



metro PLUS

THE HINDU

At the Theppakadu Elephant Camp,
lunch includes ragi, coconut and jaggery **P2**

**WHAT SIDDHU'S
JACK HAS TO OFFER P4**



Daredevil embers A fire artiste at the Gemini circus. JOHAN SATHYADAS

Hanging in the balance

It is showtime at the Gemini Circus in Chennai. We go behind the scenes and meet some of its most loved performers

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Do you know the Kamal film *Apoorva Sagodharargal*? He shot it at our theatre. With us. It was magical," says Lakshmanan Chakyith, the 77-year-old production manager of Gemini Circus.

Referencing this 1989 tragic Tamil classic set in the contrastingly exuberant world of a circus, Lakshmanan launches into a long conversation about the history of one of India's oldest modern circuses which began in Billimoria, Gujarat, in 1951. But this story of the likes of former Prime Ministers Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Atal Bihari Vajpayee having

watched the performances is one that has been oft-repeated.

The more fascinating tale is that of its people. Composed of many different physical attributes, the circus folks of Gemini have worked and trained with this company for years, beginning usually as young clowns and working their way up the ladder, sometimes quite literally, to perform stunts and become heroes of wide-eyed young children who watch the two-hour long shows in utter rapture.

We meet artistes who hang from the pinnacle of the circus tent, form human pyramids and pedal cycles with their hands, to tell you their story.

CONTINUED ON
» PAGE 2

Love so natural, only a natural diamond will do.



**love,
from dad**
COLLECTION
FOR SECOND PIERCING



DE BEERS
A DIAMOND IS FOREVER

**Asmani Macca
and Yaseen Harum**

The popular phrase 'joint at the hip' needs to be modified to fit Asmani (30) and Yaseen (25), two Swahili-speaking Tanzanians who have been part of the Gemini Circus for a year now. These two acrobats who stun audiences with audacious stunts are joint at the head instead.

"I joined the circus when I was seven," says Asmani who is from Kilimanjaro. "I was 10," chimes in Yaseen from Zanzibar. Both these young acrobats would do flips and gymnastics to elicit claps from friends and neighbours. When the call to join a touring circus company arrived, the two jumped at the opportunity as it meant helping the family out financially.

"Tanzania did not have these big circuses. We would instead go as a group, performing fire dances, bamboo dances and other conventional acts at hotels to entertain tourists who'd arrive from different parts of the world. We learnt to do acrobatics by experimenting around each other. It was fun in the beginning. Now, it is a job like any other," says Yaseen who is more comfortable speaking in English than Asmani is.

As part of its six member crew that continues to do fire dances and pyramids at the circus, Asmani says that it is the joy they see on people's faces that keeps them going. They have travelled to England, Scotland and India for their performances and enjoy being in London and Liverpool the most because they find pockets of home in the land of their colonisers. "Many come up to us and want to take selfies. They want to touch our hair. It is amusing," says Yaseen.

Asmani wants to go home and begin a hardware store. Yaseen is into fashion and would like to set up a business selling "beautiful shoes to the ladies". Until then, the selfies will have to do.



PHOTOS: JOHAN SATHYADAS

**Bikram Thapa
and Sania Thapa**

This loving couple that met at the circus, is up at 6am each day to ensure that the dangerous stunts they do land well. "I am concerned for both our safety so practice is key," says Bikram (40) from Assam's Mojai region.

This flying trapeze artiste spends much of his time high up by the 'big top' of the cylindrical tent jumping from bars suspended at the top and being caught mid-air. No single performance scares him though as he has been training since he was 10 years old. "When I was young, the circus was a whole world of possibilities. The lights, music, the public and animals. What more could a child want? I was in wonderland," he says. "It is also where I met my wife," he adds.

A chatty Sania, a ring trapeze artiste, goes over their routine. After waking up, the two head straight to the performance ring and get stretches out of the way. Right after, they practise new tricks for an hour. "We begin rehearsing the act for the evening and are very conscious about getting it right. Then, there is the standard Indian breakfast with some focus on protein – eggs, fish and chicken. Circus artistes need to look good and do great tricks. It is an art," she says.

Sania also joined the circus when she was young. They met during a performance in West Bengal. When asked if they get bored of doing the same routine over and over again, Sania says that it is akin to going to office and sitting at a desk to do a task. Except here, she contorts her body to fit through hoops suspended in the air.

"People used to come in hordes when the animals were around but now, the focus has shifted to artistry and innovation. That is why we want more people to come and watch us. It is a performance like any other music or dance concert," Bikram says.

