



metroPLUS

THE HINDU

Cruising through Tamil Nadu’s salt flats, sanctuaries, sunsets and silhouettes **P2**

HOW MITHUN PREPPED FOR TOURIST FAMILY **P4**



Aditi S Bada

When I moved to Chennai from Maharashtra, I did not expect my connection to home come wrapped in a piece of newspaper, handed over a street counter. But sometimes, it is not the grand things that make you feel rooted. It is instead a hot, spicy snack that tastes like nostalgia. A product of the 1960s, the vada pav was conceptualised outside Dadar station. A popular theory suggests that batata vada or potato vada, a Maharashtrian staple, was wedged between pieces of soft pav by a street vendor named Ashok Vaidya. Chutneys were added as binding elements. This humble, affordable dish became the go-to snack for Mumbai’s mill workers. Eventually, it transitioned from a blue-collar bite to an icon that crossed the boundaries of class, region, and generations. It did not take long for this snack to travel across State borders and reach Chennai. As Maharashtrians and Rajasthanis shifted to Chennai for work, education, or business, they brought with them their culinary habits. Slowly, pockets of the city, particularly areas like Sowcarpet, began to see stalls pop up, serving vada pav to a growing North Indian community and curious locals. Adaptations like sweeter pavs, fusion fillings, and wider menus, did take place, but mostly, sellers stuck to the authentic original recipe. The anatomy of a good vada pav is constructed on four non-negotiables: pillowy pav served with a crunchy, hot vada made of gram flour and spicy mashed potato, and a perfectly fried and salted thin chilli. To seal the deal, zingy chutneys made of garlic and coriander are added. As summer rains begin in Chennai, we go on a trail to find the perfect vada pav in Chennai. All that is left is a cup of tea.

Jay Vada Pav, Sowcarpet

Jay Vada Pav may just be a year old, but it is already giving the veterans a run for their money. Nestled in the heart of Sowcarpet, this compact stall has a cheeky banner out front that reads: “*Badi badi baatein vada pav khate.*” It is a clever riff on a popular Bollywood line, and honestly, it is impossible not to smile while reading it. What stands out here is the slightly larger pav, making it look more generous than most versions around. The vada here is a crunchier, bold spice mix that does not overpower but leaves a lasting zing. The pav follows the Chennai signature of being a tad sweet, which surprisingly pairs well with the earthy flavours of the vada. The chillies served on the side are milder than the Mumbai ones but still bring forth a kick. At ₹30 a piece, it may seem a bit steep for

PHOTO: S SHIVA RAJ



Shot on OnePlus

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Little can go wrong when bread and potatoes merge. As it rains in Chennai, we scout for hot vada pav, to learn the stories of the cooks who moved cities and then recreated the taste of home

traditionalists, but when a dish travels over 1,000 kilometres and still delivers, it seems worth it. Yashaswini Chauhan, a Delhi-based food-enthusiast who has been in Chennai for a while, says, “It was my first Chennai-style vada pav and I am blown away! Did not expect to find this Mumbai street classic down South, but they have given it their own spin.”

Jay Vada Pav is at 434/164, Mint Street, Sowcarpet, Park Town. A vada pav here is priced at ₹30. Contact: 9962119280.

Shree Vada Pav, Sowcarpet

Tucked in the buzzing lanes of Sowcarpet, Shree Vada Pav has stood its ground for 18 years. Hemant Vyas, a third-generation entrepreneur from Rajasthan, currently runs the show. His grandfather once sold vada pav on the streets of Mumbai. Seeking better opportunities, the family moved to Chennai. Eventually, Shree Vada Pav was born. Hemant, is a man of many languages, fluent in Hindi, English, Tamil, Marwadi, and Gujarati. This might explain why the stall attracts such a large crowd. Locals flock here for the

authenticity. The pav here leans a little on the sweet side, but the vada makes up for it, bursting with flavour and layered spices. The fried green chillies are not spicy, but bring their own drama. Hemant says, cheese vada pavs are their most popular option. “Everyone wants add-ons now... everyone wants an upgrade.”

Shree Vada Pav is at 27, Ramanan Road, Sowcarpet. A vada pav is priced at ₹25. Contact: 9380648311.



