd bonsai plants.

"There is one with a root over rock. The plant used is ficus long island. It represents a plant growing on the mountain or cliff. You will see it if you drive down to Ooty or travel along the Chennai-Bangalore route," he says.

Green thumb
On the last day of the bonsai exhibition on October 2, gear up to attend a workshop where interested novices can participate in the mini landscapes. "During our monthly meetings, we discuss in detail the origin of the plant, where it comes from, and what



Catch the bonsai exhibit at Lalit Kala Akademi, Nungambakkam between September 30 and October 2 from 11am to 6.30pm. Entry is free. Contact 9841179283 for details. The fee for the workshop is ₹3,000.

Miniature nature
(Top) A bonsai tree; (left) Bodhi Bonsai Workshop and exhibition at Green Meadows Resort, Palavakkam, last year. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT AND M KARUNAKARAN



Killing time kindly

As screen addiction chips away at attention spans, countless tools promise to reclaim our focus. Where does the real answer lie though?

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Hank Green has always worn many hats – author, YouTuber, entrepreneur, educator. Recently, he added another project to his sprawling portfolio: the launch of Focus Friend, an app that tackles the problem of dwindling attention spans brought on by constant screen time. The premise of the app is straightforward. Users are given a bean-shaped character they can name. Each time they put their phone aside and enable focus mode, the bean begins to knit. The scarves and socks it produces can be exchanged for room decor, gradually furnishing the bean's space. The more time you spend focussed, the more progress the bean makes.

Another app, Forest, that has been around for years, gamifies focus by growing trees whenever users stay off their phones, creating a forest. Phone makers have also attempted similar interventions with dashboard tracks usage and offers ways to disconnect.



Skys simplicity opens the door to a surprisingly wide range of uses

in aluminium, it fits in your hand or pocket and can be set to intervals of five, 15, 30, or 60 minutes. At the chosen interval, it vibrates gently, reminding you of the time that has passed.

On the surface, it might sound almost simple, but that is precisely what makes it effective. There is nothing to set up, nothing to track, nothing to distract. "We don't want it to mimic a phone. No Bluetooth, no

Skys now available for pre-ordering on [skyedevices.com](#) at ₹4,900.

Tick tock (Left) Productivity tool Skye; (below) Barath MS and his team who created the device. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT.

voice recording. Just a simple device that is a tangible reminder of the passage of time. A gentle nudge to let you know that time is passing," Barath says.

That simplicity opens the door to a surprisingly wide range of uses. "Kids who are used to screens can find it useful to realise how their time is being spent," Barath says. "For UPSC students or anyone preparing for competitive exams, it can remind them they have another 15 minutes left, so they can spend it wisely." He points to unexpected cases as well. "One IT employee told me he wasn't using it for productivity but as a reminder to change his posture or drink water. That was an interesting use we didn't design for."

For Barath and his team, though, Skye is less about pushing a product and more about building something genuinely useful. He recalls mailing out dozens of 3D-printed prototypes to professionals across industries in the early stages, just to see how people responded. "We wanted feedback before anything else," he says. That thinking extends to design decisions. The device is made of anodised aluminium, with the same grade of vibration motor used in iPhones. Although the current cost of production is far higher, Skye is set to retail at ₹4,900.

At first glance, Skye can seem overwhelming. It does not track, gamify, or dazzle with features. But that restraint is intentional. What it offers instead is a small device that slowly helps rebuild patterns of concentration. Whether that is enough will depend on the person using it, but in an age of constant notifications, there is value in a tool that simply stays out of the way and lets you focus.



A collective vision

Paperbound Dreams, a group exhibition, celebrates the power of imagination through printmaking and mixed media on paper. Showcasing the works of 23 artists from the AI 100 Edition 1, it explores stories, textures, and perspectives that unfold within the quiet strength of paper. The show invites viewers to experience a space where vision and expression converge. @Art Houz, Nungambakkam. September 24 to October 4. 10am to 6pm. Entry is free. For details, call 7397745684.