The Gemini Circus performs two shows everyday between Monday and Friday at 4.30pm and 7.30pm. Three shows are performed every weekend and on public holidays at 1.30pm, 4.30pm and 7.30pm. Tickets are priced at ₹500 each and can be purchased on BookMyShow or at YMCA ground in Perungudi, OMR.

Hanging in the balance

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Arthi Matho

Arthi Matho, a 40-year-old cycle stunt artiste from West Bengal is one of the senior-most women performers in Gemini Circus and is well-respected for her politeness.

"When I joined the circus, I was five. I was reluctant to leave my home and parents. But circumstances were dire at home and I had no choice. When I saw my father leave, I was actually sad. But five minutes later, I encountered lions and monkeys at the circus. I completely forgot everything else. The circus has been my life since," she says.

Arthi does not intend to make these statements seem grand. She is just as sincere about them as she is about the cycle she performs tricks on. When she is on stage, she says that she feels a firecracker burst inside her. The



energy of the stage is something she truly cherishes.

Arthi has travelled across India for her performances but is in love with Kerala as she likes the greenery. It is also very walkable and the crowds are sweet, she says.

She says that her son who has just finished his Class X exams is in Chennai for his break and to watch his mother perform. "Life has been on the road so he must travel to me. It is difficult but I know no other life," she says.

**STEPOUT****Ode to summer**

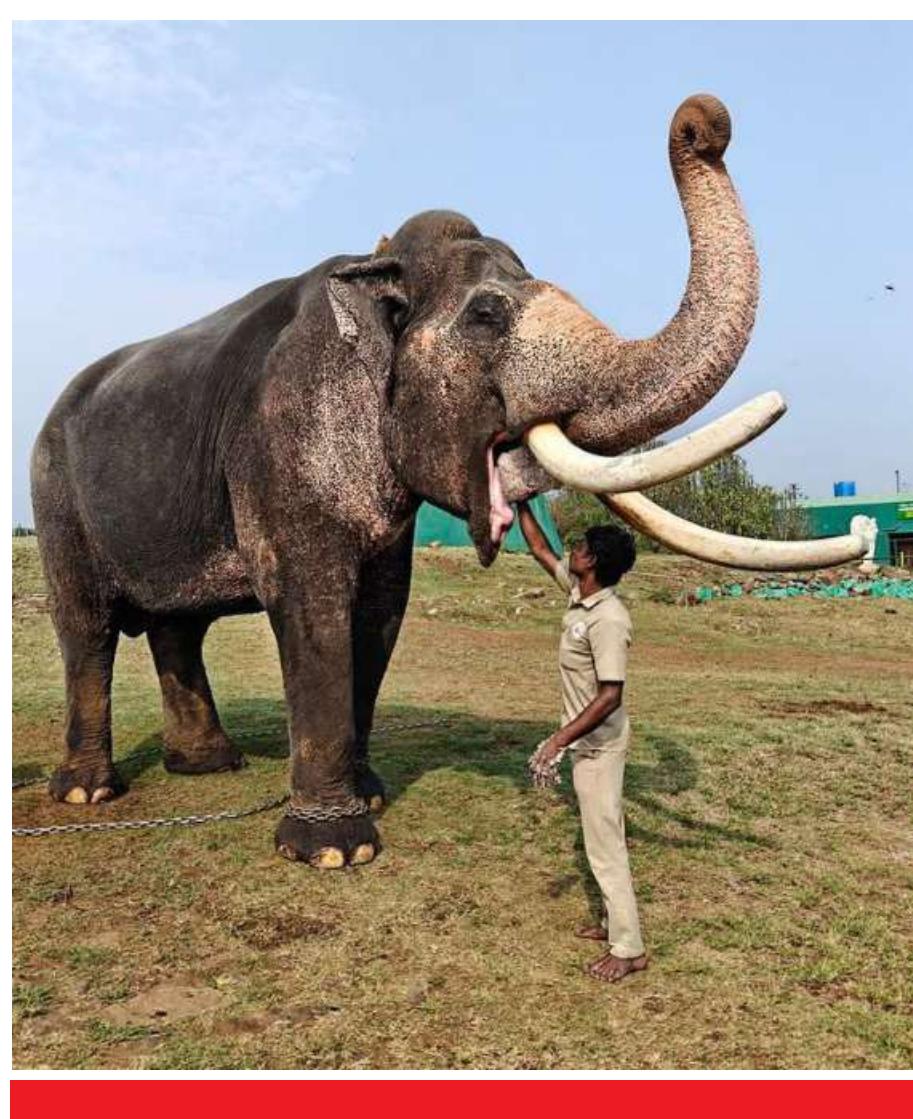
Sustainable and minimalist clothing, contemporary resort-inspired designs, modern Indian wear, and more will feature in Summer Collective, a curated pop up which will have multiple designers showcasing their latest creations. The designers participating include Itraake, Roho, Raas Life, Juanita, Khajoor, Klad, Cuin, Shop Nirvana, Gulabik Jaipur, Love Kiki, Divya Chugh, She.Ela, and Love Letter. @Collage, Nungambakkam on April 11 from 11am to 8pm. For details, call 9500082600.