Mumbai Chatwala, Kilpauk

From the moment you step into Mumbai Chatwala, there is a certain chaos in the air – the aroma of fried snacks, clatter of plates, buzz of conversation, and an owner who is running between counters, taking orders, and making sure every plate hits the mark. Mumbai Chatwala began 10 years ago when Anandaraman B, a localite, decided that it was his calling to feed people. “I haven’t stopped since,” he says, speaking in bits as he slits chillies and sets out the plates. Generously stuffed with crunchy sev, spicy onions, and a pav so soft that is drenched in butter, this version has a spice-filled vada in the centre that ties it all together. A spicy green chilli is served on the side (finally!), not just for the drama, but because it genuinely elevates the experience. What sets Mumbai Chatwala apart is the range of offering – bhel puri, sev puri, dabeli, grilled sandwiches and pizzas along with ambience. Bright, colourful interiors and a surprisingly spacious seating area makes this place a good spot to hangout. Unlike most chaat corners which are either too cramped or take-away places, this one invites you to sit and snack. Mumbai Chatwala is at Lumbini Square, 384/130, Purasaiwalkam High Road. A vada pav here is priced at ₹40. Contact: 9003228763.

King’s Vada Pav, Purasaiwalkam

If you are on the hunt for the closest thing to Mumbai’s original vada pav, your trail should end at King’s Vada Pav in Purasaiwalkam. The masalas here, are not overused. Chunky potato mash, a strong taste of curry leaves, a garlic kick, and just enough crisp on the outside. Add to that a slender, fiery green chilli. Behind the counter is Govind Kumar, a man with deep-rooted connections to the food he serves. Originally from Bihar, Govind moved to Chennai as an employee at King’s 10 years ago. But with grit and passion, he eventually bought the place himself. Over time, he fine-tuned the recipe, focussed on freshness, and created what is now one of the most beloved vada pav joints in the city. The vadas are fried in small batches, ensuring every customer gets a piping hot snack. Over the years, King’s has also expanded its menu, now offering samosas, kachoris, and even drinks to wash it all down. When asked how he manages to keep that Mumbai magic alive in Chennai, he simply says, “Just make it fresh, make it authentic, that’s what works.”

King’s Vada Pav is at 59, Alagappa Road, Purasaiwalkam. A vada pav here is priced at ₹25. Contact: 9940042134.



Srinivasa Ramanujam

Outside the transit gate at the Salt Lake City airport, 50-year-old marketing professional Bharadhwaj Lakshminarayanan was trying to perfect a *gamaka*, an embellishment applied to notes in Carnatic music. His 12-year-old daughter, Mahathi, corrected him. Moments later, a group of people waiting to board the same flight joined in, singing a Carnatic *kriti*. Soon, a mini *kutcheri* unfolded, with curious onlookers wondering about the genre of music being performed. This is a scene from mid April this year, when Bharadhwaj and Mahathi, along with many other Carnatic students, were on their way to the Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival. First celebrated in 1978, it is now considered the largest Indian classical music fest outside of India. At the festival, this group from Bay Area joined several other smaller groups, who had practised the same set of songs. Together, they came to perform for EPIC Choir, Chennai-based Sishyakulam’s



A kutcheri in Cleveland

Here is how 250-plus Carnatic music students in the US came together for the EPIC Choir performance at the Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival

signature choral ensemble. This year’s performance featured over 250 performers, aged five to 60, sharing a stage before an audience of over 2,000, in an hour-and-a-half long event that is perhaps the largest Indian music choral ensemble ever assembled. “It was like a musical vacation,” said Bharadhwaj over a call, “There is an energy when we all sing together which cannot be described in words. For us, as much as the actual performance, the journey to it was very rewarding.” He was referring to the months leading up to

the event, when Carnatic music gurus in the Bay Area including Hari Devanath, Akila Iyer and Kasturi Sivakumar reached out to their many students to participate in this endeavour. Conceptualised by Sishyakulam, an organisation founded by Neyveli

Voices from afar Participants at the Wolstein Center during the Cleveland Thyagaraja Festival. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

R Santhanagopalan to promote Indian classical arts, the EPIC Choir was formed to foster a culture where children across the US dedicate hundreds of hours to learning Indian classical music. “It gives these students immense musical growth and exposes them to songs beyond traditional *kritis*. They also learn harmonies and chords,” said musician Shankar Santhanagopalan, CEO of Sishyakulam, and son of Neyveli Santhanagopalan, a recipient of the Sangita Kalanidhi.

