



metro PLUS

THE HINDU

Stories of bravery come alive at this exhibit on ancient hero stones of Tamil Nadu **P2**

WHY DARSHANA LOVES THE STAGE P4



Hitting the right notes

With *Thug Life* releasing today, we speak to singer Chinmayi, whose rendition of the 'Mutha Mazhai' track has gone viral

Srinivasa Ramanujam

srinivasa.r@thehindu.co.in

Singer Chinmayi is back in the limelight. Her rendition of Tamil track 'Mutha Mazhai' at the recent *Thug Life* audio launch in Chennai is garnering a lot of praise. The interesting part is that Chinmayi has sung the Telugu and Hindi versions of this particular track composed by AR Rahman but not the Tamil version, which has been sung by singer Dhee.

"When I sang it, it was just another performance. It was just like how I perform classics of other singers; I have sung S Janaki amma's, Chitra amma's songs on various stages in the past. I sang the Tamil version that evening because Dhee was not available. I was a stand-in," she explains.

That she might have been, but the version she dished out on stage, in the presence of thousands of fans and the entire cast including Kamal Haasan, Silambarasan and Trisha, has gone viral; its official recording from music label Saregama Tamil has already hit more than seven million views.

"When Dhee was chosen, I'm sure they were going for something quirky. Dhee has a special musical expression. This whole talk about her version of 'Mutha Mazhai' versus mine... it feels like we are part of a wrestling match that we did not sign up for. As artistes, we openly admire each other's work. It is not a competition," she says, "I want to apologise to Dhee. She's a young

girl. To compare the two versions is not necessary at all."

Is Chinmayi banned?

The recent spotlight on her has not yet sunk in, she adds. "Because, in the last seven years, my DMs have been filled with abuse. Somewhere, my emotions got numb after that and now, when there is so much adulation, I'm like, 'thank you, I guess'. While I'm truly grateful for this, I have become numb."

Chinmayi is, of course, referring to the years since 2018, when she named influential people in the film and music industry as part of the #MeToo movement. This, she says, has made unions within the industry



Dhee has a special musical expression. This whole talk about her version of 'Mutha Mazhai' versus mine... it feels like we are part of a wrestling match that we did not sign up for. As artistes, we openly admire each other's work

CHINMAYI
Singer

PHOTO: SR RAGHUNATHAN



Pitch perfect (Clockwise from left) Singer Chinmayi, whose performance in the audio launch of *Thug Life* is going viral; musician Dhee.



To watch the video interview, scan the QR code.

Track record

■ Chinmayi's debut song in Tamil films, 'Oru Deivam' from 2002's *Kannathil Muthamittal*, was a runaway hit. Her track in *Thug Life* marks her return to the same combination of Mani Ratnam and AR Rahman, both of whom worked on the 2002 film as well.

■ The singer is also a popular dubbing artiste; her last few outings include Tamil films *Hero* and *Leo*.

■ Since her naming of influential names in the #Metoo movement, Chinmayi's work in the Tamil film industry has come down considerably. Her recent performance at *Thug Life*'s audio launch has given rise to many music fans demanding that she be given more opportunities.



PHOTO:
S SHIVARAJ

'ban' her, thus depriving her of singing and dubbing chances in Tamil films. "The dubbing union banned me. Director Mithran had to make me dub in secret for *Hero*. I also dubbed for *Leo*, for which they tried to track down the studio where it was worked on. When a film comes to the dubbing stage, people don't have the bandwidth to deal with such a 'ban,'" she says.

Facing repercussions for using her in films, many composers have opted for other available singers. "A lot of music composers tell me that they want to make me sing, but that their producers wouldn't let them," says Chinmayi, who describes the support of her family members and friends as her biggest asset.

Musical discoverability

Chinmayi burst into the Tamil music scene in 2002 in a film that was directed by Mani Ratnam and had music by AR Rahman. More than two decades later, her work in *Thug Life*, which is film from the same director-composer combination, is being discussed again. How different have these two experiences been? "Nothing has changed. For *Thug Life*, Rahman sir sang a few lines, taught me, and we worked on it." The song showcases elements of Carnatic and qawwali as well. "It showcases his creative genius; he may be given the same bag of rice, but he'll give you an entire 15-course menu with it."

Her performance at the *Thug Life* audio launch has, in turn, led to music fans discovering some of her older work. "This happened when I did a Twitter Spaces concert during the pandemic. A lot of people then requested some older songs of mine too and they got a new lease of life then. In general, my career is

defined by tracks that people don't know I sang. If I ever have a live concert in Chennai, I will probably name it 'I did not know you sang that,'" she laughs.

That probably marks her musical versatility; Chinmayi sounds very different – from a melodious 'Sara Sara' to an energetic 'Mayya Mayya'. "Many of my songs have been standalone hits, but listeners have not been able to make a connection and attribute it to me, though my name is in the credits," explains Chinmayi, who is looking forward to engage more with art and music in the future.

STEP OUT

Breathing it in

Villains, an immersive theatre experience, blends performance, poetry and Tamil conversation. This 90-minute production by Tale 'O' Meter is said to be unconventional as it places you at the heart of the narrative. The storytelling moves between Tamil and English. The experience is said to include changes in light and even the possible use of blindfolds for a textural experience. @ Medai, Alwarpet, from 6pm to 7.30pm on June 7. Tickets available on BookMyShow.

Wave that flag high

Pride month is here! Affections, a queer art festival, brings together a day of expression, celebration, and community, curated by Sunshine House. The festival invites attendees to experience queer life through a range of art forms – visual works, performances, curated talks, installations, and even food, all rooted in queer voices and perspectives. The event will be conducted in Tamil and English and welcomes anyone looking to spend a day surrounded by community. @Backyard, Adyar, June 8, 12pm to 8pm. Open to those aged 18 and above. Entry is ₹100 per person at allevents.in. Call 7305004225.