**Pages of history**

The Oriental Club at Stratford House was an institution that once served as a gathering place for the men of the East India Company. Among those who once frequented the club was Dr Wynne Peyton. An Irishman of formidable intellect and ambition, Peyton served in the Indian Medical Service under Governor-General Francis Hastings during the Third Anglo-Maratha War. Following his service, Peyton settled in Madras, a city where the tides of empire ebbed and flowed ceaselessly. He ascended the ranks of his profession with distinction, eventually attaining the prestigious position of president of the Medical Board of Madras, a role that cemented his legacy in the annals of colonial administration. Scan the QR code to delve into his story.



The meal time ritual for elephants at the Theppakadu Elephant Camp is also an opportunity to watch the majestic beings in their natural habitat and learn to care for them



Shot on OnePlus

#FramesofIndia

Meal time at Mudumalai

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As dusk sets over The Nilgiris, the river Moyar is bathed in a golden hue. Peacocks make plaintive calls as they show off their plumage while grey langurs forage for berries. A stocky wild boar makes its presence felt briefly and the air is streaked with the loud calls of racket-tailed drongos and jungle mynahs.

Tucked away amidst the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve (MTR), along the banks of the river, is the

Theppakadu Elephant Camp, one of the oldest camps in Asia that dates back to the 1920s where as many as 27 elephants are rehabilitated.

Visitors can observe elephants in their natural habitat, their behaviour, and activities like feeding and bathing under the supervision of trained mahouts.

"During the British times, elephants were captured from the forest, trained, and used for hauling timber logs," says C Vidhya, Deputy Director of MTR (Core Area) adding that a paradigm shift in forest conservation turned such camps

to rehabilitation centres for elephants captured from the forest due to conflicts, issues, or injuries.

Inside the camp, a bunch of mahouts and kavadis, who are caretakers of elephants, are mixing giant food blocks made of cooked horse-gram, white rice, and ragi, throwing in a dash of mineral mix and salt, all under the watchful eyes of Dr K Rajesh Kumar, the camp veterinarian.

"An adult elephant in the wild grazes for 16 to 18 hours a day and consumes about 200 kilograms of greens. As camp elephants have bathing rituals,

training etc, there is loss of grazing time. This supplement diet, fed every morning and evening, makes up for it," he says, adding that the feeding time also enriches the bonding between mahouts and elephants. He arrives at the diet chart based on age, weight, and physiology status, which is reviewed every three months.

It is the only camp where elephants are trained without using conventional tools like ankush (a stick with a pointed hook). The tribal communities of Kaatunackers, Kurumbas, and Malasars have been the

Where humans and animals co-exist After a luxurious bath, large food balls are served to the elephants. K JESHI

caretakers for generations. C Mari, a mahout for three decades talks fondly of 65-year-old Kamatchi, captured from Pollachi. "Like children, they will feed only when hungry. They are also naughty and like to play in the mud. Nutritious food is the key to maintain the overall health of elephants, especially till they reach 10 or 15 years."

The camp's feeding ritual is unique. A jumbo kitchen runs like clockwork through the day with huge cooking vessels churning food for the gentle giants. "Horsegaram, ragi and rice are cooked for hours and mashed before placing them in square moulds. The micronutrients are always a part of their diet, unless there is a special diet prescribed by the veterinarian, like including fruits or chickpeas," explains the Deputy Director.

The feeding routine also disciplines the mahouts and kavadis, she adds. It helps the veterinarian update any behavioural changes in elephants whether it is in musth (an aggressive state) period etc. "The sugarcane, coconut and jaggery are sweet treats at the end of the meal. They also like to have sugar in their diet," adds Vidhya.

A mahout rings the bell at 6pm signalling mealtime. The food blocks are hand-mixed and turned into giant-sized balls and served to the hungry elephants. "They graze on seasonal fodder through the day. Male elephants like Santosh, and Bama, Kamatchi, Indra are out in the wild during nights as well. One of the elephants Murthy, believed to have killed 20 people, became the baby of the camp. So is Cherambadi Shankar captured from Gudalur that killed two people in a day. We have to bow to the caretakers. Such positive stories are heartening," says Vidhya, adding, "What better way to understand that elephants and humans can co-exist harmoniously."

