



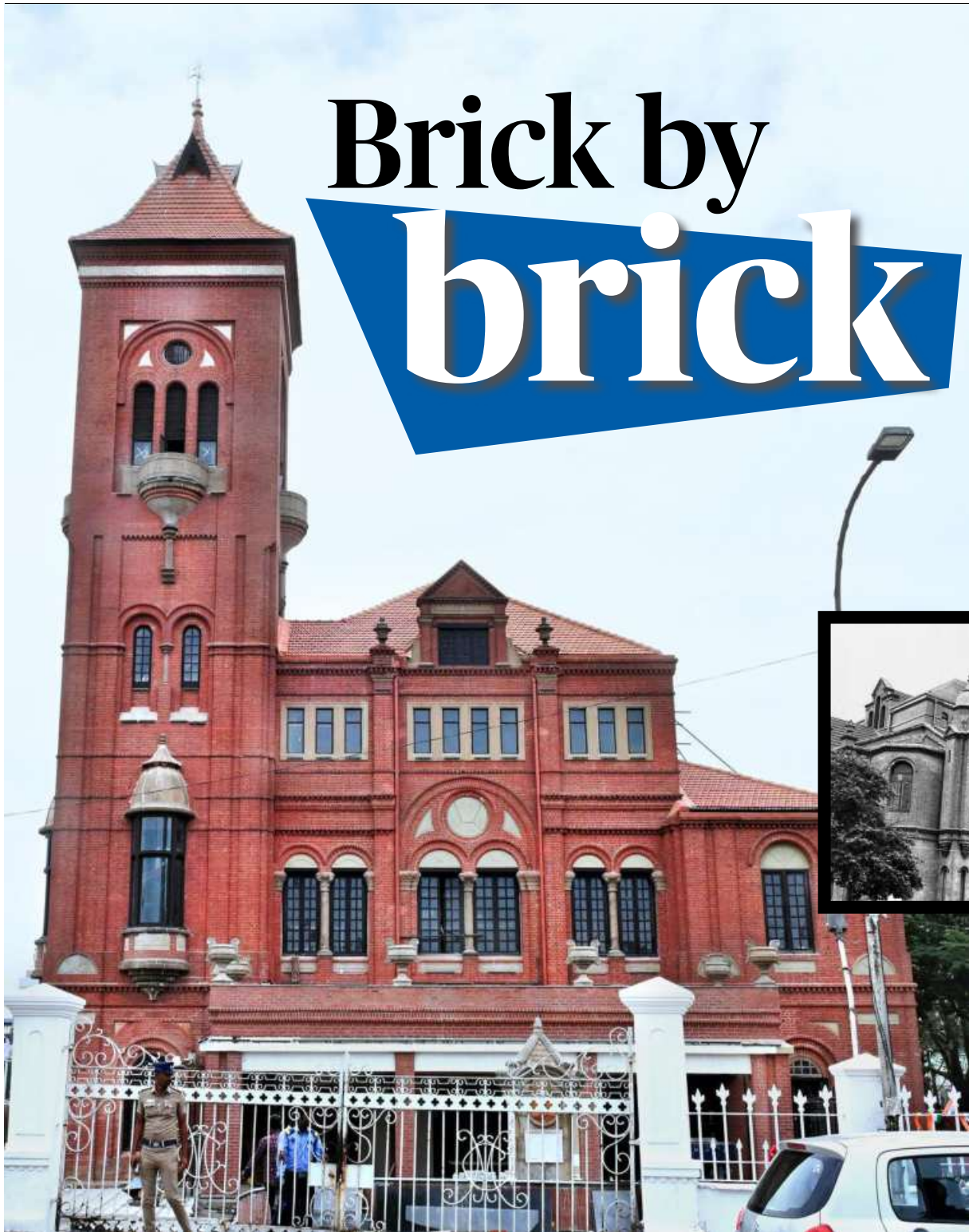
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THE HINDU



The Stella Maris Fine Arts batch of '87 turns friendship into a gallery showcase **P2**

WHY I LOOK LIKE RAJINIKANTH **P6**



Brick by brick

model currently in place at the Ripon Buildings.

Abha Narain Lambah, the country's preferred conservation architect, who was roped in for the restoration project, says that work primarily went into structural strengthening. "A lot of archival research, assessment of documents and mapping the structure was undertaken one and a half years ago. We looked at fabric and structural assessment of buildings in the 19th and 20th Century for reference but also needed to conserve it in such a way that it could be in active use. The aim was to ensure that it does not fall back into dilapidation. We also looked into the acoustics of the hall because it was primarily a performance venue," she says.



A glorious return (left) Victoria Public Hall at present; (above) Archival image of the hall. R RAVINDRAN AND THE HINDU ARCHIVES

Raj Cherubal, Executive Director, Chennai Smart City and Christy Lemma, Communication Cell In-Charge, GCC, say that much of the original pillars of the building were maintained. Earthquake proofing was done and an attempt to conceal the use of modern embellishments like air conditioners and lighting were done in a manner so as to not appear garish.

"For the inauguration, we plan on hosting an exhibition on Chennai, its roots, the recent discoveries of the Tamil civilisation and many more. There will also be a fete with cultural performances and a food festival," says Christy.

Of contributions Victoria Public Hall is about 90% ready to invite visitors as of today but a date is yet to be set on the inauguration. As workers put the final touches on the historic staircase of the building and the front yard, I ask a labourer what he thinks of working on the building and his thoughts on the recent sanitary workers' protest that was held close to the entrance of the hall. The labourer insists on a state of impermanence. He says that nobody will acknowledge his effort of having painted the building, the effort of daily wage labourers, or even the function of the government. "Nothing is permanent but this building. That is where the beauty lies."

STEP OUT



Voices without borders

The Madras Musical Association Choir joins the Concerto Glacensis Choir from Poland for An Evening of Global Music. Over 120 voices, 80 from Chennai and 43 from Poland, come together in a vibrant celebration of harmony across cultures. The programme spans continents and traditions, from folk songs and musical hits to a Tamil composition and familiar classics. Conducted by Augustine Paul and Katarzyna Mąka, the evening blends local resonance with international finesse.

@The Museum Theatre, Egmore, August 22, 2025, at 7pm. Tickets, priced at ₹ 500 and ₹1000, and are available at BookMyShow.in



Back with a beat

The 12th edition of live concert series Rewind, promises an evening of timeless music and shared energy. Created and produced by Krishna Iyer, Rewind has grown into a tradition over the past decade, drawing audiences with its blend of pop, rock and roll, and country classics. @The Museum Theatre, Egmore. August 24, 6.30pm onwards. For tickets, priced at ₹500, call 98846 80688.

In the late 19th Century, Victoria Public Hall hosted ballroom dances. Now, it is welcoming the public once more after an intensive restoration that took three years and ₹32.62 crore. What does it look like now?

Sanjana Ganesh
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Back in 2022, when Victoria Public Hall, an imposing town hall structure standing alongside some of the city's other great monuments like the Ripon buildings and the Central station, was still in disuse, a group of engineers from the Greater Chennai Corporation (GCC) gathered to undertake a study of the premises. Conservation architects and restoration experts who were roped in, said that entering meant danger. Once the ideal location for ballroom dancing in the late 19th and early 20th Century, a heavy step on the floorboard meant that your legs would go through the base of the structure, as the wood was ready to give way from years of having been locked away.

Three years hence, the smell of paint and fresh varnish wafts through the air of this iconic red-brick building which is now nearly ready to welcome visitors. Considered to be built somewhere between 1883 and 1890 in Indo-Saracenic style (although historian V Sriram in a recent *The Hindu* article argues that it is far more Roman in nature with its Travencore caps) by Robert Chisholm, the British architect who conjured up Chennai's most beautiful Colonial-era buildings, the project, under the Singara Chennai 2.0 initiative, cost ₹32.62 crore to restore.