Track record All this musical action unfolded at the Wolstein Center, which usually hosts basketball events. Over 250 students performed six compositions set to tune by Santhanagopalan. The final track, ‘Aradhanai’, set in Nalinakanthi raga, was among the highlights of the performance, with many children enthusiastically chipping in. “It’s become the theme

song for the festival,” said Shankar, who also conducted the choir. He added, “When I told people back home that I had organised a choir, everyone was surprised. But the rewards were rich, not just for the participants but their parents too. It helped normalise the idea of meaningful investment in the arts.” For participants like eight-year-old Sabarish Rajagopal from New Jersey, playing the mridangam on such a big stage was exciting. He learns virtually from Chennai-based Patri Satish Kumar. “I made many friends and jammed along with them too,” said Sabharish, whose father drove them to Cleveland, an eight-hour car journey during which he played the kanjira to some Carnatic tracks. “I also learnt a lot of new musical ideas,” he added. With this year’s choir bringing together over 250 classical music students and their families, the hope for a similar event next year is soaring. Shankar promises to be more ambitious in the forthcoming years with this exercise. He said, “We might try to bring together over 300 students and their families, and maybe even apply for an official record, like the Limca Book or Guinness. The sky is the limit.”



Catch the drift

From misty hills to sunlit salt pans, our journey from Coimbatore to Valparai, Nagercoil and Thoothukudi revealed towns where contrasts thrive

Vikram Gour

There are road trips you take to escape, and then there are road trips that remind you why the journey matters. Our three-day drive through the deep South of Tamil Nadu – covering Valparai, Thoothukudi, and Nagercoil – was one such experience. An exploration of lesser-known destinations, framed by winding mountain roads, coastal serenity, and jungle escapes.

Choosing the Mercedes-Benz GLC 300 for this drive was not just about comfort or luxury – it was about enabling a journey that spanned terrain as varied as tea country, sun-scorched coastlines, and dense tropical jungles. With its blend of power, elegance, and intelligent technology, the GLC became more than our mode of transport – it became a trusted companion. It absorbed the miles with grace, offered a commanding view of the road ahead, and effortlessly transitioned from smooth highways to broken trails.

Tamil Nadu is a driver's dream. With wide, well-paved highways and scenic backroads that snake through some of the most underrated terrains in the country, it is a State that rewards those who love the road as much as the destination.

Into the hills
We began our journey in Coimbatore, heading toward the mist-draped haven of Valparai, nestled high in the Anamalai Hills. The climb to Valparai is the stuff of road trip legends – 40 hairpin bends twisting through forests and tea plantations, flanked by towering trees and deep valleys. The drive was engaging yet smooth, with the GLC's poised handling and plush cabin making it even more enjoyable.

Things to do in Valparai

- Aliyar dam and viewpoint** – The ideal stop to take in the view before the ascent.
- Loam's view point** – Breath-taking panoramic vistas over the plains below.
- Nirar dam and Sholayar forest reserve** – Ideal for quiet walks and spontaneous wildlife sightings.
- Tea garden trails** – Drive or walk through the misty plantations.



Day 1



Day 2

Things to do in Thoothukudi

- Manapad coastline** – A dramatic, less-visited coastal stretch with cliffside views.
- Salt pan drives** – Especially striking at sunrise or dusk, these make for surreal photo ops.
- Harbour walk** – Soak in the local flavour and the hum of maritime life.

Salt flats, seafood and boutique luxury
Leaving the hills behind, we made our way toward Thoothukudi. The landscape shifted dramatically – tea estates gave way to palm-fringed fields, open plains, and eventually salt pans shimmering in the sun. The drive was long, but the GLC's adaptive cruise control and refined ride kept fatigue at bay.

Thoothukudi is a city of contrasts: a working port with raw energy, set against the calm rhythm of the coast. We chose to stay at The Croft, a boutique property tucked a little outside town. Built with refined simplicity and an eye for design, it served as the perfect base to unwind.

And then there was the food. Fresh seafood dominates menus here – think grilled prawns, fiery crab masala, and delicately cooked seer fish with southern spices. It is not fine dining, but it is fresh, authentic, and memorable.