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**Scorsese's next**

Martin Scorsese has set his next project, with Leonardo DiCaprio and Jennifer Lawrence starring in *What Happens at Night*, an adaptation of Peter Cameron's ghost story novel. The film, scripted by Patrick Marber (*Closer*), follows an American couple who travel to a snowbound European town to adopt a child. They take up residence in a vast but fading hotel where they encounter a string of eccentric and unsettling figures. As their stay deepens, reality begins to blur and their relationship unravels. Apple Original Films is in talks to finance and produce the project alongside Studiocanal. Production is expected to begin in early 2026.

**A Hindi release**

Bad Girl, the acclaimed Tamil coming-of-age drama produced by Vetri Maaran and Anurag Kashyap, is now all set to release in Hindi on September 26. The film, directed by Varsha Bharath, was released in theatres in Tamil on September 5. Headlined by actor Anjali Sivaraman, the film follows a young woman's journey from her teenage years to her early thirties, as she navigates love, lust, and life as a woman in Chennai. With music composed by Amit Trivedi, the film also features Shanthi Priya, Hridhu Haroon, TeeJay Arunasalam, Sashank Bommireddipalli, and Saranya Ravichandran. Notably, the film won the prestigious NETPAC award at the 54th International Film Festival Rotterdam earlier this year.

Nolan elected president of Directors Guild of America

Christopher Nolan has been elected president of the Directors Guild of America (DGA), marking a rare moment where one of Hollywood's most bankable filmmakers takes on the leadership of the union. Nolan succeeds Lesli Linka Glatter, who served two terms after being first elected in 2021. "To be elected president of the Directors Guild of America is one of the greatest honours of my career," Nolan said in a statement. Nolan, who won the Oscar for *Oppenheimer*, has his next project, *The Odyssey*, releasing next July from Universal Pictures.



Shilpa Nair Anand
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The trailer of *Karam*, which dropped out of the blue last month, rather stylishly and dramatically announced director-actor-producer Vineeth Sreenivasan's next directorial film after last year's *Varshangalkku Shesham*.

That he was working on a film, let alone that it was ready, was kept under wraps. "It is precisely for this reason...for that element of surprise. We did not want anyone to know; if word got out, then information about the film would have also got out, like the story and the location! This way, people could go straight to the trailer and wonder 'How did that happen?'" says Vineeth, a tad gleefully over phone from the UK.

Karam, which releases in



Vineeth Sreenivasan talks about how he 'asked' for *Karam*, and filming the movie in Georgia

Man on a mission

theatres on September 25, looks very different from the signature, feel-good Vineeth Sreenivasan films. With Noble Babu Thomas in the lead, the two trailers have generated quite a bit of curiosity. "We have ensured that the trailer has been cut in such a way that nothing is revealed."

But this much Vineeth will say: "It is about how a man on a mission in a foreign country survives and does what needs to be done to get out of there alive." He clarifies it is not a survival thriller.



"It (*Karam*) is about how a man on a mission in a foreign country survives, and gets out of that place

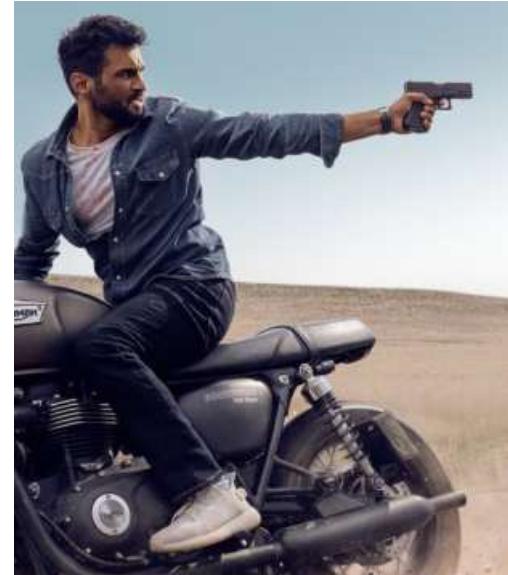
VINEETH SRINIVASAN
Director

After *Thira*, *Karam* is the second Vineeth-directed film that wasn't written by him; Noble, who is also Vineeth's long-time friend from college, has penned the screenplay apart from playing the lead role.