A S Murugan, Superintending Engineer, Special Projects Department, GCC, wants Chennai-residents to use the town hall as it was initially intended – a public space for residents and travellers alike. "You have a train to

catch and need a place to wait? Spend some time at Victoria Public Hall where a museum on the history of the hall's conservation is going to be built," he says.

A time of generosity

Victoria Public Hall was originally conceived to honour Queen Victoria on her Golden Jubilee in 1887. An article in *Madras Musings* states that Sir AT Arundel, President of the Corporation at the time, raised funds to build the structure as "an affirmation of loyalty to the Crown". The opening however, would not have been possible if Rajah Sir Ananda Gajapati, the Maharajah of Vijayanagaram, did not set aside three and a half acres from People's Park to a Board of Trustees on a 99-year lease at eight annas (half a rupee) a ground per year. He is remembered in a tablet, embellished with all his titles, preserved at the entrance, for having laid the foundation stone.

Chisholm designed the hall with Gothic arcades and tiled sloping roofs and verandahs. A tall four-sided tower that rises to a height of 150 feet continues to exist till date with a claustrophobic winding path, just perfect to take one to the top to the top.

The Victoria Public Hall's purpose was to further the city's cultural and intellectual pursuits. It is why the place hosted several talks, screened films, held ballroom

dances, saw performances of plays and discourse on challenging political, spiritual and nationalistic concepts.

An article in *The Hindu* states that the premiere of the first ever film screening in the city was by T Stevenson in December 1896, the proprietor of the Madras Photographic Store. At Victoria Public Hall, he screened ten short films and many magic lantern slides, depicting views of Madras such as the Guindy horse races and a Mowbrays Road street scene.

Several plays, particularly those political by nature, were hosted by the Suguna Vilasa Sabha. It is also stated that the Justice Party had its first meeting at the Victoria Public Hall in 1916.

The hall has also played host to several eminent speakers. An article from *The Hindu's* 1897 edition speaks of Swami Vivekananda's visit. Mahatma Gandhi has also addressed a gathering here. Several sports: table tennis, billiards, and chess found patronage here at the ground floor of the venue.

Despite having played such a central role in Chennai's pursuit, the hall was often found in dire straits. Although exhibitions were held at the hall intermittently since the 1980s, no consistent use was planned for the location.

Heralding change

With the latest restoration in place, Victoria Public Hall is expected to return to its glory days. Galleries have been installed on the premises for travelling exhibits and a permanent one on the reconstruction of the heritage building. The GCC plans to open the space for talks and occasional performances. There is also a plan to replicate the heritage walk

Victoria Public Hall hosted several talks, screened films, held ballroom dances, saw performances of plays and discourse on challenging political, spiritual and nationalistic concepts.



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A

Framed together (below) Artist Thota Tharani at the showcase; (right) organisers Mala Chinnappa, Varuna Arvind, and Rangashree Srinivas. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Sangita Rajan
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In a quiet corner of VA Gallery on Chamiers Road, a group of women lean over a desk, admiring paintings. The artist, Kannur-based Vidhya Chandran, appears a little overwhelmed by the attention. “My main medium is fabric... these are just practice sketches,” she says, signing her name with her brush. At once, her batchmates erupt in encouragement, insisting the works deserve to be framed and treasured.

It is this spirit of camaraderie and creative persistence that defines An Artful Reunion, a group show by the Fine Arts batch of 1987 from Stella Maris College. Nearly four decades after graduation, 18 of them have returned to the gallery space, not just with paintings, but with crochet, origami, photography, ceramics, and fabric art, showcasing how their practice has evolved with time.

“We have always kept in touch, thanks to WhatsApp. This show came together very organically. All of us are still doing some form of art even after all these years, and bringing it all together for a show was an obvious choice,” says Rangashree Srinivas, who organised the show with her two batchmates Mala Chinnappa, art facilitator,

Canvas calls back

Four decades later, the Stella Maris batch of '87 reunites in a show where friendship is as much on display as the art

and Varuna Arvind, interior designer and founder of VA Gallery.

The result is a showcase that feels less like a formal exhibition



and more like a reunion in paint, fabric, and form. “There is no overarching theme to the exhibition, because each of us have different strengths, and we wanted everyone to showcase what they do best,” adds Rangashree.

On display are delicate origami sculptures, textured crochet pieces, collages, watercolours, ceramics, photographs, and paintings in a variety of styles. Some artists have stayed true to their chosen medium for decades, like award-winning origamist Kalyani Voleti and Philadelphia-based watercolourist Radhika Srinivas, while others continue to experiment across forms.

The mix makes for a viewing experience that is eclectic yet deeply personal, with each work carrying the stamp of a life lived outside and alongside art. Margaret Thomas, the current vice principal of Stella Maris College, who works with pen on canvas, says, “When we joined the course, it was because we were all interested in the arts. This has kept us together over the years.” Mala mirrors the sentiment, adding, “We were all in this because we appreciated the arts. This wasn’t just a degree we picked to keep us busy until something better came along.”

Over the years, the group has not only kept in touch and encouraged each other, but also travelled together for art – visiting the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, holding retreats in Kodaikanal and Coonoor, and showing up unflinchingly for each other’s showcases.

When their former professor, art historian and curator Ashrafi Bhagat, dropped by the gallery, she was quick to encourage the initiative. For the Batch of '87, her presence was a reminder of where it all began, making this return to the gallery not just a reunion of friends, but a reaffirmation of the role art has continued to play in their lives.

An Artful Reunion will be on view at VA Gallery, Chamiers Road, till August 23, 11am to 7pm.

Along the Cotton Route

What drew European traders to the Coromandel coast? Visit the historic port town of Pulicat as part of Madras Day celebrations to find out

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The origin of Madras can be traced to Pulicat. “Pulicat is where trade began, eventually resulting in the founding of Madrasapattinam nearby by the British,” says Xavier Benedict, the founder-trustee of Art & Architecture Research Development & Education (AARDE) Foundation. As part of Madras Day celebrations, the not-for-profit trust is organising a heritage walk in the historic port town to trace the origin of Madras.

“This year, the walk will focus on understanding history through Nature,” explains Xavier.

European traders came to Tamil Nadu for a reason: they needed fuel to power their navigation. “Fuel, in their time, was the sail cloth or *paaimaram* in Tamil,” points out Xavier. Ships needed sturdy cloths to travel the seas and Xavier adds that Europeans used linen and hemp for their sails, which couldn’t withstand the force of the winds for more than a month.