Things to do in Nagercoil:

- Land's End drive (Kanyakumari)** – A scenic drive down to the southernmost point of India.
- Chothavilai beach** – A serene, crowd-free spot with clean sands and gentle waves.
- Vattakottai fort** – An old coastal fort with commanding views of the sea and countryside.
- Keeriparai jungle trails** – Ideal for those who love a bit of adventure.

Jungle trails and land's end

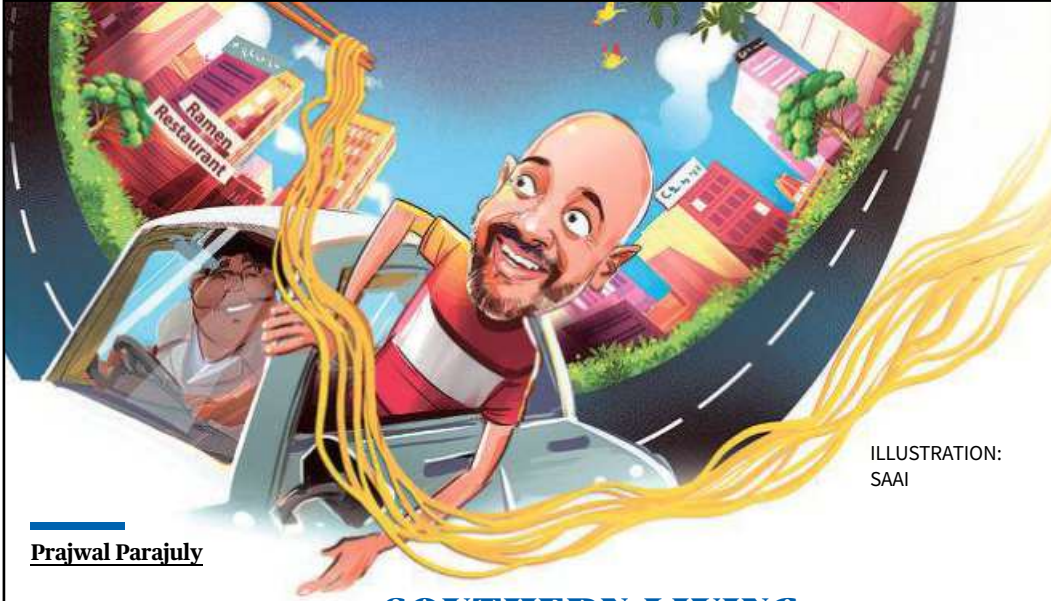
The final leg of the journey took us South-West to Nagercoil, a town tucked between the Western Ghats and the coastline, just shy of the tip of the Indian subcontinent. The terrain became greener, denser. We detoured into jungle paths near Keeriparai, a forested region that offered us our most off-road-heavy drive of the trip. Here, the GLC's off-road tech came into its own. With the transparent bonnet view showing us hidden rocks and dips, we navigated narrow forest tracks with surprising ease. It is rare to combine luxury with confidence in such terrain, but the GLC managed to deliver both. Driving out to Land's End felt symbolic. The road narrows as it hugs the coastline, revealing views of the sea that seem endless. It was the perfect place to bring the journey to a close – peaceful, expansive, and humbling.

Day 3

Falling in love with the road

This was more than a scenic drive. It was a deep dive into the varied landscapes and textures of Tamil Nadu's South – a land of misty hills, salt-swept plains, and verdant forests. Each place offered a different rhythm, and each road told a different story. While the destinations were the heroes of this journey, the Mercedes-Benz GLC 300 enabled it with quiet competence and consistent comfort. It allowed us to soak in the experience without ever worrying about what lay ahead – be it a winding hill road or a jungle trail. For those who love driving, Tamil Nadu offers a treasure trove of routes and getaways. And with the right vehicle, the journey itself becomes a destination.

Motorscribes, in association with The Hindu, brings you the latest in cars and bikes. Follow them on Instagram on @motorscribes



Prajwal Parajuly

Novelist Prayaag Akbar had promised that the students were smart. That was reason enough for me to move to Sri City, in the middle of nowhere, sight unseen. I'd be building the Creative Writing programme at a new university that was making news for all the right reasons.