Picture perfect (Clockwise from left) Photos by V Mohanakrishnan, GN Ramaswami and Lakshmi Pichaimani. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



has always been a great stress buster, and as an avid biker, my trips have translated into good opportunities for wildlife and Nature photography," he says. Photographed by him is a pair of Khalij pheasants with their vibrant, blue plumage. "Patience is the key to photographing wildlife and Nature," he says of his experiences.

For S Balu, who has been interested in photography for 30 years, his interest in pictorial and Nature photography has meant planning dedicated photography trips at regular intervals. His photos on

As part of Confluence 2025, over 230 photographs from the Photographic Society of Madras' members are on display across seven categories comprising monochrome, landscape, street, portrait, wildlife, monuments, and open colour. Also on display are photographs from across

Life, in focus

A legacy organisation, the Photographic Society of Madras, established in 1857, is currently having its photo exhibition Confluence 2025

across age groups, and meet once a month. Apart from interactions and workshops by noted photographers and cinematographers, we also organise photo tours, seminars, walks and exhibitions for our members," says president of the society, GN Ramaswami.

As part of Confluence 2025, over 230 photographs from the Photographic Society of Madras' members are on display across seven categories comprising monochrome, landscape, street, portrait, wildlife, monuments, and open colour. Also on display are photographs from across

the world which have won awards at the salons conducted by the society.

A member for over 10 years now, V Mohanakrishnan says being a part of the society has meant meeting many like-minded people, and a camaraderie he greatly cherishes. "Photography

display include the electric blue Ain Dubai ferris wheel in motion by the water, and birds including a peacock with its tail feathers unfurled and in full display.

If the vibrant wildlife and Nature photographs are fascinating to see, the monochrome photographs capture a melancholic stillness. From wooden cabins covered in snow to the stunning colours of autumn, the landscape photos on display make for a capsule trip around the world.

Ramaswami says they have been encouraging more youngsters to join in, and pick up photography as a hobby.

"We have also seen a marked rise in interest among them. After coming together, we have bettered our craft through learning and experience sharing. This exhibition is a great platform for our members to showcase their work through various themes," he adds.

Confluence 2025 is on at Lalit Kala Akademi till June 7. Open from 11am to 7pm.



Cultural spotlight (Clockwise from below)
At the exhibition; Sudhakar Nalliyappan (left) with members of Yaakkai Trust at a site.
R RAVINDRAN AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

An exhibition on the hero stones of Tamil Nadu reveals the past, one discovery at a time



Deepa Alexander
deepa.alexander@thehindu.co.in

It is the last weekend before school begins, and Chennai's famed DakshinaChitra is crowded with families. At the Varjai Art Gallery, a group of college students is putting together tactile clay objects they have helped create. Anitha Pottamkulam, director, Culture, DakshinaChitra, says, "The Immortal Valors: Hero Stones of Tamil Nadu is an extraordinary exhibition curated by DakshinaChitra in collaboration with Tamil Nadu's Department of Archaeology, Roja Muthiah Research Library and Yaakkai Heritage Trust. On these pictorial representations come alive stories etched in stone – of bravery, sacrifice and ancestral homage spanning over two millennia. It invites you to discover the fascinating world of *nadukal*, the legendary hero stones that immortalise Tamil warriors who gave their lives in war,

cattle conflicts, and protection of their villages. Museums say 'don't touch' but to bring these fascinating stories from the fringe to the mainstream, we have created tactile versions."

Ways to classify

At the inaugural event, both the chief guest R Sivaranthan, Joint Director, State Archaeology Department, and K Rajan, Academic and Research Advisor to Institute of Archaeology and Museology, help the audience journey through time, throwing light on rare artefacts, sculptures and inscriptions dating from 3BC to the 19th Century to unveil secrets of ancient Tamil governance, warfare and societal values.

"There are three ways you can date an inscription," says Prof Rajan on a phone call. "The first is based on content – name of the king, regnal year... Assuming that this is not available, the content may denote the political geography of the region or the territorial division which may have emerged after a certain period (names of dynasty or names of chieftains also give clues). The third is paleography – initially *vatta ezhuthu* script and later Tamil script. The shift from the first to the second happened in the late Pallava period. In addition, sculptural representation on the stone helps date them. Early stones have shields and swords, bow and arrow, and are on cattle raids. Later ones have details

on capturing land and villages, a sign of social transformation."

Hero stones populated the Tamil land "from 4BC to the 5th Century as just stones with inscriptions. Post that, figures made their appearance, from 6th Century to 9th Century – this is when most of the memorial stones were created. A new range came up after the 10th Century, not just for heroes but also on sati and sanyasis. During the Vijayanagara period, inscriptions were done away with and only sculptural representations were found. By the Colonial period, they started fading", says Rajan, adding that the oldest hero stone in India is found in Pulimankombai in Theni

district on the banks of the Vaigai.

Whether the 'hero' has been buried at the scene of action or brought home and buried is a question that begs to be asked. "Only if we excavate under them and find the skeletal remains will we know. But these stones are worshipped, and out of deference to the dead, this has not been done," he adds.

Passion for history

In a land profuse with such cultural artefacts that define both time and territory, the onus of discovering, protecting and pushing for their study also falls on the citizen-historian. Which is where institutions such as the Coimbatore-based Yaakkai Heritage Trust, founded in 2017 by Sudhakar Nalliyappan to create awareness and conserve cultural heritage, step in. Sudhakar, president of Yaakkai, found his way to history through degrees in Computer Science and Tamil Studies.