They hence set out in search of a better variety: cotton. This quest led them to Tamil Nadu, whose black soil, *kari manal*, that will eventually earn the coast the name ‘Coromandel’, was conducive for cotton. “Coromandel

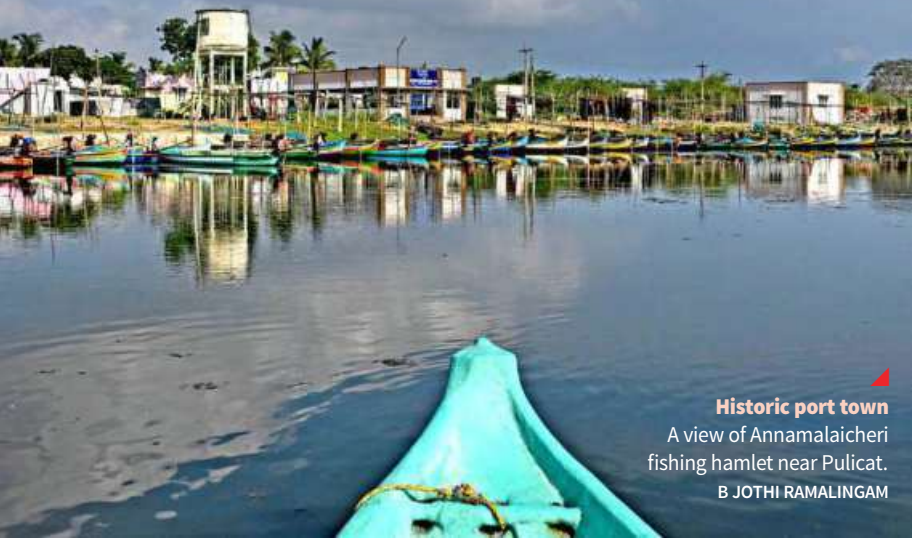
cotton was thick, and was apt for making sail cloth,” says Xavier. This variety was grown across the coast from Tuticorin, all the way up to Kakinada in Andhra Pradesh. “It has been historically proven that cotton sails were exported from India,” he adds.

In exchange, Europeans brought spices from the Indonesian islands to trade. “They offered cardamom, cloves, and cinnamon in exchange for Tamil Nadu’s cotton,” says Xavier. “Every document in our archival material points out that 80% of commodity on ships until the 1850s was cotton,” he adds.

Xavier hopes to create awareness on Pulicat’s importance in India’s trade and historical landscape. “We are fighting for World Heritage status for the port town that also houses the oldest Dutch cemetery in India,” he says.

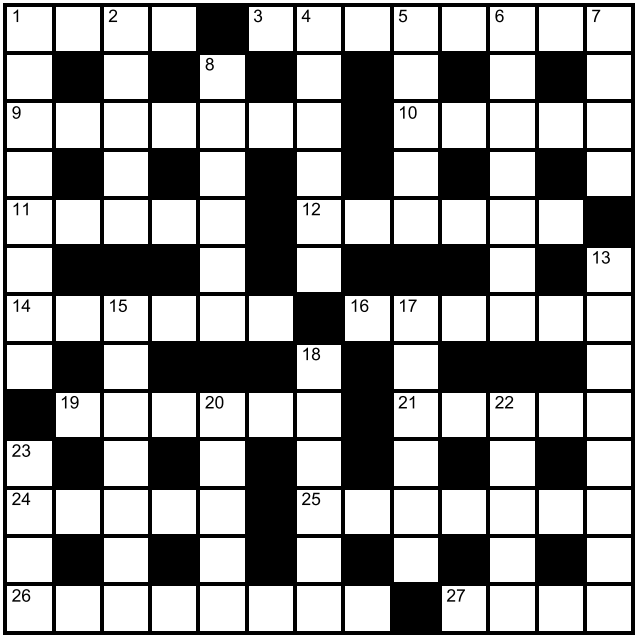
The heritage walk will take participants to the Pulicat Interpretation Centre, Dutch and Portuguese cemeteries, Adi Narayana Perumal temple, Tamil mosques, the Lighthouse, Portuguese church, and the lagoon.

The trip will start at 7am from Loyola’s ICAM Gate, Mahalingapuram on August 23. Visit www.aarde.in; to register WhatsApp 9043542174 / 9884013409.



Historic port town
A view of Annamalaicheri fishing hamlet near Pulicat.
B JOTHI RAMALINGAM

METROPLUS QUICK CROSSWORD #17 (Set by Doppelpganger)



Across

- 1 A streak of different colour (4)
- 3 Characteristic of a sly person (8)
- 9 Muhammad was one (7)
- 10 Creature with adhesive pads on digits (5)
- 11 Size of paper, 19 x 24in (5)
- 12 Organic radical from methane (6)
- 14 Time when a computer is operating (6)
- 16 Bird of the swallow family (6)
- 19 An East African (6)
- 21 A temporary pause (3,2)
- 24 Throw away (5)
- 25 Free oneself from an acquired habit (7)
- 26 Belonging to the past (8)
- 27 Hand-me-down (4)

Down

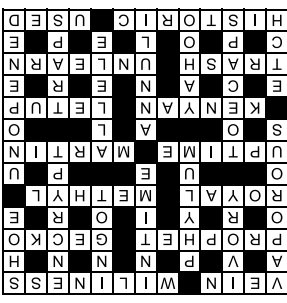
- 1 Substance in the form of a mist (8)
- 2 Material used to make piano keys (5)
- 4 Eventually (2,4)
- 5 Brick-shaped gold (5)
- 6 Convert ordinary language into code (7)
- 7 Strip of metal on the bottom of sled runner (4)

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- 8 Major taxonomic division of living organisms (6)
- 13 Barred (8)
- 15 Steel covers for the tip of boots (7)
- 17 Alternative forms of the same gene (6)
- 18 Discs with central holes (6)
- 20 Exclamation expressing excitement (5)
- 22 Light, two-wheeled carriages (5)
- 23 Make a deep impression (4)

Solution No. 17



Prajwal Parajuly

Happy Birthday, Chennai. I have known you somewhat intimately for about a year. It’s been a journey and a half.

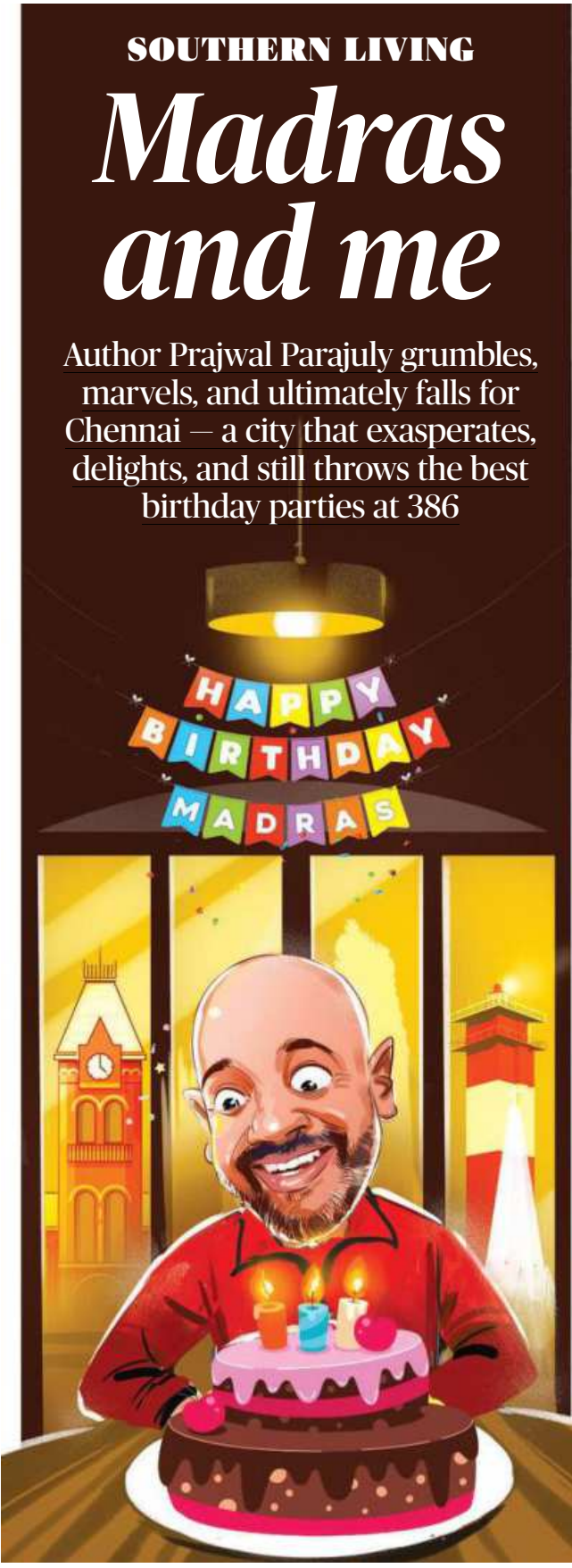
When I first landed in you last year, I was crestfallen. I had flown in from Singapore, which, if aviation nerds are to be trusted, has the best airport in the world, and was warned, again and again, to rein in my expectations for the city I’d soon call home. I arrived in the middle of the night, wide-eyed and brimming with optimism. Your airport, I concluded, should be converted into a barn. I prayed you would be nothing like it.