I had been to Chennai once before and looked forward to rating the best idli and chutney. I'd judge every fault at Avartana and Southern Spice and Pumpkin Tales and Kappa Chakka Kandhari. I'd visit the temples of Mahabalipuram and the beaches of Kovalam. I'd weekend in Pondicherry like the perfectly pretentious snob that I was. On the way back, I'd stop at The Farm.

But Sri City? What of Sri City? The information online was scant. Yes, it was what they called a special economic zone, poetically abbreviated to SEZ. And yes, there was a supermarket. Yes, Krea University, where I'd teach, was the city's pride and joy. And yes, Krea's main building was ugly while the newer buildings were pretty. Was that a smirk on my driver's face when I asked him to tell me something about the city?

"So, lots of factories?" I asked the driver. He smirked.

"Have you been to Krea

SOUTHERN LIVING

Goodbye brings hello

Meet Prajwal Parajuly. His slice-of-life weekly column follows his new life in India, now that he has exchanged the high-rises of New York and sidewalks of Paris for the organised charm of Sri City

before?" I asked. "Many times."

"And?" Smirk. Someone would get tipped zero rupees.

"We are almost there," he said.

Outside, the landscape changed. We were fast leaving the chaos and colour of average Indian streets. The roads became wider and smoother. The dividers were more ornamental. They sported flowers. On either side of the tree-lined avenues were tall walls housing well-known brands: Mondelez, Pepsico, Sodexo. This felt strangely familiar. And why was that? I could have been in ... Texas. Sure, few things in life were more mind-numbing than American suburbia – I'd

lived in the penthouse. Outside, a canoodling couple plucked lice off each other – they would be an integral part of my Sri City vista – oblivious to the game of cricket factory workers played on a makeshift pitch. The glaze-tile-floored flat had toilets that didn't have showers in the middle of the room. That was a win. But the two bathrooms were divided by a wall that stopped three-quarters of the way up. You could throw toilet paper across the wall from one bathroom to another.

"You like?" the driver asked when he saw me consider the partition. I ignored him. My colleague Anannya would take me out for lunch. "Japanese?" she asked. Here? A jittery bus disgorged a gaggle of daily-wage earners next door.

I was whisked off to Asagao, which served Japanese and Italian cuisine, and not to Tokyo Ryokan, which served Japanese and Indian. Like I wasn't confronted by an embarrassment of riches already, a third Japanese restaurant named Senri even bragged views. The Sri City expats – many of them Japanese and Korean – needed their karaage fix. My ramen bowl could have been from any Japanese restaurant in New York or Singapore.

"That was a great meal," I started to text Anannya on the drive back to Chennai. I'd have to do a social-media post about this strange cosmopolitan experience. "Best ramen I ate in India," I'd brag. The driver swerved. A pair of snakes slithered to safety.

The columnist is the author of The Gurkha's Daughter and Land Where I Flee. He loves idli, loathes naan, and is indifferent to coffee. He teaches Creative Writing at Krea University.



A story of heritage

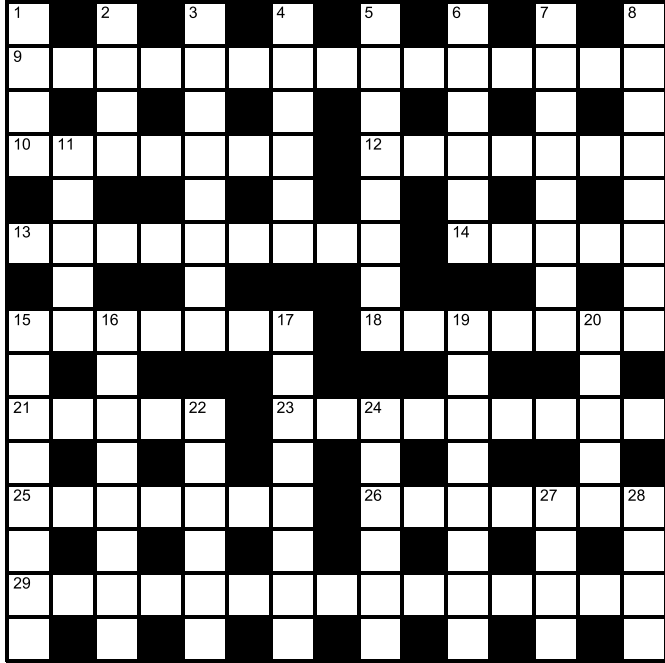
SHROT, a culinary celebration of Rajasthan's rich gastronomic heritage at The Flying Elephant is inspired by Rajputana cuisine and brings authentic dishes, traditional ambience, and regional storytelling to Chennai. There is an à la carte lunch and a buffet dinner with dishes such as maans surjan phalli ka shorba and Jodhpuri raan. @Park Hyatt, Guindy till May 25; ₹1,199 plus taxes. For reservations, call 8939871128.