Feeding time is 8.30am to 9am and 5.30pm to 6pm. Visit mudumalaitigerreserve.com





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Over centuries, thread has been an instrument to sew, mend, darn, embellish and create. We female artistes are much like individual threads in the fabric of a society's culture – seen but not noticed. But once you notice us, you will see us everywhere." This message at the entrance to the ongoing exhibition titled The Female Legacy Project (TFLP), sums up the theme and intent of this event and is a reclamation of narratives.

The exhibition focusses on three women: Usha Rani, a kattaikoothu artiste, Seethalakshmi, a shadow puppetry artiste, and Narthaki Nataraj, a Bharatanatyam artiste. The exhibition traces the lives and struggles of these three women artistes, their influences, inspirations, and the people who supported them.

Seethalakshmi hailed from a family of puppeteers in Kakinada, and was trained by her maternal uncle MV Ramanmurthy. She came to Chennai at the age of nine in 1954 along with her troupe for a show at Island Grounds, and soon after made the city her home.

Though she never went to school, it was Usha's keen sense of observation and remarkable ability to memorise songs and dialogues that helped her forge her career. She was known for the portrayal of the character of Kaikeyi, from *The Ramayana*. She could hold the audience in rapt attention while

Tall walls of legacy

The Female Legacy Project is an ongoing exploration that spotlights women in culture through art exhibits and workshops

she performed. Yet, the world she lived in only referred to her as a *nadakaari*, and nothing more.

For Narthaki Nataraj, a transgender Bharatanatyam artiste, Shakti Bhasker was an ardent cheerleader. KP Kittappa Pillai, the descendant of the famed Tanjore Quartet, took her in as his disciple in Thanjavur and gave Narthaki her name. Over the decades, Narthaki has faced numerous rejections and upheavals as a transwoman. The greatest moment in her life was when she was awarded the Padma Shri in 2019.

Sea of emotions

In parallel to the exhibit, 34-year-old kattaikoothu artiste Thilagavathi Palani conducted a koothu make-up workshop.

Initiated into the art by her uncle Munuswamy at the age of 11, she later underwent formal training at the Kattaikuttu



Gurukulam under P Rajagopal. "Each of us had to learn reading, writing, singing, costume design, play any one musical instrument and also make-up. Artistes have to learn to apply the make-up for themselves, and also make the costumes and wooden accessories," says Thilagavathi.

"Our makeup has to be loud, bright, dramatic and exaggerated as it is performed in open grounds during temple festivals, usually past midnight. Every *rasa*

(emotion) has a colour, for example, aggression, anger and courage is signified by red; for female [characters] we use pink or yellow, and for heroic characters such as Krishna or Arjuna it is dark green or blue; and for neutral emotions, it is a combination of orange and yellow," she says.

For the first layer, they mix coconut oil and *muthuvella* (a pearl white colour powder) and once it is evenly applied, they draw lines to accentuate the features and expressions using a *thenang kuchi* (broomstick). For heroic characters, a moustache is drawn in black but for villains it is attached using a rope. Once the lines are drawn, they begin to mix dominant colours in oil and rub it gently, covering all areas. Once the makeup is applied, it is topped with talcum powder.

Thilagavathi says, "Each troupe will have just one makeup kit. Pink, orange, yellow, red, black and white are the basic colours, with pink being a recent addition. We mix two colours to indicate certain characters."

@Alliance Francaise of Madras, Nungambakkam. On till April 13, 10am to 7pm. Get your professional portraits clicked with the most inspiring woman of your life free of cost on April 12, 4pm to 7pm. Make a piece of jewellery from a one-to-five inch image of your favourite female artiste on April 12, 4pm to 6pm. Presented by Goethe-Institut in association with SNS Arts Development Consultancy, and Kala Collective in collaboration with Alliance Francaise.

Breaking barriers (Clockwise from left) Usha Rani; Seethalakshmi and Thilagavathi applying make-up ahead of her performance. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Bringing Bombay in a plate of pani puri

Bombay Truffle brings Mumbai's flavours to the Chennai fine dining milieu

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On a hot and humid afternoon, we found ourselves at Bombay Truffle for lunch. The soothing interiors and cosy seating were inviting so we lingered. We started with their popular crisp palak patta chaat and Bombay-style pani puri, while our refreshing strawberry mojito mocktail arrived in the meantime.

The first brand under Collective Cuisines, this pure vegetarian fine dining restaurant is committed to



Burst of flavours Street food from Mumbai and Delhi makes an appearance in the menu. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

and oozing melted cheese, delivered a deep, umami-rich flavour. As for the pani puri, in true Mumbai street-food style, it was served with potato, black channa, and ragda fillings, along with a choice of dips. The pomegranate-infused pani with chaat masala and tamarind stood out. At the chef's recommendation, we tried the Peshawari paneer kebab, presented on a shimmering gold plate. Stuffed with minced nuts and cheese, the paneer was cooked to perfection.