I started exploring you by staying in the nicer hotels, equal parts gleeful and uncomfortable with their interpretation of hospitality. I moved to the Madras Club, whose shortcomings I ignored because I paid less than half for a room there than I did in your posh hotels. Soon, I rented my own weekend place, because I wanted to call a little slice of you home. I continue to enjoy my wacky living arrangement, which I share with Pagir, a community art space. Some days, I wake up to music on the terrace. Other days, it is thumping feet. A few weekends ago, it was a singing conch.

I miss you when I am gone for extended periods. When I have been here a while, I relentlessly complain about you. You’re not a pretty city, even if wounded locals will claim some parts of you are breathtaking. You’re not a walker’s city, unless walker-friendliness is restricted to the beach. You could do with more accessible green spaces. Yet I rhapsodise about you week after week in this column.

I like you because of the food I find in you.

Take Avartana, for instance. As an avowed repository of insufferable declarations, I will not let you forget that I had pronounced your Avartana superior to Delhi’s Indian Accent



long before the world woke up to it. Avartana is still consistently impressive, but it’s not the only excellent restaurant you house. You are awash with recommendation-worthy foods in Pumpkin Tales and Dahlia, Kappa Chakka Kandhari and Southern Spice, Zhouyu and Erode Amman Mess, The Farm and MadCo. There’s of course, Mathsya, my preferred place for late-night rasa vada and Murugan Idli, an endorsement of which, elite Chennai tells me, obliterates the last shred of credibility I possess as a gourmet.

I like you because you are a cerebral city. You are secure enough about it not to wear your brains on your *veshti*. You like poetry but will not recite it at a party. You like books. You restore libraries with quiet pride and are reticent to talk about it. You have birthed places like Tulika Books, stepping into which jaded adults become excitable children. It was on my first visit there that my new children’s book was incubated.

I like that you underplay yourself like someone who’s absolutely sure of themselves.

I like you because your best-kept secret – your remarkable metro – is actually a secret. Sure, other Indian cities have metros, but yours is cleaner and has more disciplined passengers. It’s completely devoid of hype – perhaps that’s why it took me months to discover that it even existed. Once I availed myself of a ride, I was hooked. It confounds me that something this groovy can be this absent from mainstream national consciousness. I understand the metro’s reach isn’t as wide as Delhi’s; that’s no excuse for you not to give it pride of place on your list of triumphs. But that’s you, Chennai – you don’t shout out your achievements the way other cities do.

I like you because you have convinced me that I am perhaps not carved from stone

after all. I momentarily become a softer, kinder, more thoughtful version of myself in the midst of the chaos of the Kapaleeshwarar temple. My family thinks at this rate I’ll become a reincarnation of Shiva himself. I have you to thank for that, dear Chennai.

I like what you become in the winter. It’s as though you decide to shoulder the cultural burdens of the entire planet with your enthusiasm for concerts and canteens. Until I encountered a January here, I assumed Januarys were miserable almost everywhere. You make the ugliest month palatable, Chennai. And perhaps you yourself become more palatable because of your proximity to Kovalam, Mahabalipuram and Pondicherry. It helps that I don’t have to negotiate the obstacle course that is your airport to get to these places.

Happy Birthday, Chennai. You easily are among the least pretentious places in the world. Ostentatiousness isn’t in your DNA. I shall not romanticise your people and claim that you have the nicest, kindest, most helpful population in the world. I have met better people elsewhere, and I have confronted worse people elsewhere. But I am yet to come across a populace whose vast majority is as shorn of affectation as yours is.

Happy 386th Birthday, Madras. You continue to delight me, humour me and exasperate me. I look forward to seeing how you grow this year. I hope to be around for your 387th.

I love you, Prajwal

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 City.



The perfect recipe Dishes from the Madras Cookbook Club's fourth potluck; and (below) some members of the club. S POORVAJA

from. The recipes were well explained, there was great history and insight into Korean cuisine and culture, and the substitutions mentioned helped a lot," Akshitha says. She got a bamboo mat to make kimbaps with for the first time, a challenge she says was well worth it. As the members set up the table with all the food they have cooked, there is a lot of chatter about what worked for them and what did not, and how some discoveries were made along the way

For many members, the club and its potlucks have pushed boundaries in the kitchen. "The first time I ever deep-fried a dish was for the club, when I attempted to make elements for an Amritsaari chaat from Sonal Ved's cookbook, *Tiffin*," says Varsha Raghavan, a member. A peanut podi recipe she stumbled upon while cooking for a past potluck from *Five Morsels Of Love* by Archana Pidathala has now become a pantry staple at home.

In buffet-style, we pile our plates high with the Korean fare laid out before us – there are stir fried anchovies, blanched seasoned spinach, omelet rice dosirak, zucchini pancakes and a host of other dishes to choose from. With every bite, come playful quips about the flavours, curious questions about the ingredients, and generous words of praise passed around.

While the meal ends, there is a bit of debate about what book and cuisine to pick for the next month. The votes are almost unanimously in favour of sambol; Sri Lankan cooking it is.

Find the club on Instagram @madrascookbookclub



Sambar stories Aathitiyan Somu, founder and CEO of Cookd and his team making sambar at a dosa *kadai*. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Taste takeover

A one-day tiffin *kadai* takeover proved that some of the best marketing ideas are also the simplest

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You have probably heard of bar takeovers, restaurant takeovers, café takeovers and even bakery takeovers. But have you ever heard of a tiffin *kadai* takeover? It happened recently in Chennai, at a small streetside stall on the OMR. Stall owner Dharman continued his usual routine – pouring batter, flipping dosas, serving chutneys. The only difference was that every ladle of sambar that day came from a special recipe made with masala from Cookd, a homegrown brand best known for its meal kits, and spice blends designed to make cooking easier.

"There is a tiffin *kadai* right below our office where a few of the staff members have breakfast every morning. We spoke to the person who runs the *kadai* and decided to make the sambar for him," says Aathitiyan Somu, founder and CEO of Cookd, adding that they made around 20 litres of sambar, and by the end of the day, they had run out of the whole batch.

Aathitiyan explains that what began as a fun idea for a product launch quickly turned into something bigger. "After the takeover, we spoke to the *anna* decided to supply our sambar

masala to him for a month, so his costs would come down. That way, he can afford to add more lentils to the sambar than he usually does, and follow our recipe."

The Cookd team also spent time teaching him how to make the sambar their way, ensuring consistency and flavour. And they are not stopping there. The brand has promised to give the tiny *kadai* a much-needed facelift. "We have put in an order to redo his stall's board, and he has agreed to let us use it as an advertising platform, so we will have our logo on it," adds Aathitiyan.

Apart from this small collaboration, Cookd has teamed up with grocery chains like Reliance Fresh and Kovai Pazhamudir Nilayam for a cheeky promotion: pamphlets wrapped around bundles of drumsticks.