With around 90% of the film being shot in Georgia, parts of Azerbaijan and Russia, and parts of North India and Kochi, filming was a whole other ball game, says Vineeth.

"Filming was tough. We were on another continent, the weather was unpredictable, and we were working with a foreign crew, most of whom did not speak English. While shooting in those countries, everything better be planned. If you get an impromptu idea, you just fold it and put it back in your pocket [laughs]."

On co-producing the film, he says, "I knew the budget would be huge, and I did not want Visakh [Subramaniam] to take it all on himself. We have not



Vineeth Sreenivasan and the making of *Karam*

scrimped or cut corners in any way." Adding that this experience has been a learning curve for him and Visakh, Vineeth says they now know what it takes to film in Europe in terms of the overheads, budgets, visa procedures and other variables.

This also happens to be the first time that Vineeth will not be in the country for the release of a film of his – he is in the UK as part of a stage show he committed to a year ago. "This film has been many firsts for me," he laughs.

"We had planned [before filming started] for *Karam* to release earlier this year, in April-May. We thought of filming in October-November 2024. However, we could not get visas for some of our crew. By the time that was sorted, the weather wasn't ideal – not only would it be cold, but sunlight hours would be fewer too. So, we ended up filming when we thought we would release it, and that is how I am here."

Karam releases in theatres on September 25

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Director Athiyan Athirai on how he shot his long and extensive sophomore film in less than 40 days

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Filmmaker Athiyan Athirai looks content as he graciously takes feedback for *Thandakaaranyam* from an eager crowd after a special screening. One can understand the relief he must feel, for his ambitious sophomore is releasing six long years after his debut, *Irandam Ulagaporin Kadai Gundu*. "I got many opportunities immediately after the release of *Gundu*. In fact, I was in talks with a big hero at that point, but by the time I finished preparing a script, the COVID-19 pandemic happened. Then that hero already had four to five films in the line-up that were delayed due to the pandemic, so I had to move on." Athiyan then spent the next two years working on *Thandakaaranyam*. "I prepared

the story, did extensive field work, met specific sources, did a recce in multiple states like Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Kerala, and then started production."

The film narrates the story of a tribal man's long and gruelling journey from a forest in Tamil Nadu to an unforgiving paramilitary training camp in Jharkhand. Surprisingly, Athiyan took only 38 days for the principal photography. "This was possible only because of the extensive pre-production. From military drills to the physical training of the actors, everything had to be done beforehand, because we had to shoot in the forests and in many locations. We had to be conscious of our actors' call sheets and the budget," says Athiyan.

In one of the most tender moments of the film, Vinsu Sam's Priya and her lover, the protagonist Murugan,



(Kalaiyarasan) speak about the desire to shed all baggage, clothes, identity and gender, and venture into the forests.

"There's a tribal custom in which newlyweds would inform the town and roam around the forest nude, bathe in the river, consummate their marriage, and so on. Only when outsiders from the plains started encroaching on the forests did they stop following this custom," explains Athiyan, before

Forest stories Vinsu Sam and Kalaiyarasan in a still from *Thandakaaranyam*; and (below) Athiyan Athirai. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

pondering over what clothes denote in human civilisation. "In today's time, it denotes social status, caste, creed, identity, pride, and so on. To live without any of that baggage is the norm. That's how we were for millions of years; all this caste and creed came about less than 5,000 years ago."

In the film, Athiyan lets an *oppatti* score speak for itself, without any visuals, during the introduction credits. "My assistants suggested we have an animation for the opening credits, but in that case, I would have to create a piece of music that would fit that art. By playing it over the black screen, I am allowing the audience to imagine their own visuals," he says.

Athiyan relied on the film's composer, Justin Prabhakar, to come up with a score that could prepare the audience and welcome them into the forest musically.

When asked if he is worried about how Internet trolls might criticise his film even before consuming it whole, Athiyan says, "I am just telling a story about a man and the people he encountered in his life. He wants to protect his country, but foxes, also claiming to protect the country, misuse their authority and position, and threaten the very same security that all claim to guard, all for their own greed. So while I am sure there might be people who will jump to conclusions and criticise it, I am confident that they will like my film if they watch it."

Thandakaaranyam is currently running in theatres

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