For the mains, we order an assortment of breads – cheese olive naan, lacha paratha, and garlic naan. To accompany them, we chose the Bombay-style dal makhani and paneer tikka masala. The cheese olive naan stole my heart, pairing perfectly with the mildly flavored, buttery dal makhani, which had a rich, smoky depth. The paneer tikka masala, infused with a hint of kasuri methi, was equally indulgent.

From their continental menu, I opt for the penne in creamy basil pesto. While the subji dum biryani was fairly good, it didn't leave a lasting impression.

The basil pesto pasta, however, was a different story.

Having decided on dessert even before our soup, we wasted no time. The biscotti tres leches and gur (jaggery) ice cream arrived soon after. While the ice cream was a bit overwhelming, the tres leches more than made up for it. This fusion of caramelised biscotti flavours with the classic Latin American three-milk cake was pure indulgence – soft, spongy, and soaked in a luscious biscotti-infused milk mixture, topped with whipped cream and crushed nuts.

Bombay Truffle, Anna Nagar East. Cost for two ₹2,800. For reservations, call 8925996602.

Reclaiming the stage

Gana Cypher marries the cypher culture of hip-hop with gaana and hopes to bring the genre into Chennai's mainstream gig culture



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A few years ago, 36-year-old Sakthi Venkatesan, who grew up in an Egmore Housing Board tenement, decided to become a hip-hop artiste. He travelled to the United States, met some of the OGs of locking (a dance style endemic to hip-hop), mastered the form, and returned home to quit his tech job and help performing artistes in Chennai find sustainable sources of income through art.

But he wanted to do more, particularly for an artform deeply embedded in the city's soul, yet still underappreciated: gaana.

For Sakthi, songs of pioneers like Gana Pazhani were his gateway into music.

As someone who has closely watched the evolution of gaana – from the slums of North and central Chennai to both big and small screens – he believes the artform has been misrepresented in the mainstream for long, with its artistes caught in a cycle of exploitation.

Moved by hip-hop's influence on the Black community in the US, he recognised gaana's potential as a tool for self-expression and cultural identity, and founded Gana Cypher, with the support of dance crew, B-FAB. "Gana Cypher is inspired by 'cypher', an important concept in hip-hop culture, which involves dancers taking turns improvising their moves, ideally in a circle. The circle means there's no hierarchy," he says. What started as a small

initiative with a handful of gaana singers, Gana Cypher now offers a platform to both budding and established artistes to not only showcase their songs but also bring gaana into the mainstream, in the most unadulterated way.

The fifth edition is scheduled



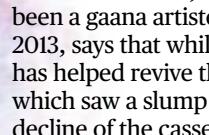
Voice of the people (Clockwise from left) Artistes at a Gana Cypher event in Chennai; Sakthi Venkatesan and Rev Prashanth. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

for this weekend where 20 artistes are scheduled to perform.

Back to roots

Gaana originally began as a mournful recital at funerals, and Gaana Cypher aims to bring this essence to the fore. "Gaana is still performed in slums during funerals as *erangal gaana*. It is ritualistic, and that is why it remains a thriving artform. However, just as slums are isolated from the rest of society, the artform is too. Appreciation is limited to these areas, and the only way to bring it into the mainstream is through YouTube or movies," says Sakthi.

Rev Prashanth, 31, who has been a gaana artiste since 2013, says that while YouTube has helped revive the artform, which saw a slump after the decline of the cassette culture in the early 2000s, there have



Crossing certain political lines can land us in trouble

REV PRASHANTH
Gaana artiste

been instances of censorship when the content of a gaana song is overtly political. "Gaana singers, including Gana Pazhani and Gana Vinoth, have sung against caste discrimination, but crossing certain political lines can land us in trouble. There will be distasteful comments and threats, and YouTube may even remove our content. But we don't have enough support to fight this," Prashanth, who is set to perform at the Gana Cypher event, adds.