In the end, what began as a playful tiffin *kadai* takeover turned into more than just a launch. From supporting a small stall to slipping into grocery bundles of drumsticks, Cookd's sambar masala is making its way into everyday Chennai life in simple, thoughtful ways.

Sambar masala and kits by Cookd will be available from August 24 on shop.cookd.tv.com, Reliance Fresh, Kovai Pazhamudir Nilayam, starting at ₹35.

S Poorvaia
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There is lo-fi music playing on the television, fairy lights strung up on the walls and loud chatter all around at Akshitha Praveen's home on a rainy Saturday evening. Every time the doorbell rings, someone walks in holding a casserole or a tray of food which is promptly arranged on a table – the pièce de résistance which has everything from kimbap and kimchi to fried chicken.

This is how every potluck at the Madras Cookbook Club begins; with 'oohs' and 'aahs' over the dish each member brings in, and spirited conversation about the day of cooking that preceded this.

"We started off with an idea for a supper club, but given our schedules, thought this worked better. The idea was to build a community of people who wanted to come together and cook," says Akshitha, who began the cookbook club with her friend Akshitha Mucherla.

Every month, the 24-member strong club picks a cookbook from a different cuisine, and each

Booked for dinner

Every month, the Madras Cookbook Club comes together for a cosy potluck of dishes chosen from a cookbook of their choice

of them picks a dish they want to try out. "Not everyone in the club is great at cooking; we actually have an absolute beginner as well. The idea is that every cookbook has its share of simple and complex recipes that we can pick from depending on whatever we are comfortable with," Akshitha explains. The club then meets at a member's house for a potluck, where they discuss their cooking experiments and

of course, sample each other's dishes.

For their fourth potluck, the club has chosen *Maangchi's Big Book of Korean Cooking*. "This was probably among our most favourite books so far to cook



The Jane Austen connect

St George's Cathedral has an endearing connection to the popular British novelist

Fabiola Jacob

On the right side of the nave at St George's Cathedral, facing the altar, is the marble statue by Flaxman of a young man – the 28-year-old James Stephen Lushington, a budding bureaucrat of the Bengal Civil Service, who died of 'a lingering illness' in his prime. His father, Stephen Rumbold Lushington (1776 - 1868), was both a Member of Parliament from Canterbury (1812 - 1830) and a Governor of Madras (1827 - 32), almost simultaneously.

Historian V Sriram recollects that Stephen Rumbold Lushington was commemorated for long in a stately home in Saidapet known as Lushington Gardens. "It was owned by a Chettiar family. The house has gone, but the property remains with the family."

'Lushington' is a name that pops up in British novelist Jane Austen's letters to her sister Cassandra. Jane Austen met Stephen Rumbold Lushington in 1813, when he visited her niece, Fanny Knight, who lived at Godmersham, Kent. As a member of parliament, he had the authority to provide a frank (free postage) for the delivery of letters.



Jane Austen seems to have availed this favour from him.

In a letter to her sister Cassandra dated October 15, 1813, she writes: "I like him very much. I am sure he is clever, and a man of taste. He got a volume of Milton last night, and spoke of it with warmth. He is quite an M.P., very smiling, with an exceeding good address and readiness of language. I am rather in

Sense and sensibility (Clockwise from left) St Georges Cathedral; Jane Austen; marble statue of James Stephen Lushington. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



love with him. I dare say he is ambitious and insincere. He puts me in mind of Mr Dundas. He has a wide smiling mouth, and very good teeth, and something of the same complexion and nose. He is a much shorter man..."

"Mr Lushington sang," goes another entry in Fanny Knight's pocket book, of that same evening. "He has a lovely voice, and is quite delightful."

Jane Austen's novels have endured to this day not just as a social commentary on 18th-century Britain, but have also spawned numerous books and films on marriage and match-making. In the semi-biographical film, *Miss Austen Regrets*, Stephen makes an appearance as a rather flirtatious man, quite besotted with Jane Austen.

In reality, Stephen was a year younger than Jane and was, in fact, married to Anne Elizabeth, eldest daughter of Lord George Harris, the infamous Commander-in-Chief of the Madras Army that defeated Tipu Sultan at Seringapatam. The couple had six children at that time and would go on to have two more. Stephen was widowed at 80, remarried at 82, and lived to the grand old age of 92.

Jane Austen might have missed the bus, but the Lushingtons surely stand to gain from her reference and will be remembered not just for their colonial heritage.

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Village comes to town Children at an earlier edition of the festival; cattle expo bringing together over 40 native animal breeds. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



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To commemorate the first anniversary of the Jallikattu protests, a festival called Sempulam was held in 2018. It was helmed by Thondaimandalam Foundation – that works to sustain rural and peri-urban livelihoods in the Thondaimandalam region spanning from Tirupati to Tiruvannamalai – and actor Karthi’s Uzhavan Foundation that supports farmer livelihoods. The two-day event brought together farmers who promoted organic farming methods, and the fair showcased native cattle breeds of Tamil Nadu.

Last year, the fest returned as Sempozhil (meaning a flourishing grove in red soil, in Tamil) and was held on a much-larger scale as a three-day event with artiste performances, native food, and more. “We wanted to organise a rural fest celebrating organic farming, sustainable living and showcasing native livestock as a mark of gratitude to people for supporting the campaign,” says Himakiran, managing trustee at Thondaimandalam Foundation. “Sempulam means ‘fertile lands’. We

The urban thiruvizha

Sempozhil is back with more than 40 native animal breeds, a Sangam era-themed fashion show, native food, and more

wanted to create a larger canvas for the festival and hence changed the name to Sempozhil. ‘Sem’ is from semmai which means fertile, and ‘pozhi’ means a garden, forest, or a large landscape,” he explains. This year, Sempozhil will be held for four days and in a far larger format. “This year, we have content in the six themes of food, clothing, shelter, art, literature, and wellness. and will be presented as workshops, exhibits, and performances. The content is also tied to the *ainthinai* (five landscapes),” says Himakiran, who is also the executive producer of Sempozhil. Aimed at spotlighting the

various facets of Tamil heritage, Sempozhil will have daily performances by rural troupes from across Tamil Nadu including Therukoothu, Paraiaattam, Oyilattam, Bommallattam, among others; a space dedicated to native seeds, heritage crops; thematic installations; play areas for children, among other features. The highlight, however, is the cattle expo that will bring together over 40 native animal breeds of Jallikattu bulls, sheep, goats, dogs, horses, and poultry. For the event, Himakiran says the team has collaborated with Alliance Francaise of Madras for the workshops, Tamil Nadu Iyarkai Uzhavar Kootiyakkam for the food and seed displays, Anubavi for curating the arts performances, exhibits and workshops. First-time art forms at Sempozhil include Tiruvannamalai periyamelam, dappankuthu, Silambattam, to name a few. “Over 1,000 farmers

and 150 performing artistes, primarily from rural and tribal belts, are participating in the show,” he says, adding that over 3,000 school children will also be attending Sempozhil as part of organised educational and experiential tours.

Curating an event of such a scale has its own share of challenges. “Someone who loves the arts might not necessarily like livestock. Someone who likes farming might not be interested in exhibits. These are perceptions and pre-conceived notions that are the hardest to deal with. The urban vs. rural divide is artificial and we truly believe that there is a child in every adult and a villager in every urbanite,” says Himakiran.

For someone attending the event for the first time, what does the team recommend they do? Himakiran says learning about seed diversity, and our livestock should be on their agenda, including savouring traditional millet and rice-based organic food. “You could attend one of the many workshops happening as a run up to the event until August 22, and also witness one of the four livestock shows that will make people be amazed by the hard work needed in rearing livestock,” he says. A fashion show featuring 2,000 years of Tamil apparel will also be held and it will feature contemporary Madras streetwear.