"I was fond of travel and discovered hidden facets of our culture. Information was available, but scattered, and bringing this microhistory under one umbrella was our focus. Memorial stones are written in common dialects of the region. We have GPS-pinned nearly 1,200 stones. As many as 150 students intern with us. We also work to conserve prehistoric rock paintings and megalithic sites. Heritage should also be made part of CSR activity – it opens up funding. Time and knowledge investment is our biggest contribution," says Sudhakar.

This knowledge now hangs on photographs with details of the memorial stones at the gallery. There are also 3D models created by the interning college students. The exhibition invites you to travel back and forth, but it follows the narrative that connects modern people with the way we were.

The exhibition is on till July 20 (10am-6pm) at DakshinaChitra, Muttukadu. Closed on Tuesdays.

Journeying on

Kulavai 2025, a two-day fest, looks to celebrate survival and radical vulnerabilities



Holding a mirror
A still from Avvai.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

progressive philosophies, over call.

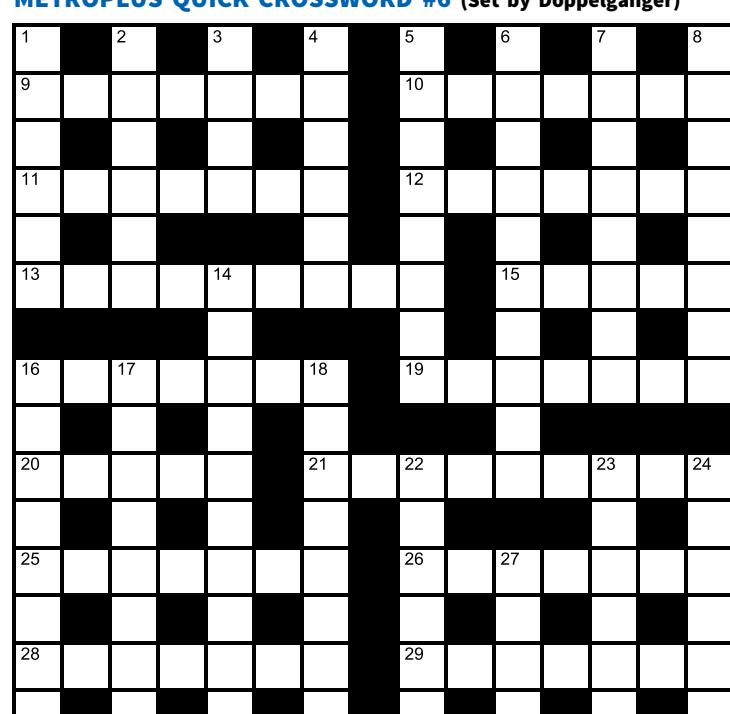
Most people who are associated with Mangai, including the likes of her lighting artiste M Surendar, have worked with her for at least 15 years. To him, celebrating Mangai seems obvious. "Nobody has brought in as many women artistes on stage or subverted *The Mahabharata* or other religious texts with a feminist lens like she has in Tamil and shared these stories," he says.

The journey has hence veered towards ensuring that vulnerable groups find comfortable spaces on stage. Many of the theatre artistes performing on Saturday and Sunday are from the queer community. "I use the word radical vulnerabilities a lot. You know, how when people get together despite all the burdens and pass on empathy or solidarity despite the vulnerabilities," she says.

"I do not care about being palatable. I just want to raise as many uncomfortable questions as possible. Nothing else," she says.

Kulavai is on June 8 and 9 at Alliance Française of Madras, Nungambakkam between 10am and 6.30pm. On June 8, an open-mic event is scheduled. Entry is free.

METROPLUS QUICK CROSSWORD #6 (Set by Doppelganger)



Across

- 9 The concert was _____ awesome (7)
- 10 Simple and ingenious (7)
- 11 It comes before tomorrow morning (7)
- 12 A lightweight boxer is _____ than a featherweight boxer (7)
- 13 Personnel skilled at making things (9)
- 15 A legal process (5)
- 16 Brash conceited young men (7)
- 19 Moved the ball out of the defensive zone (7)
- 20 However, on the other hand ... (5)
- 21 This never strikes twice at the same spot (9)
- 25 A group of cells with a similar structure and particular function (7)
- 26 Give active approval to a theory (7)
- 28 Not manufactured by robots (3-4)
- 29 Furthest in any direction from the centre (7)

Down

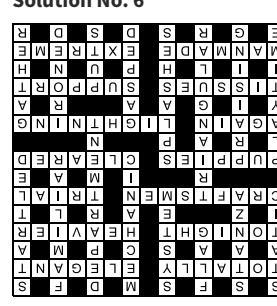
- 1 What you hear on the radio sometimes (6)
- 2 Part of a poem (6)
- 3 You can _____ down a passing car to get a lift (4)
- 4 Students need to get some _____ into their exam revision (6)
- 5 This person can repair a malfunctioning (4)

To play The Guardian Quick Crossword, The Hindu Cryptic crossword, Sudoku & other puzzles online, scan the QR code.



- 6 A section of an organisation with responsibility for one particular aspect (10)
- 7 Was happy to see a _____ face in the crowd (8)
- 8 Surprised suddenly (8)
- 14 Delta shaped (10)
- 16 A period for recreation (8)
- 17 Expressing a feeling of veneration (8)
- 18 Applies patches of a contrasting colour (8)
- 22 Took a sharp breath in, through surprise (6)
- 23 Decreased (6)
- 24 Pull material into small folds (6)
- 27 It's risky when someone _____ all his eggs in one basket (4)

Solution No. 6



Prajwal Parajuly

Not very long ago, Amazon refused to deliver to Sri City. Of course, as a town grows, increasing its share of residents with disposable income, global giants come around. Colleagues often remarked how lucky I was to have mops and wipes and blenders brought to my doorstep. It hadn't been so straightforward for them. Setting up a house anywhere is hard. Do that in the middle of nowhere, and the challenge compounds. The mobile data in my apartment refused to cooperate. A teeny crumb on the floor, and an army of ants descended from hell. The campus laundromat would lose my laundry, only for it to resurface several days later. At least home deliveries made my move somewhat easier.