Breaking stereotypes

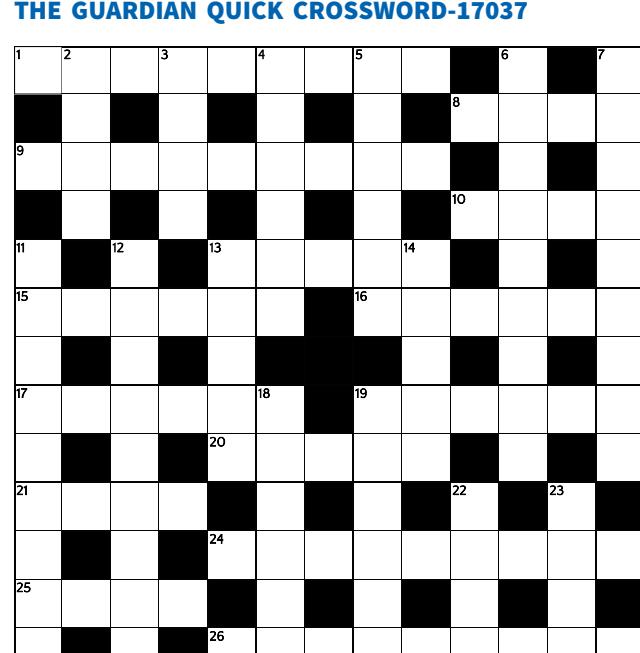
Twenty-three-year-old Kodambakkam Gaana Sakthi, a budding artiste, wants to use Gaana Cypher to address stereotypes surrounding performers. "When someone sees a gaana artiste, they think we are rowdies or drug addicts. Sometimes even the police stop us on the road and abuse us, just because we look and talk a certain way," he says.

Even for a performance on TV, we are expected to dress like a 'typical gaana singer', with a lungi and torn undershirt, says Kaccha. "How we want to portray ourselves is our choice. It is a matter of self-respect," adds Prashanth.

What Gana Cypher aspires to achieve is to celebrate the genre for its authenticity, and spark a conversation between the mainstream audience and gaana artistes. "No adulteration or cultural appropriation; the event is mainly for the mainstream audience to see, acknowledge, and appreciate the artform in all its glory," says Sakthi.

The group is hosting the fifth edition of its gaana concert and open mic on April 14, on the occasion of Ambedkar Jayanti, at Medai in Alwarpet. Tickets are priced at ₹299. Call 9150007598.

THE GUARDIAN QUICK CROSSWORD-17037



Across
1 Policy U-turns (4-5)
8 Seberg or Shrimpton? (4)
9 Journey there and back (5,4)
10 Gradually leak (4)
13 Bull riding event (5)
15 Rats and fleas, say (6)
16 Thin portion (6)
17 Beat (6)
19 Injury (6)
20 Mood (5)
21 It goes with this and the other (4)
24 Calculated (9)
25 Remaining (2,2)
26 In an unlawful way (9)
Down

2 Closed circle (4)

3 Around half a litre (4)

4 Balsam or balm (6)

5 Nobel and Booker, for example (6)

6 Pool (9)

7 Merciless (9)

11 E.g. protest too much (9)

12 Quarrelling (4-5)

13 One's entitled to it (5)

14 Senior (5)

18 Intellectual (6)

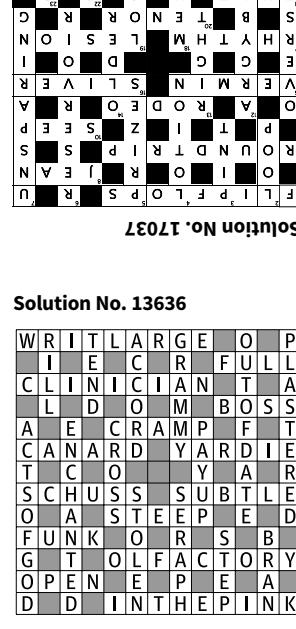
19 Setting (6)

22 Greek salad ingredient (4)

23 Publicise - draft legislation (4)

Solution No. 17037

Solution No. 13636





With Telugu film *Jack* releasing today, actor Siddhu Jonnalagadda discusses his career post the *Tillu* films and tackling the funny guy image

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A year after the blockbuster *Tillu Square*, Siddhu Jonnalagadda returns with his new Telugu film *Jack*, written and directed by Bhaskar of *Bommarillu* fame. Over the past nine years – barring a brief role in *Kalki* (2019) – *Jack* marks the only project in which Siddhu has not worn multiple hats as co-writer, co-editor, or creative producer.

It was, he admits, a welcome breather to focus solely on acting – the craft that first drew him to cinema. “It

Jack of all trades

was a relief,” says Siddhu. Although he experienced a few withdrawal symptoms, he resisted the temptation to involve himself in other departments. “Gradually, I began to enjoy focussing just on acting and nothing else.”