Till August 24 at YMCA, Nandanam. Tickets on sempozhil.org

Celebrating care and compassion

SCARF marks the 10th anniversary of their dementia care unit DEMCARES, with a host of events

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From an immersive experience, engaging stalls, a panel discussion and a play, DEMCARES, the dementia care unit of the Schizophrenia Research Foundation (SCARF) in Chennai will mark their 10th anniversary on August 23 in collaboration with the Alliance Francaise of Madras.

This public event which is open to all, will honour the decade of work by DEMCARES in dementia care, research and community engagement.

An exploration of love, memory and identity, *The Father*, a play written by Florian Zeller and directed by Denver Anthony Nicholas will be staged as a part of the event. Starring TM Karthik, Abinaya R, Abhijit Senthil, Athithya Jayachandran, Bhavya Balantrapu and Dakshana Rajaram, the play chronicles a father-daughter relationship that traverses the everyday reality of living with dementia.

“We have staged this play a few times before in different places and every time we do, there is some nuance and a newer understanding of dementia that emerges for us,” says actor TM Karthik. Having seen a close family member go through a terminal illness, Karthik says that while he was able to instantly empathise with the character of the father he plays, his empathy too has evolved, and shaped by his director and fellow actors onstage as they immerse themselves in this story.

This 10th year celebration aims to create awareness, foster empathy, and provide meaningful support for persons with dementia and their caregivers. A sensitively designed immersive experience

Raising awareness
At DEMCARES; and the cast of *The Father*. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



room will be set up that people can walk into from 2pm to 9pm, and the play will be followed by a panel discussion. Stalls set up by community partners will also have engaging activities for visitors.

Dr Sridhar Vaitheswaran, additional director, SCARF, DEMCARES says that the immersive experience room will give people an idea of what it is that people with dementia go through in their daily lives. “The panel discussion will focus on what the play has tried to convey, and has healthcare practitioners, caregivers and other guests discuss the current issues and future challenges in India with regard to treating dementia,” he says.

Awareness programmes, Dr Sridhar says, need to start early from educating students in schools about overall good brain health and dementia as a part of that. “We need to keep the conversation going about lifestyle factors, physical activity, proper diet and social engagement. We also need to target specific groups; people with diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease for instance, speak to them about brain health and how if they don’t treat or keep their conditions under control, it can negatively influence their overall brain health and contribute to dementia,” he adds.

At the Alliance Française of Madras, 24 College Road, Nungambakkam from 2pm onwards. Entry is free. For the play *The Father* at 5pm, register at dementia.scarfindia.org/registration-form/



On August 22

The Hindu Made of Chennai bus, a city-themed bus which is a moving celebration of Chennai will be flagged off from the Casagrand office in Thiruvannamalai and make its way to Besant Nagar beach. Along the route, expect fun activities, trivia quizzes and prizes on-the-spot. At 6pm, gear up for some music by the sea as Chennai-based band The Unusuals will perform near the Schmidt memorial until 8pm.

On August 23

Shabnam Kamil from Annam by Shabnam leads Madras Munch at Velachery, an evening vegetarian snack session that celebrates Chennai’s rich and varied evening tiffin culture from 6pm onwards. At Marina Beach, settle down on the sands for Moonlight Cinema to watch two hit Tamil films *Panchathanthiram* and *Chandramukhi* from 5pm onwards.

On August 24

Thirupurasundari Sevvell from Nam Veedu Nam Oor Nam Kadhai leads a walk inside the Police Museum housed inside the historic old Commissioner’s office in Egmore. Within its galleries are preserved documents, wireless communication sets, early typewriters, forensic instruments, and meticulously kept records that speak of changing technologies and methods. From 10am onwards.

On September 7

The Made of Chennai run, co-hosted by Chennai Runners will take place. Registrations are now open and participants can sign up for the run at ₹499, inclusive of a bib, T-shirt and medal (on finishing) for 5km and 10km.



To register for the run, scan the QR code. To sign up for the events this week, log onto madeofchennai.thehindu.com.

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For centuries, the sea was Chennai’s front gate. Long before airports and expressways, the city’s first encounters were shaped along this coast. In many ways, modern Chennai began here: with ships unloading not just cargo, but cultures, communities, and the city’s very identity.

It is not every day that the gates of Chennai Port open to visitors, but on a cloudy August dawn, buzzing with anticipation, a group of us step past the high-security entrance as part of *The Hindu’s* Made of Chennai heritage walk led by Thirupurasundari Sevvell, architect and founder of Nam Veedu Nam Oor Nam Kadhai.

We begin at the Chennai Port Trust Centenary Building, where officials take us through the history of the port. “Chennai Port and Chennai city are integrated with each other. The city came into being in 1639, while the port

Harbouring Madras memories

Behind its high walls, Chennai Port holds the pulse of a city shaped by ships, storms and trade



City by sea Participants of the heritage walk listening to Thirupurasundari Sevvell; view of the harbour. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT AND SANGITA RAJAN

was officially built only in 1881. For almost 240 years, there was no protected harbour – ships anchored offshore and passengers were ferried through the surf,” said Sunil Paliwal, the Chairman of the Port Trust.

The story goes back to 1770, when Warren Hastings first suggested a harbour in Madras. The idea lay dormant until 1836, when the Madras Chamber of Commerce began lobbying for one. Work started on a pier in 1859, but it collapsed within years due to the rough sea.

In 1875, when the Prince of Wales laid the foundation stone, the port’s modern history began. The foundation stone can be spotted at the Centenary Building even today. Completed in 1880 and opened in 1881, Chennai Port became India’s third-oldest major port, after Kolkata and Mumbai – a horseshoe-shaped harbour that finally tamed the Coromandel coast.

Our first stop is the Steam House, the oldest surviving structure on the port campus. Built in 1938, this brick-and-stone building still bears its Madras terrace roof, an architectural style that kept interiors cool. “Over the years it has

served many purposes, from a steam house to an electric substation. Now, we are working to restore and transform it into a museum that showcases the history of the port,” said the chairman.

Next, we climb to the Signal Station perched on the North of the port. From here, the panorama is striking – all three docks laid out in sequence, cranes swivelling, cargo stacked high. This is the nerve centre of the port. From here ships are signalled when to enter, which berth to dock at and how pilot boats guide them in.

The walk ends at the Royal Madras Yacht Club (RMYC), tucked to the South of the harbour. During First World War, on the morning of September 22, 1914, the German warship *SMS Emden* bombarded Madras, targeting oil tanks along the coast. “Shells and shrapnel fell close to the harbour and the RMYC, and one of the paintings displayed there was damaged,” said Captain Vivek Shanbhag who runs the RMYC. The

painting, with scars of war, is still on display at the club.

As the walk winds down, what lingers is the sense that the port is not just a restricted industrial space, but the city’s first doorway. “We are celebrating Madras Day at the place which is really the starting point of everything – the Chennai Port, the beach, and the many aspects that shaped the city,” said Thirupurasundari.

The Hindu Made of Chennai is presented by Casagrand and powered by SRM. In association with Union Bank of India. Associate Partners: Tata Tea Chakra Gold, Tata Coffee. Walk partners: Chennai Port Authority and Kamarajar Port Limited. The event is also done in partnership with Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation, Greater Chennai Corporation, Greater Chennai Police, Greater Chennai Traffic Police and Namma Marina, Namma Pride. Radio Partners: Big FM, Fever FM and Radio One. Happiness partner: On The Streets of Chennai. Movie partner: Shree Raajalakshmi Films and Sivaji Productions.