The first week of my new life, I had spent as much time contemplating paper towels on Amazon as I had my syllabus. For every hour dedicated to lesson plans on dialogue tags, there would be two hours of mulling over the benefits of Mr. Muscle verses some eye-wateringly expensive hipster brand. I bought spoons and plates and glasses. I ordered a steel trashcan, too. By the end of the week, I had read more reviews on hangers – apparently my choice of wooden ones was aesthetically pleasing but broke at an alarming frequency – than I had my students' writing. It didn't help that the expected packages hadn't yet materialised. Between phoning Amazon and ordering on Amazon, I was drained.

It was time for a break. And nothing screamed break louder than a jaunt in the neighborhood park. When I accepted the job at Krea University, I was given two accommodation options: a dingy flat the size of my thumb in perfectly organised Sri City proper or a light-filled place the size of France in the midst of some chaos just outside of Sri City. I selected the bigger flat despite its being farther from campus because it came with park. Referring to it as a park was optimistic, but what else would you call an empty rectangular plot, gated and barricaded, in an area infested with mid-rises? Inside the gate was a walking track. There was an overgrown patch. There were even benches. Bangalore's

SOUTHERN LIVING

Not on the bucket list

In a town where paper towels, hangers and mops arrive fashionably late, salvation comes in the form of a park and a walking track

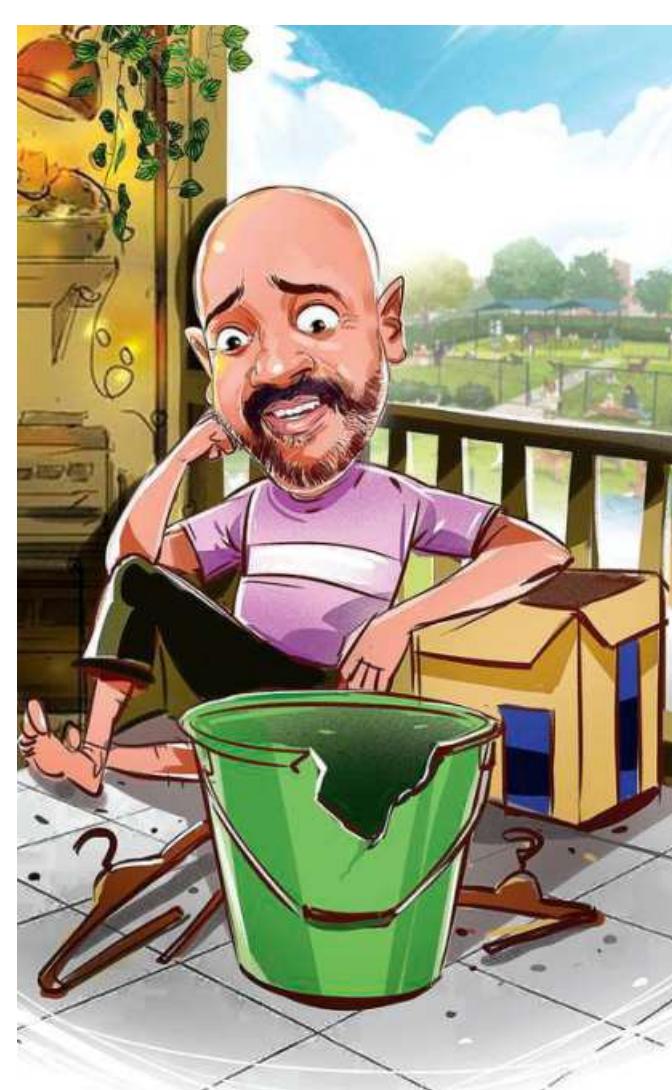


ILLUSTRATION: SAAI

Cubbon Park wouldn't hold a candle to this neighbourhood gem.

My glaze-white-tiled flat with the two bathrooms whose shared wall went only three-quarters of the way up looked out to the park. How the empty plot came to be is a mystery, but if it was the main reason I had eschewed an easier commute, I would make sure I'd use it. So far, I had been intimidated in much the way going to a new gym intimidates people. But Amazon can do funny things to your brain; I switched off my computer and made my way out.

The park was a happy place. The factory workers had returned home. Young men played cricket. Young women chatted. I traded pleasantries with visiting parents of Krea professors. I even exchanged awkward nods with the petting lovers I spied on from my balcony.

It was nice to be out in the open, far from Amazon. This was our version of forest-bathing. Sure, there was no breeze, I might have stepped on a sanitary pad and fornicating stray dogs didn't exactly provoke the same feelings that birdsong did, but an actual dedicated area for sports and walks was a blessing. I was grateful. The park had done its job.

How long would it last, though? There was rampant construction around me. Would the empty plot go the way of other empty plots? A colleague echoed my concerns. He was afraid that the park was only a placeholder for a future building. It didn't make sense for something that size to sit there unmonetised.

But I had other issues to worry about. The Amazon packages had finally appeared. About half a dozen hangers arrived broken. The blender was reported delivered but nowhere to be seen. And the steel trashcan? Amazon replaced it with a broken green bucket. The return process was cumbersome. I'd use the green bucket as the trashcan in my balcony, the same one that overlooked the park. One stormy day, the wind almost blew it away.