Jack is an investigative action entertainer, and Siddhu’s character brings a flair for humour. Ever since his hyperlocal one-liners as *Tillu* became a rage in *DJ Tillu* and its sequel *Tillu Square*, Siddhu has cultivated an image as the

A new test

Siddhu Jonnalagadda in a still from *Jack*. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

“funny guy”. “People expect me to deliver fun lines, so Bhaskar sir and I decided not to take that away completely. I don’t want to shock the audience by suddenly becoming too serious or quiet. At the same time, I am mindful of not getting stuck in that image,” he says. “*Jack* deals with larger issues, and while there’s humour, it doesn’t dilute the core of the story.”

Siddhu says his character’s name – Pablo Neruda – adds a layer of quirk and intrigue. “In the film, my mother is a fan of the Chilean poet and names me after him. When Bhaskar sir told me this, I found it interesting. A lot of youngsters today might know Pablo Escobar, but not the poet, so it might spark some curiosity.”

In many ways, *Krishna and His Leela*, which had a direct digital release during the lockdown, was a breakthrough for Siddhu both as a writer and actor. But it was *Tillu* that made him a household name. With *Jack* arriving after two *Tillu* films, does it feel like a test? “Not at all. Every film is a new test,” he says with a smile.

The talkative one
Siddhu’s character in *Jack* is also dialogue-heavy, much like *Tillu*. In one scene from the trailer, his character even

I don't want to shock the audience by suddenly becoming too serious or quiet. At the same time, I am mindful of not getting stuck in that image

SIDDHU JONNALAGADDA

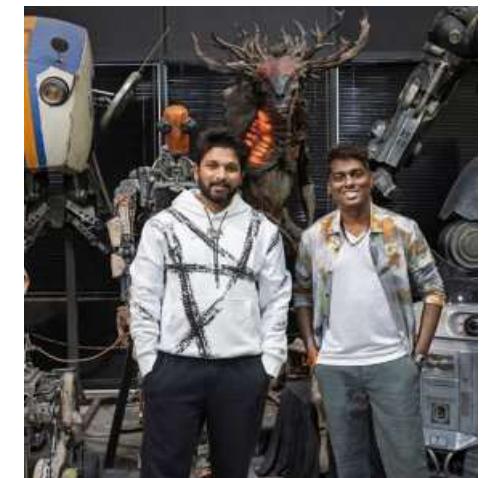
comments on his tendency to talk too much. That line, Siddhu reveals, was an on-set improvisation. “The opponent delivers a long monologue, which irritates my character – and that frustration comes out through humour,” he says.

Following *Jack* and *Telusu Kada*, Siddhu will begin work on *Badass*, a film he has co-written with director Ravikanth Perepu. The duo, who have known each other for 15 years, first made their mark as collaborators with *Krishna and His Leela*.

Structure doctor
Siddhu’s writing process makes for an interesting case study.

While the *Tillu* films may appear to be light-hearted comedies on the surface, what makes the character resonate is the underlying angst – layered with sharp societal observations, from taxes to colourism. An engineer and MBA graduate who turned to acting, Siddhu says he is constantly absorbing the world around him – and that seeps into his writing. “When I was dealing with taxes, I didn’t understand the system at first and ranted about it. That rant became part of *Tillu Square*. I also follow marketing trends like the farm-to-table concept. But when I’m at a café, I just want coffee with regular milk and sugar. No alternative sweeteners or milks. I also prefer a menu card over scanning QR codes.” These everyday musings, he says, often find their way into his characters.

From manifesting a ₹100-crore film a few years ago to now achieving it, Siddhu remains optimistic about the road ahead. “Money matters when it comes to realising a vision. But I’m drawn to stories and characters that are relevant,” says the actor, who confirms that *Tillu Cube* is in development.



All about the effects

Actor Allu Arjun has collaborated with hit filmmaker Atlee for a magnum opus, to be bankrolled by Kalanithi Maran of Sun Pictures. Tentatively titled *AA22xA6*, a promotional video of the film released recently shows the actor-director duo travelling to Lola VFX company and visiting technicians at Ironhead Studio (costume and creature design), Spectral Motion, ILM Technoprops and Legacy Effects. The promotional video hints at a big-budget sci-fi action film high on VFX. “I read the script and my head is still spinning,” says Jamie Madigan, VFX supervisor known for his works in *Iron Man 2*, *Transformers: Rise of the Beats* and *G.I. Joe*. Allu Arjun was last seen in the pan-India blockbuster *Pushpa 2: The Rule*, directed by Sukumar. Atlee last directed *Jawan*, starring Shah Rukh Khan and Nayanthara.



The show goes on

Guess where Kamal Haasan is right now! The actor is at the ongoing NAB Show in Las Vegas, which is said to be the largest show for media, entertainment and technology. This year’s show focusses on production tools, AI-driven workflow and new streaming solutions. Photos of the Ulaganayagan checking out the show have gone viral. Kamal is awaiting the release of *Thug Life*, directed by Mani Ratnam. It signifies the reunion of Kamal Haasan and Mani Ratnam after their 1987 classic, *Nayakan*. Apart from this, he also has *Indian 3* and a film with action choreographers Anbariv lined up.