The action route
Rachita Ram; (below) with
Rajinikanth.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

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Rachita Ram is a huge fan of Rajinikanth's 1999 blockbuster *Padayappa*. The film instilled in her the dream of working with the superstar and sparked her love for complex characters, such as Neelambari, essayed with aplomb by Ramya Krishnan.

For the past decade, Rachita has reigned as one of Kannada cinema's leading ladies, featuring alongside stars such as Darshan in *Bulbul* (2013), Sudeep in *Ranna* (2015), Puneeth Rajkumar in *Chakravyuha* (2016), Upendra in *I Love You* (2019), and Shivarajkumar in *Rustum* (2019). Even before her film debut, she hinted at her flair for cunning roles with her television breakthrough in *Arasi*.

After years of playing the second fiddle to the hero with glamour and charm, Rachita's desire to explore a character with grey shades became reality when filmmaker Lokesh Kanagaraj approached her for *Coolie*, his maiden project with Rajinikanth. "When Lokesh asked me what kind of a role I fancied, I told him I want to play someone like Neelambari," she says.

Coolie

and beyond

Meet Rachita Ram, one of the top heroines of Kannada cinema and the surprise package of the recent Rajinikanth biggie

"Lokesh was a bit surprised with my choice, considering I am known for female lead characters in Kannada. Being an antagonist gives you a lot of scope to perform. It's the kind of challenge I would love to take up more often," she adds.

Rachita is one of the biggest surprise factors in *Coolie*, which hit screens recently. In a star-studded cast, not many expected Rachita to shine, more so because she had a blink-and-you-miss appearance in the movie's trailer. "Lokesh was particular that my character wasn't discussed anywhere pre-release, because he was sure my role would make a huge impact after



the release," reveals Rachita.

Lokesh's instinct was proven right when her performance won praise. She admits to being overwhelmed by the response from people who weren't familiar with her work. Her biggest compliment came from the superstar himself.

"He said it was great to see a *Kannadada hudgi* (Kannada girl) perform so well. I told him his words were bigger than the Oscars for me. For one year, it was tough to not tell the world about this."

Rachita loved how she was made to feel at ease by Rajinikanth and Lokesh from the first day of her shoot. "I had a small chat with Rajini sir after the shoot. He was curious about developments in the Kannada film industry. He recollected some of his works in Kannada cinema. He assured me that my character in *Coolie* would have a huge impact on the audience."

As an actor, Rachita believes in spontaneity on sets. "I didn't prepare much before my scenes in *Coolie*. Lokesh wasn't particular about rehearsals either. He was very specific about the all-important transformation of my character. To ace that switch in personality, he told me to keep in mind that I am a trained police officer. I had to ensure I exhibit the character trait of a trained officer, especially in the action sequence," she explains.

The first approval for her efforts came from the cast and crew on set, recalls Rachita. "Anbariv masters were happy with how I pulled off the action scene. This was my first-ever action sequence. I used to get petrified when actors performed stunts in my movies. Also, when I revealed the big surprise in the tense scene, people on the set applauded," she says.

Rachita's performance in *Coolie* could open the door for more non-Kannada opportunities for the actor. This dream Tamil debut wouldn't have happened if not for her chance meeting with Lokesh at an awards ceremony. "I told him to give me a script with a strong female protagonist. After seeing his Agent Tina character in *Vikram* (2022), I wanted to get a Kannada film made on a script by Lokesh.

"He loved my confidence. I was desperate to do a role with villainous shades. In Kannada, filmmakers were hesitant to think beyond the traditional heroine role. They would always tell me, 'How can a girl with a cute and chubby face petrify people?' Thankfully, Lokesh believed in seeing me differently on screen."

With *Coolie*, Rachita feels she has answered her detractors. "In recent times, I saw several comments on social media that people were tired of seeing me on screen. They felt it was time for me to get married and retire from acting. I am glad to have answered them through my work," she says.

It's show time

A glimpse into the Big Cine Expo, where all the stakeholders of the film business came together



The big picture Fans dance inside a theatre during the screening of *Coolie*. AFP

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Less than a month ago, *Thalaivan Thalaivi* clashed at the Tamil cinema box office with *Maaresan*.

Later this week, the same two films - one featuring Vijay Sethupathi and Nithya Menon, and the other featuring Fahadh Faasil and Vadivelu - are clashing yet again, at the OTT space. The two films are being releasing on Amazon Prime and Netflix respectively.

For many, who might have missed these films on the big screen, this is an opportunity to catch up with them. But what does a scenario such as this mean to theatre owners? Or, in simpler words, why watch a film on the big

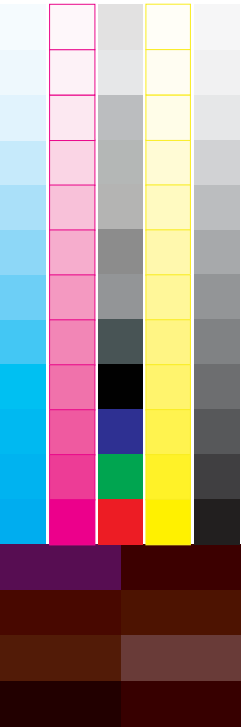
screen when you can watch it at home in a few weeks?

This was the hot topic of discussion at Big Cine Expo, held at Chennai Trade Centre from August 19 to 20. "In 2016, when OTT started off, it was not threatening. But post the pandemic, when films started releasing directly on OTT platforms, this whole window of theatrical-OTT release schedule collapsed. For many people, it became a concern whether a certain film will hit the big screen or not," said Thomas D'Souza, Senior Vice President (Programming), PVR-INOX.

Is the onus on the cinema hall stakeholders or the makers to pull in audiences? It is the latter, felt Rahul Puri of Mukta A2 Cinemas. "Cinema halls can see footfall only if there's content... content that has intrigue value. A great theatrical trailer, for instance, sucks people in. It's like a build-up to a phone launch," said Rahul.

While the situation in theatres in metropolitan cities might not be rosy, the story is a little different in tier-2 and tier-3 centres. Like in Mysore, for instance, where a nondescript Kannada film sans big names titled *Su from So* is turning out to be a hit. "We have had 16 days with packed houses," said Vaishali Hanumanth of DRC Cinemas, "People are coming in as early as 7am to watch the film. A lot of people from the new generation are coming in to watch Kannada films as well. It proves that content is king."

Billed as a conglomeration for all stakeholders in the cinema business, Big Cine Expo also showcased stalls that dealt with ticketing, acoustics, interior design, popcorn and other aspects related to theatres.



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When the 71st National Film Awards were announced, Sachin Sudhakaran and Hariharan Muralidharan were at work, as usual. "My dad called to inform me, which made it all the more special," recalls Sachin. He and Hariharan jointly bagged the National Award for Best Sound Design for the Hindi film *Animal*. "We are grateful; we weren't expecting this recognition at all," adds Sachin.

Animal won three awards at the 71st National Film Awards, including Special Mention for re-recording (MR Rajakrishnan) and Best Background Score (Harshavardhan Rameshwar). "Sandeep Reddy Vanga, the director, has a clear vision. We observed this since the time we worked with him on *Arjun Reddy* and *Kabir Singh*. He knows precisely where the music should begin and end. It is easy when a director and a composer (Harshavardhan) have that clarity," says Sachin.

All for realism
Vanga wanted the sound to be realistic, reflecting the ambience and conveying the emotions. For example, for the scene featuring Ranbir Kapoor walking into the classroom with a gun, ambient



Sound choice

Sachin Sudhakaran and Hariharan Muralidharan, National Film Award winners, on the intricacies of sound in storytelling

sounds were recorded on campus to keep the mood realistic. The task was also to capture the anger with which the gun shot is fired.