Prajwal Parajuly is the author of *The Gurkha's Daughter and Land Where I Flew*. He loves idli, loathes naan, and is indifferent to coffee. He teaches Creative Writing at Krea University and oscillates between New York City and Sri City.



Shot on OnePlus

#FramesofIndia

Frame of coexistence

At The House of Klothberg in Chennai, a new exhibition titled Coalescence places contemporary art among racks of sustainable fashion

Sangita Rajan
sangitarajan.pb@thehindu.co.in

shelves of heels, and displays filled with straw hats and jute bags at The House of Klothberg on Harrington Road.

The store and vegan cafe, with its commitment to sustainability and mindful design, is less a backdrop and more a co-curator, allowing the artworks to engage with everyday life. "Art shows are always within galleries or spaces meant for art. So, the people who walk in are art literate, and they're coming just because they're interested in art. So how do you make art accessible to the public?" asks

curator Jitha Karthikeyan.

To bring art to spaces that are not galleries, was the idea that fuelled this exhibition. The five participating artists, Aishwaryan K, Sooraja KS, Dimple Shah, Anita TK, and Mibin, interpret the central theme of coalescence in their unique way.

Chennai-based visual artist K S Sooraja's collage of artworks depicting the physical and mental experiences and feelings of women, hang inches away from a display of handbags and shoes. The artworks confront the weight of physical and emotional experiences tied to womanhood, using hair as a symbol.

Dimple Shah, meanwhile, presents three distinct series. Fungi Head, bursting with psychedelic colour, is a metaphor for her shifting psychological states. In contrast,



In the broader context, art is very important to the world because it helps us understand those who are different from us

JITHA KARTHIKEYAN
Curator

Contemplating with a Dead Tree turns inward, and focusses on decay, and the passage of time. Her third series, Quixotic Landscape, takes a more overtly critical tone, using absurd, imagined terrains to comment on ecological destruction and misuse of natural resources.

"In the broader context, art is very important to the world because it helps us understand those who are different from us. These artists have no common thread running between them. But that itself is the point. To show that we can be different, and still belong together," says Jitha.

Aishwaryan K's Hasta series captures hand gestures in gouache and archival ink on elephant dung paper. Each gesture, drawn from memory, ritual, or everyday experience, invites the viewer to pause and connect with moments often overlooked. They are drenched in nostalgia of a childhood that no longer exists.

There is something disarming about turning a corner in a store and finding a painted gesture waiting for you. Coalescence does not demand attention – it lingers quietly, nudging you to look, reflect, and maybe see the space, and each other, a little differently.

Coalescence is on view at The House of Klothberg, Harrington Road, till June 13.

A milk that is a game-changer



A revolutionary product in the ever-evolving realm of food and beverage technology, Amul Moti stands out. With no added preservatives, his long-life toned milk, packaged in groundbreaking aseptic technology, boasts an impressive shelf life of 90 days. Utilizing cutting-edge science, it maintains its freshness and does not need refrigeration until it is opened, making it an ideal choice for consumers residing in remote areas. Additionally, it minimizes the necessity for frequent trips to the grocery store. Beyond its suitability for the usual tea or coffee, this milk proves to be a culinary marvel, perfect for crafting creamy curries and delightful desserts. Its concentrated flavour and consistency make it a superb choice for dishes

"CONSUMER CONNECT INITIATIVE"

that rely on a milk base, enhancing the enjoyment of homemade meals.

The aseptic packaging guarantees that the milk remains untainted and nutritious, even in challenging environments. Whether enjoying a morning cup of coffee amidst nature's serenity or opting for a quick on-the-go meal, this product caters to the preferences of those who prioritize both convenience and quality.

The prolonged shelf life not only reduces food wastage but also allows consumers to purchase it in larger quantities without the fear of spoilage.

In essence, Amul Moti emerges as a comprehensive solution that seamlessly combines innovation and sustainability in the ever-changing landscape of food technology.

Changemakers in focus

Alliance Française of Madras, in collaboration with Institut Français, is hosting a French movie screening on the occasion of World Environment Day. The featured documentary, *Bigger Than Us*, follows 18-year-old Indonesian activist Melati Wijsen on her journey around the world as she meets young changemakers tackling some of the most urgent global issues of our time. @Alliance Française of Madras, Nungambakkam. June 6, 6pm. Open to all.



Scoop of legacy

Naturals Ice Cream arrives in Chennai with tropical flavours and a taste of nostalgia

Ikshaa J

Fruit. Sugar. Milk. That is all it takes to make good ice cream, and Mumbai's iconic brand Naturals is testament to this.

The brand that has become synonymous with time, taste, and temptation has finally opened its first store in Chennai, and it is the perfect antidote to the city's scorching heat.

What began as a fruit vendor's curiosity to blend real fruit into ice cream has grown into a near 40-year-old legacy which now boasts 178 stores across 15 states. Nestled in KNK Road, this 1,119 sq ft store, is the brand's 178th outlet.

As I walked in, I was greeted by a fresh, fruity aroma and vibrant walls adorned with colourful murals of fruit: Mahabaleshwar strawberries, Ratnagiri mangoes, coconuts from Kerala. Being the first store in Chennai, one of the murals is of Raghunanda Kamath, founder of Naturals Ice Cream. It takes customers through the the humble beginnings of the brand in 1984.