Art meets design

The House of Klothberg presents Coalescence, a contemporary art exhibition curated by Jitha Karthikeyan. Featuring works by five Indian artists – Aishwaryan K, Sooraja KS, Dimple Shah, Anitha TK, and Mibin – the exhibition explores a distinctive convergence of artistic expression and cultural dialogue. @The House of Klothberg, Chetpet. May 22 to June 13 from 11am to 9pm. Open to all. For more details, call 9092070099.

METROPLUS QUICK CROSSWORD #4 (Set by Doppelganger)

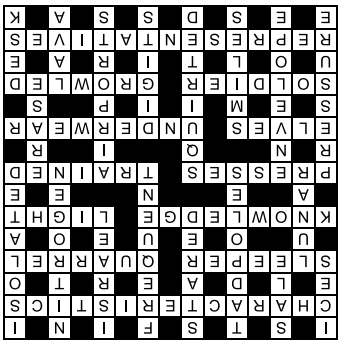


- Across**
- 9 Exponents used in number representations in computing (15)
 - 10 AC 3-Tier coach (7)
 - 12 A break in a friendship (7)
 - 13 Specific information about a subject (9)
 - 14 A prominent or distinguished person (5)
 - 15 Oils can come out from these (7)
 - 18 Aimed one's gun at (7)
 - 21 Santa's mischievous helpers (5)
 - 23 Unmentionables! (9)
 - 25 A type of ant? (7)
 - 26 The dog ____ to show hostility (7)
 - 29 Typical of others of the same class (15)
- Down**
- 1 What the baker does to a cake? (4)
 - 2 A period during which goods are offered at reduced prices (4)
 - 3 Young toads with a tail (8)
 - 4 The solution ____ one in his/her face (6)
 - 5 Recur at short intervals (8)
 - 6 Country formed on 14 May, 1948 (6)
 - 7 This makes up fourfifths of the air we breathe (8)
 - 8 The Sentinelese tribe live on an ____ island (8)
 - 11 ____ vehicle used in the American Apollo program (5)

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



Solution #4





Way with words
Members of the Anna Nagar Orators Toastmasters Club at a meeting. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

S Poorvaja
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For the many members of Toastmasters International, going on stage and speaking to a large audience is hardly a daunting task. This, in fact, is something they enjoy, and regularly come together to work on.

A large contingent of members, from Toastmasters International District 120, which comprises Tamil Nadu and Puducherry, will converge in the city from May 23 to 25 for their Discover 2025 annual conference. The three-day event has eminent speakers taking the stage, and speakers from Toastmasters who will battle it out in the finale of their annual district championships.

While it has been 20 years since Toastmasters clubs in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry began, the organisation has had a much longer legacy. Toastmasters International, a non-profit educational organisation headquartered in the US was founded by Ralph C Smedley 100 years ago in 1924, and has helped people work on

The gift of the gab

their confidence by developing their communication and leadership skills.

“In Tamil Nadu and Puducherry, we currently have around 4,500 members spread over 175 clubs. These clubs are community clubs, corporate clubs and in colleges as well,” says G Mohanakrishnan, district director, District 120, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry.

At Discover 2025, PTR Palanivel Thiagarajan, Minister of Information Technology and Digital Services; Luisa Montalvo, world champion of public speaking 2024; Innocent Divya, Commissioner of Technical Education; Fursey Gotuaco, world champion of public speaking 2024 finalist; Jahabar Sadique, CEO, Chai Kings; Sam Paul, chairman and

At Toastmasters International District 120's annual conference, listen to eminent speakers and watch members participate in a slew of competitions

When: May 23 to 25
Where: IIT Madras Research Park
Register at: district120.org

The Hindu is the print media partner for the event.

managing director, Paulsons beauty and fashion; and Deepa Venkat, voice artiste and actor, will take the stage. The finale for four different speaking competitions – humorous speech contest, evaluation speech contest, table topics contest and international speech contest, will have 36 contestants participate.