In the driver's seat

Malayalam superstar Mohanlal, who is in the limelight for the blockbuster *L2: Empuraan*, has announced that his upcoming film *Thudarum* will be released in theatres on April 25. The film, co-starring Shobhana, was earlier slated for release on January 30 but was postponed. Directed by Tharun Moorthy, *Thudarum* is bankrolled by M Renjith. The film brings back Mohanlal and Shobhana after 15 years on the big screen. The evergreen pair, known for hit films such as *Nadodikattu* (1987), *Minnaram* (1994), *Manichirathazhu* (1993), *Thennavin Kombath* (1994), *Pakshe* (1994), and *Maya Mayuram* (1993), is back in the movie, which promises fun, suspense and nostalgia.

Moving cinema

How ‘balloon theatres’ are taking cinema to India’s small towns

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The Lumière brothers’ 1896 short silent documentary *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station*, one of the earliest films ever screened, is linked to a famous legend. The story goes that when audiences first saw the moving image of a life-sized train rushing towards them, they panicked, screamed, and even fled to the back of the room.

A similar story lives on in Bommidi, a small town in Tamil Nadu’s Dharmapuri district. Anbutheeban, the founder of the Adi Dravidar Sangam and editor of the local film monthly *Vaanam*, recalls a time, four or five decades ago, when cinema was a rare luxury

in the region. “We had an *ola kottai*,” the elderly gentleman reminisces, referring to the makeshift theatres with thatched roofs. “There were three seating classes – *thara* (floor), bench, and chair. People from 30 to 40 neighbouring villages would occasionally gather for screenings.”

One night, a film featured a car speeding directly towards the camera. Mistaking it for reality, the audience seated on the floor stood up and waved their *veshtis* frantically at the screen, as if trying to stop the vehicle. “It was a sight to behold,” Anbutheeban chuckles.

To this very town has now arrived what locals are calling the “balloon theatre”. Picture Time, in association with MFR Cinemas, has recently launched



What's playing?

A mobile digital movie theatre in Bommidi, Tamil Nadu; (below) a mobile digital movie theatre in Ladakh.
SHIBU NARAYAN

Tamil Nadu’s first Mobile Digital Movie Theatre (MDMT).

Innovative tech

According to Arun S of MFR Cinemas, some locals have concerns about the ‘balloon theatre’. Would it deflate, catch fire, or burst? “We call it a balloon theatre because it’s catchy and easy to remember, but it’s not a literal balloon,” he explains. The structure is built using AEIE (Acoustics Enabled



Inflated Enclosure), Picture Time’s custom-made, patent-pending inflatable system constructed from thermoplastic polyurethane. “It is fire-resistant and weather-resistant.”

MDMT is designed for ease of setup and dismantling, making it highly portable. According to Picture Time’s founder and CEO, Sushil Chaudhary, there are two variants: ‘portable’ and ‘mobile’.

“The portable screen, like the one in Bommidi, is designed so that every component is movable. It required no construction or civil engineering, except for the washrooms. We can relocate the entire theatre within 10 days.”

The mobile variant, on the other hand, is a vehicle-mounted screen capable of transforming any open space into a 120-140 seat air-conditioned cinema in just three hours. This flexibility allows them to bring the big-screen experience to rural and underserved areas with minimal infrastructure requirements.

The team prioritises high-quality projection and sound. “Good sound requires good acoustics, which is difficult to achieve with portability. Fixed locations can

optimise acoustics, but for a mobile setup, we needed a different approach. That’s why we designed an inflatable system where the walls handle acoustic requirements,” Sushil explains. The Bommidi theatre includes an additional acoustic wall, costing ₹20 lakh, to enhance the multiplex experience as per the local partner MFR Cinema’s request.

“Despite not being a fixed structure, our portable theatres can have a long lifespan up to 15 years with proper upkeep,” adds Sushil.

Grab the popcorn

The MDMT concept is also transforming cinema access in extreme locations. For example, in Ladakh, where temperatures drop to -28°C, the company designed a weather-resistant screen. “It has been running successfully for four years,” says Sushil.

Meanwhile, back in Bommidi, there is some buzz about the ‘balloon theatre’. Murugan R, who runs an oil store in the town, says, “For a long time, Kavitha Theatre was our only option. But this balloon theatre... they say the sound is good and the interiors are like multiplexes in cities. It’s quite something... I’m definitely planning to watch a film here soon.”