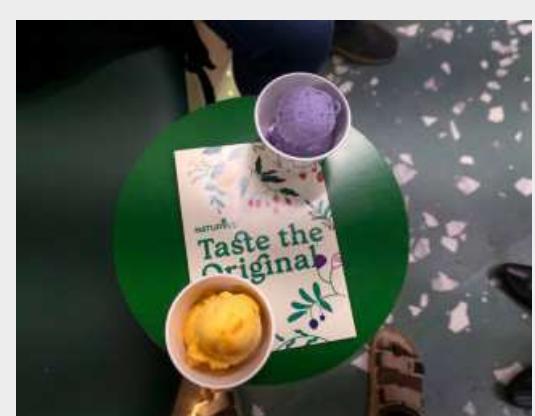
With 21 flavours like tender

coconut, mango, roasted almond and more on display, the store will keep switching the seasonal flavours. Kala jamun, jackfruit, and lychee are this summer's top sellers. Along with scoops of ice cream they also have ice cream shakes and fruit sundaes. Even the waffle cones are made from scratch, adding to the freshness of the experience.

We tasted the mango sundae – a scoop of the rich and creamy malai ice cream, topped with freshly chopped Ratnagiri mangoes. The lychee ice cream was luscious and tasted just like eating the fruit.

In the store, there is a wall which has stories from factory workers explaining the brand's origin. There is a QR code that customers can scan, which lets them leave feedback, and pictures of the memories made while tasting the original. The customer images will be displayed on this wall on a rotational basis.

Naturals Ice Cream is located at new no. 10, old no. 29, Khader Nawaz Khan Road. One scoop of ice cream costs ₹90.



Sundae best Kala jamun and mango ice cream flavours from Naturals.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Chef Devagi has authored 22 cook books SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Heritage on a plate

Savour Tamil flavours from the kitchens of Singapore and Malaysia, curated by celebrated Singaporean Chef Devagi Sanmugam at Feathers Hotel

Chitradeepa Anantharam

chitradeepa.a@thehindu.co.in

As a Tamilian born and raised in Singapore, 69-year-old Chef Devagi Sanmugam, connects to her roots through the rich aromatic world of spices. In Chennai to curate Ayalagam, a food festival that celebrates Tamil flavours from Singapore and Malaysia, Devagi shares her culinary journey and how she blends tradition with innovation.

"The title resonated with me deeply, and I could instantly connect to the theme," she says with a smile. Her story begins with her father, Chandrasekaran, who migrated to Singapore from Mayavaram in Tamil Nadu. He worked at a Tamil newspaper and later married Anjalai, whose mother, Nagammal, was raised in Indonesia. "So I became familiar with Southeast Asian cooking cultures early on in life," says Devagi.

"In Singapore we have three major ethnic groups, Chinese, Malay,

and Indian. So we grow up exposed to spices from all over Asia," she says. Over time, these influences began to appear in Tamil cooking.

"For example, we now use soy sauce in mutton and fish dishes and add Sichuan pepper to enhance heat."

Chef Devagi points out that while many spices are shared across Asian cuisines, kalpasi (black stone flower, a dry and brittle lichen), is uniquely South Indian. "It is especially prominent in Chettinad cuisine and imparts a deep, intense, smoky flavour that is hard to replicate," she says. Another favourite is thalippu vadagam, a traditional seasoning blend made from sun-dried spices and aromatics and onions.

Our meal at Sangamithra starts with six dips accompanied by crisp rice wafers. Each dip showcases a unique flavour profile, but the standout dish is the curry leaf aioli, that lingers on the palate. A close second is the calamansi chilli sauce, which packs a tangy punch thanks to the citrusy notes of calamansi, a Southeast Asian variety of lime. With



our palates awakened by this array of flavours, we are served a refreshing pudalangai salad. Raw snake gourd is combined with cherry tomatoes and julienne carrots, tossed in a light dressing of lemon juice and ginger juice and salt, and finished with a sprinkle of fresh coconut shavings.

The thenga sadham pottalam features mildly spiced coconut milk rice carefully wrapped in a banana

leaf along with chicken sambal, sweet and sour chutney, stir-fried bitter gourd, fried chicken and mutton chukka. The pottalam, meaning package, is then tied with a string and grilled on a tawa, allowing the flavours to meld together. As we untie the leaf parcel, the aroma wafts up, rich with coconut milk and ghee. The interplay of bitter, sweet, sour and spicy elements make for a harmonious and visually stunning dish. It is best enjoyed the traditional way, with your fingers, no cutlery.

We are then served the vendhaya chicken, a signature creation by Chef Devagi. "No one would think to throw in a handful of roasted fenugreek into a semi-gravy chicken dish," she says with a smile, adding, "The bitter and nutty taste of the fenugreek goes well with the chicken dish made in South Indian style." And, she is right. The roasted fenugreek adds a deep, aromatic bitterness that complements the South Indian-style chicken perfectly.

Immensely impressed by the pottalam experience, we get ready for dessert: maravalli kizhangu (tapioca) halwa and pandan idiyappam with vazhai pazham sauce. While both are intriguing, it is the former that truly stands out. The tapioca halwa is comforting and nostalgic. Cooked tapioca is grated, infused with ghee and aromatic spices, then gently steamed and shaped like round cutlets. Served warm, with a generous sprinkling of fresh coconut shavings, it is delicate on the palate.

With Ayalagam, Chef Devagi not only brings the tastes of her heritage to Chennai but also demonstrates how tradition can evolve without being lost.

At Sangamithra Restaurant, Feathers Hotel. On July 8, for lunch and dinner. A vegetarian meal is ₹2,500 and a non-vegetarian meal is ₹3,000. There are five rotating menus. For reservations, call 7823977825.

Make space for poetry

Lyricist Karthik Netha on working with Mani Ratnam and AR Rahman on their latest project



The written word

Lyricist Karthik Netha. VELANKANNI RAJ B

Akila Kannadasan

akila.kg@thehindu.co.in

'Vinveli Nayaga' is the song of the moment in Tamil Nadu. It is from AR Rahman's album for the soon-to-release Kamal Haasan and Silambarasan starrer *Thug Life*, directed by Mani Ratnam. The song has some beautiful poetry by Karthik Netha, woven into its electrifying rhythm. The poet-lyricist has also written lines for the song 'Anju Vanna Poove' from the film. An elated Karthik says that he is happy his endeavour to bring good poetry into film songs is being received well.