Awards will also be given to different clubs and members based on their performance through the year.

With members from ages 18 to 80 years, Toastmasters clubs typically meet once a week, engage in discussions, deliver speeches and practise taking on leadership roles. For the conference, members and the public are encouraged to attend to hear the speakers, and watch the finale of the competitions.

Mohanakrishnan says that taking Toastmasters and their vision to young students has been something they are consistently working on. “Around 30 colleges in Tamil Nadu have active Toastmasters clubs. This way, youngsters will work on better communication and leadership skills which will help with their campus placements,” he says.

Treat yourself to yummy ice creams.

Chocolate, vanilla, strawberry, chocolate chip, kulfi, each person may have a favorite flavor but one thing everyone agrees on is that they love ice cream. It's cool, creamy, delicious and is versatile enough to top-up cakes, brownies, puddings, hot jalebi and gulab jamun, milkshake, frappes or cold coffee.

Amul ice cream tubs are an excellent solution for an ice cream loving family. They offer hygienically packed ice-cream tubs that are easy to handle and store. Whether for dessert after a meal or late night cravings they are a must-have for your fridge.

Amul offers a diversity of flavours in ice cream tubs . You can get flavours like Butterscotch and Vanilla. Chocolate flavours like Choco Chips or Chocolate Brownie are musts for those who love chocolate. If you like fruits there is a good selection for you. The rich dry fruit-and-nut icecreams cover Rajbhog, Shahi Kulfi and Moroccan Dry Fruit, which enhance the richness of a celebration. Amul even have Sundae-in-Tubs like Chocolate Sundae, Strawberry Magic, Cheese- n-Strawberry Sundae, among others.

SOME INTERESTING WAYS YOU CAN USE ICE-CREAM:

Top-up pancakes or waffles with ice-cream and fruits or dessert sauces to make a great breakfast or dessert plate.

An ice cream float or ice cream soda is a chilled drink made using carbonated soft drinks with ice-cream.

Make Baked Alaska using ice-cream and cake topped with browned sugar or meringue. The mixture is first chilled and then baked before serving.

Quick banana or pineapple sandwiches with ice-cream.

Rice Pudding with ice-cream instead of kheer, laced with nutmeg and cardamom

Top-up cookies with ice-cream in flavours to match.

“CONSUMER CONNECT INITIATIVE”



Street beats

After her iconic DJ set from a Mumbai auto, DJ Suggahunny is headed to Chennai for a block party at The Neighborhood Bar on May 24. She will be spinning her high-energy amapiano and house mixes live outside the venue in an open-air street takeover. Call: 9090383818

For the love of flavour

Abhav Malhotra transforms everyday cooking with his artisanal range of chilli oil, pickles, and seasonings

Chitradeepa Anantharam
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Now 27, Abhav Malhotra balances his role in his family business of lighting solutions, with a deep commitment to his passion. “As a child, I spent most of my time in the kitchen, observing and learning from my grandmother. That is when I realised, I was drawn to the culinary arts. Over time, I understood that it was not just the science of food that interested me, it was the process of developing new flavours and combinations,” says Abhav, who also founded Owensay, a space in Bengaluru dedicated to home chefs, and a retail space for baked goods.

Abhav, who interned with Chef Sanjeev Kapoor's *Khana Khazana* cookery show team for a few months, and The Park in Chennai before pursuing a course in Culinary and Food Science at The Culinary Institute of America, has launched seven flavoured oils, seasonings and pickles, curated with the young,



experimental end-user in mind.

“Chilli oils are currently trending, so I have created three variations: crunchy garlic, classic and fermented honey chilli oil. The last is especially versatile and can be used in multiple ways to enhance the flavour of a dish,” he says.

While the chilli and seasoning oils are under his own name, Abhav has also introduced a Punjabi-style garlic pickle and a sweet-and-sour pickle paste under the nostalgic brand, Dadi Ki Recipes.