For the 18-minute action episode featuring the mammoth 'war machine gun', both music and sound were designed to be dramatic and over the top. "A lot of layering was involved. If you amp up both music and sound to 100%, it would sound noisy; we worked

towards balancing the sound, music, and silences," says Sachin.

Sachin and Hariharan are based in Chennai, where they founded Sync Cinema studio in 2016, four years after they began working together. They met while studying sound engineering at SAE Institute, Chennai. They began as foley artists (recording everyday live sounds to suit a scene) for Tamil films *Pizza* and *Maya*.

Work brings them to Hyderabad often and the duo explains that while both Chennai and Hyderabad have state of the art sound recording and mixing studios, the choice often rests on the director. For instance, Lokesh Kanagaraj prefers having on board sound engineer Kannan Ganpat, who moved to Hyderabad from Chennai, and hence Sachin and Hariharan were here to work alongside

Kannan at the Annapurna Studios' Dolby Atmos original suite.

The workflow has been steady. "We almost never say no to work," laughs Hariharan, "Unless there's an odd case of two films having simultaneous release dates. We had to let go of Nag Ashwin's *Mahanati* because the timeline was too short."

Sync sound
While most films prefer to add the dialogues in the dubbing studio rather than recording live on set, a few films take the tougher route of sync sound recording.

Sachin and Hariharan observe that sync sound can cut down on post-production time. "We have also noticed that the actors' performances are better."

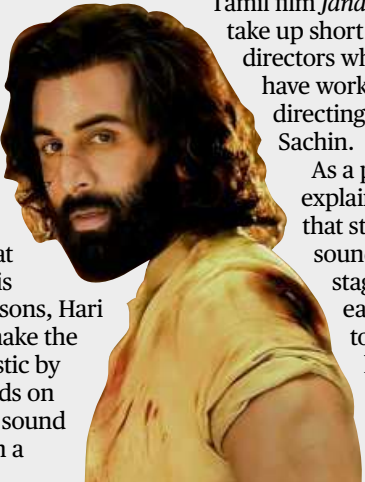
For film units that are unable to do this owing to varied reasons, Hari and Sachin try to make the sound appear realistic by capturing live sounds on set - footsteps, the sound of placing a glass on a

table or thumping of a fist on the table. "Imagine recording the sound of Ranbir Kapoor thumping his fist on a table in anger on set as opposed to a foley artist trying to replicate that emotion in a studio. The former will be more authentic," Hari explains.

The duo worked on the sound of the Tamil web series *Suzhal* that opted for sync sound recording. "Sriya Reddy opted to dub her lines later at a studio, and we tried to match it with the rest of the sync sound recording."

Up next
Sachin and Hari are now working on a handful of films, including director Sujeeth's *They Call Him OG* starring Pawan Kalyan, the Prabhas-starrer *The Raja Saab*, director Vineeth Sreenivasan's Malayalam film *Karam*, and Vijay's Tamil film *Jana Nayagan*. "We also take up short films; a few directors whose short films we have worked on are now directing feature films," says Sachin.

As a parting shot, Hari explains why it is crucial that storytellers think of sound at the scripting stage: "The first sound each of us has listened to is our mother's heartbeat, even before we saw the world. Sound is that important."





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There comes a point in A Somasundaram's act when he ceases to be a 52-year-old father of two. Dressed in figure-hugging bellbottoms and a crisp white shirt, he marches out of his rented house in Dindigul's RM Colony. Neatly-polished shoes gleam as he casually flicks his hair to strike a pose for the camera. The resemblance is uncanny; so much so that passers-by pause to stare. Could it really be him?

Somasundaram is now Rajinikanth, and the transformation is complete. Not just the looks; it is as though the personality of the actor – the swag he is known for, his cool confidence and star aura – has seeped into Somu as well. Only moments before, seated in his living room in a lungi, he was just Somu; an actor from a small town. All it took was a little make-up, a wig, and a costume change to get him to shed his real self.

Somu, known as 'Rajini' Somu

The many lives of Rajinikanth

professionally, is among the most popular stage impersonators of Rajinikanth. Tamil Nadu is known to have over 200 such actors – many of them from smaller towns. While not all of them get the make-up and acting spot on, they manage to make a living out of imitating the Superstar.

"Every morsel of rice I eat has his name written on it," says Somu. "He has given me an identity; everything in my life –

from the house I live in, to the two-wheeler I ride – has come from him," he adds. The son of a Carnatic music teacher, Somu first went up the stage as a group dancer during a small cultural event associated with a temple festival in Dindigul in 1986. From then on, he started performing on stage regularly, dancing to Rajini songs with fervour and even imitating his moves.

"It was after a photo shoot in the costume from the film

Thalaivar has given me an identity; everything in my life — from the house I live in, to the two-wheeler I ride — has come from him

'RAJINI' SOMU

Stage ready Rajini Somu and Ragupathi. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Arunachalam that I started feeling I was able to pull this off well," says Somu. He has done the Rajini act on hundreds of stages across Tamil Nadu as well as other parts of the country over the years. Among his best makeovers is that of 80s Rajini; a look that Somu nails. He is also known for his *Kabali* look, and has recently perfected the *Coolie* look in denims.

Somu has watched Rajini's films over and over again to get his body language right. "There was no YouTube when I started out, and I would watch his films in the theatre several times," he says. He knows Rajini's hairstyle from every movie like the back of his hand, and has also kept a close watch on his beard and moustache styles. "It was after *Rajadhi Raja* that his hairstyle changed," he notes.

Somu spent a few years in Chennai as a junior artiste, acting in around 15 films. He has inspired several stage actors, among them being T Ragupathi from P N Kallupatti in Oddanchatram block in Dindigul district.

The 38-year-old carries an old plastic box that contains face powder and brushes, wherever he goes for stage performances. The box, a little frayed at the edges, is among his most precious possessions. Ragupathi, unlike Somu, uses simple make-up; he doesn't wear a wig, instead, has styled his hair like Rajini's untamed locks. His outfit – black shirt over black pants and a fanny pack has been carefully picked to go with the actor's costumes from the 90s and early 2000s.

There is one question Somu often encounters: 'Don't you have an identity of your own?' Somu says, "I'm just an actor. The real Somu is always inside me." His phone rings just then and he steps aside to answer it, laughing at something over the call. For a minute, it sounds just like Rajinikanth.



Kasaragod tales
Director Senna Hegde, known for setting most of his films in Kanhangad in Kasaragod district, is ready with another 'Made in Kanhangad' venture: *Aviitham*. Unni Raja and Ranji Kankol, both seen in supporting roles in Malayalam cinema, are said to play important characters in the movie. Senna, who made his debut with the docu-drama *0-41* and later directed the Kannada movie *Kathayondu Shuruvagide*, rose to fame with the breezy Malayalam entertainer *Thinkalazhcha Nishchayam*, which won the National Award for Best Malayalam Film in 2020. His other films are *1744 White Alto* (2022) and *Padmini* (2023). He made his acting debut in Aashiq Abu's *Rifle Club* (2024).



Postcard from Hungary
Have you ever watched a Hungarian film? If not, here is a chance to do so... at the Hungarian Film Festival happening in the city. Organised by the Indo Cine Appreciation Foundation (ICAF), in association with Embassy of Hungary, Liszt Institute – Hungarian Cultural Centre, the films to be screened will include *Lepattanó*, *Mastergame*, *Magasmentés* and *Some Birds*. Films will be screened today and tomorrow, from 5pm onwards, at the Tagore Film Centre, NFDC, Music College Road.

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