Karthik Netha can be credited with coining the title 'Vinveli Nayaga' for Kamal Haasan. Only a few months ago, the actor made news by requesting that he not be referred to as 'Ulaganayagan' that was bestowed upon him by his fans. However, he now has a new title that transcends planets.

The spark for the term came from Rahman. "He had originally titled the track 'Space Hero,'" explains Karthik, adding that he came up with a suitable Tamil term that fit into the song's tune and requirements. "Rahman sir sent me the track in November 2023 and by January 2024, we were done working on it," says Karthik.

Working with Mani Ratnam and Rahman, Karthik says, was like "sitting in front of masters to learn". The four months between the end of 2023 and 2024 is when the songs came alive, Karthik recalls. He remembers how when he first heard the track 'Anju Vanna Poove' in Rahman's voice, words began to flow without himself realising it. "I wrote everything at one go," he explains, adding

that once he listened to the track, it stayed in his mind, and he later edited his lines to go with the tune.

Karthik finds the process of writing a song for a pre-composed tune creatively enriching. "A certain rhythm exists in my mind into which my words fit when I set out to write," he explains, adding that this rhythm tends to make him stick to his usual voice. "But when a tune comes from outside, I will arrive at a rhythm that is completely new."

This exchange between composer and lyricist, Karthik feels, is like an intimate conversation between lovers. "We give the composer's emotions and feelings words and structure, for every tune has the composer's soul in it," he says.

Karthik has several films in the line up, and is most excited about a film Darbuka Siva is directing and composing music for. "I've written five songs, and the album is close to my heart," he says. On the poetry front, he is working on his eighth collection, to be launched at the Chennai Book Fair in January next year. While Karthik's poetry explores themes of philosophy, his recent verses talk about lust from a philosophical perspective. "I have tried to elucidate how powerful desire is."

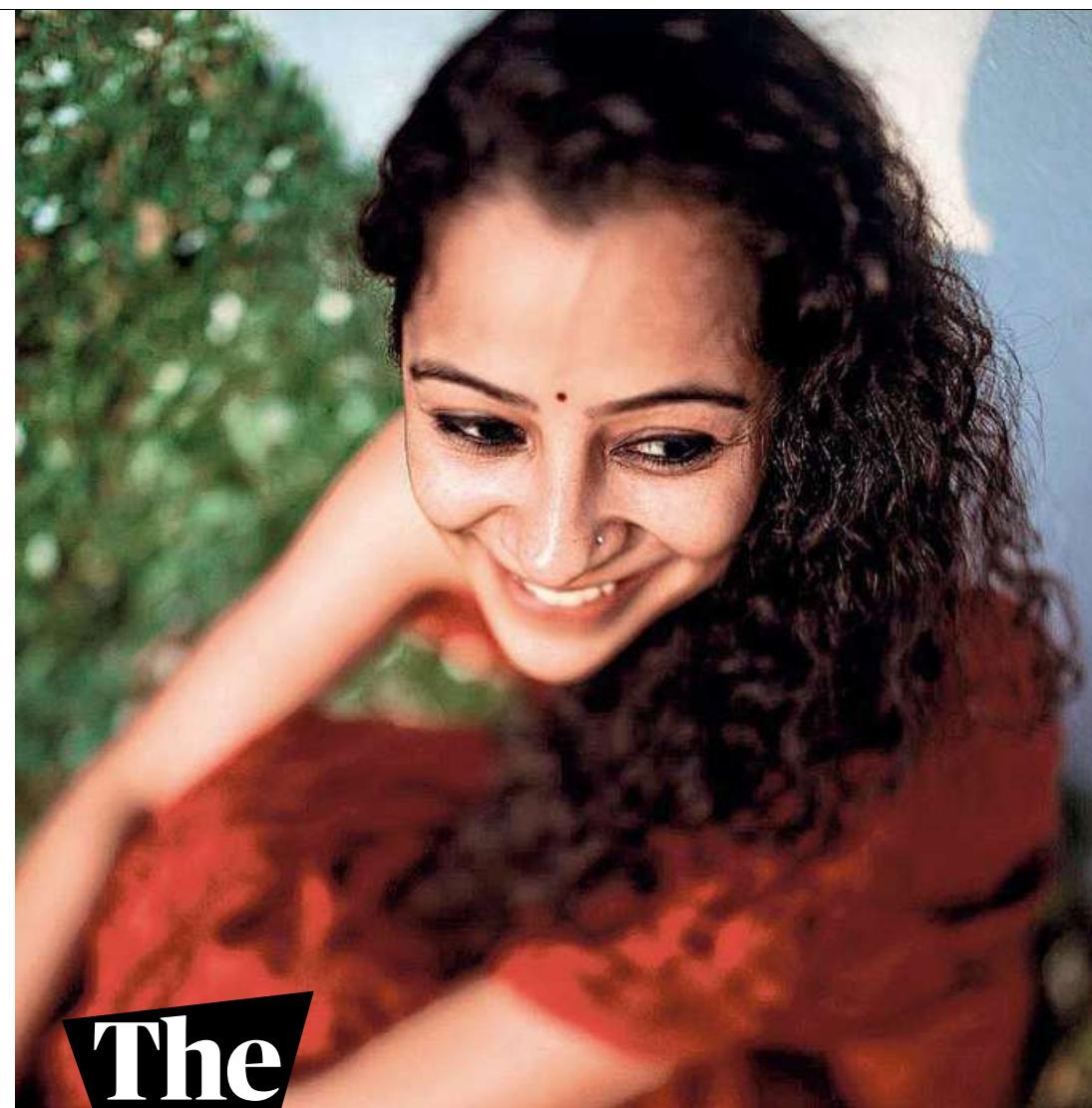
Why Darshana Rajendran, now a popular face in films, got back to theatre to perform in a Malayalam play titled *Bye Bye Bypass*

Shilpa Nair Anand
shilpa.nair@thehindu.co.in

Darshana Rajendran started doing theatre as a hobby initially. As she engaged more with the medium, she realised she thoroughly enjoyed it to pursue it full time. Over the years, she explored other connected forms such as dubbing, voice overs, theatre workshops and films. Among the films she has been part of are *C U Soon*, *Aanum Pennum, Hridayam*, *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey*, *Purusha Pretham*, *Paradise* and *Rifle Club*. She has acted in web series such as *Ctrl Alt Del* and *Naya Safar*. Recently she was part of the play *Bye Bye Bypass*, directed by actor Roshan Mathew. The seven shows of the nostalgia-inducing Malayalam play were embraced with enthusiasm by the Kochi audience. The play, told through the point of view of kids, is about four cousins and their soon-to-be demolished ancestral home to make way for a bypass. Excerpts from an interview with the actor:

Question: What is it like coming back to theatre?

Answer: I haven't really thought of this as coming back to doing plays because I started exploring acting, with theatre, in 2011. At that time I had a job and this was a hobby of sorts. It was sometime around 2014 when I decided to quit my job and spend more time with it



The stage is set



Darshana (third from left) in a scene from the play.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

the same group. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, we did a small play; we have been doing play readings together, and hosted performances at home. I have been part of theatre and I don't think of it as coming back to it. But yes, a show like *Bye Bye Bypass* is difficult to get going. We started [AVNF] with a small bunch of people. Today, when one show happens, there are 25-30 people working non-stop to run it.

Q: What were the inputs of the actors in the play?

A: It's (*Bye Bye Bypass*) a devised performance: each scene has been devised by a set of actors, the musician, the writer, the director. We were creating it together; so all actors have played different characters in it, like I play this character called Thumbi. But I have also played other characters; we have all switched characters and played when we were creating.

In a scene – the three children are meeting one boy, and they become friends. We would have two sets of actors try different versions of that scene. Then we all sit together, watch it, judge it and then decide what works and what to retain. This way, everyone has a sense of ownership.

Q: How did the story of *Bye Bye Bypass* resonate with you?

A: I grew up in Riyadh, moved to Kochi for high school, then I was in Delhi. I went to London for my Master's and then moved to Chennai. I was also in Bangalore for a while. I have shifted so many times, lived in so many houses that I have had to say goodbye to several houses. For me, the idea of home is not the house as such but the memories and the stories that happened there.

Q: Are you working on other plays?

A: I'm going to be working on another play with Chennai-based Perch, who are reviving their play, *Under the Mangosteen Tree*.



SATHYAM | ESCAPE | INOX | DEVI | SANGAM | CASINO | ALBERT | WOODLANDS | EGA | PVR - AMPA | PALAZZO KAMALA CINEMAS | S2 PERAMBUR | BHARATH | IDREAM | MAHALAXMI | KRISHNAVENI | KKNAGAR KASI KASI TALKIES | INOX LUX | PVR - VELACHERY | PVR - PALAVARAM | PVR ICON VR MALL | REDHILLS PVR AIRPORT PVR AERO HUB ECR - PVR | INOX NATIONAL | INOX MARINA | S2 THIYAGARAJA | MAYAJAAL | ECR - VIJAY PARK | MAMANDUR - C3 OMR - CINEPOLIS | EVP CINEMAS | AMBATHUR - RAKI & MURUGAN | KOYAMBEDU - ROHINI | PORUR - GK CINEMAS THAMBARAM - VIDHYA & MR & NATIONAL | CHORMPET - VETRI | KOLATHUR - GANGA | REDHILLS - SRI RADHA MOVIE PARK PADI - SIVA SAKTHI & LAXMI BALA & GREEN CINEMAS | THIRUVALLUR - RAKI & ROJA & THULASI | CHENGALPET - SRK & LATHA ST THOMAS - JOUTHI | PONNAMALLE - SUNDHAR & VIGNESWARA & BHAGAVATHY | ULLAGARAM - KUMARAN PALLAVARAM - JANATHA | THIRUNINRAVUR - VELACINEMAS | MINJUR - MANI | VIRUGAMBakkAM - SRI DEVIKARUMARI THIRUVOTRIYUR - MSM & ODEAN MANI | ANAKAPUTHUR - GANESH & VELCO | AVADI - MEENAKSHI & REMI | UTHUKOTTAI - KUMARAI KUNDRATHUR - PARIMALAM & VENKATESWARA | TIRUTHANI - DURGA & GK GOLDEN | PALLAVARAM - JANATHA | MAPPEDU - AVK ADAYAR -GANAPATHYRAM | THIRUKAZHUKUNDRAM - BHUVANESWARI | MANALI - MEENAKSHI | MADHURANTHANGAM - RK & SR



All eyes on Prabhas

After months of speculation, the release date for Prabhas' upcoming horror entertainer *The Raja Saab* has finally been confirmed. The film is set to hit theatres worldwide on December 5, 2025. The makers have also confirmed that the film will release in five languages — Telugu, Hindi, Tamil, Kannada, and Malayalam.

Directed by Maruthi, the film marks Prabhas' first foray into the horror-comedy genre. Joining him are Malavika Mohanan, Nidhi Agarwal, and Ridhi Kumar. The film features music by Thaman S and cinematography by Karthik Palani.