The idea behind these oils and seasonings is to empower anyone who enjoys

experimenting with food. For example, the classic chilli oil can be used as a topping on a dosa, omelette or instant noodles. His crunchy garlic chilli oil pairs well with curd rice and jeera pulao. The fermented honey chilli oil and lemongrass ginger oil work well as salad dressing, meat glazes, drizzles for toast, cocktail infusions, or as dips served with cheese.

“When it comes to pickle pre-mix, it is all about using it creatively,” says Abhav.

He adds, “The paste can be used as a coating for roasted broccoli or cauliflower or any vegetable of your choice, and it also pairs well with meat. Traditionally, the sweet and sour pickle is made in winter, using turnip and radish and mustard oil. What I have developed is just the base, without the vegetable, so that people can customise it to their liking.”

Abhav Malhotra's products are available gourmet stores in the city. Products are priced starting ₹300.



Spice it up (Top) Abhav, Malhotra; (left) his range of flavoured chilli oils. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Palm nectar in a bottle

Padaneer bottled by women in Pulicat is now available in organic stores in Chennai, in a first in Tamil Nadu

Akila Kannadasan
akila.k@thehindu.co.in

Pungent, sweet, earthy, and nutty all at once, *padaneer* is best had before noon, off large pots attached to *nungu* sellers. They serve the drink in cradle-like baskets made of palm leaves, sometimes mixed with translucent chunks of the jelly-like *nungu*. Now that summer is here and palm nectar is in season, Pulicat-based non-profit Art & Architecture Research Development & Education (AARDE) Foundation has launched bottled *padaneer*.

This is the first time in Tamil Nadu that bottled palm nectar has been certified by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India

(FSSAI). Xavier Benedict, founder-trustee of AARDE, says that the product is the result of two years of research.

“We also referred to work by the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University to arrive at the process,” he says.

To bottle *padaneer*, Xavier explains, the drink simply



At present, our team of seven climbers from Pulicat procures 200 litres of padaneer per day from 90 to 120 trees in Tiruvallur district

XAVIER BENEDICT
Founder-trustee, Architecture Research Development & Education



has to be heated the same way milk is during pasteurisation. “Once this is done, the nectar has a shelf life of four months, and 12 months if refrigerated,” he explains.

The process of tapping

Fresh as dew (Left) *Padaneer* being collected; (below) the bottled drink from Pulicat. N RAJESH AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

palm trees for *padaneer* can be traced back to 1,000 years. “Historically, *sumnambu* [slaked lime] is applied to clay pots for collecting *padaneer*,” says Xavier, adding that they filter out the lime. “The resulting nectar tastes fresh, and we store them in brown glass bottles to prevent the entry of UV rays,” he says.

Commercial success

If their product becomes commercially successful, Xavier feels a lot of farmers in Tamil Nadu will benefit from the idea.

“At present, our team of seven climbers from Pulicat procures 200 litres of *padaneer* per day from 90 to 120 trees in Tiruvallur district's Ponneri taluk,” he says. “Once we invest in more heating machines, we can touch 1,000 litres a day.”

The bottling is being done by women from a self-help group in Pulicat, and Xavier has worked on a strategy for the nectar to be available through the year. “We have identified districts with palm trees in season in the upcoming months,” he says. “In Pulicat, for instance, the season is from February to July, while in Vembar, it is from July to October.” The idea is to offer additional income to the people of Pulicat, whose women also weave colourful palm-leaf boxes.

Palm nectar has several nutritional benefits, and Xavier says that with Government support, farmers and consumers alike can benefit from it. “It will be great if the Government announces *padaneer* as a health drink,” he says.

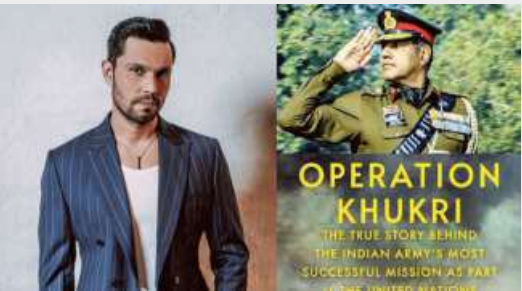
Bottled *padaneer* is available at Chemmai Organics, Chromepet; and Amudhu Organics, KK Nagar. A 330ml bottle is priced at ₹120. For details, call 9043542174.



What's your wish?
Ace filmmaker Mani Ratnam, who is awaiting the release of *Thug Life*, recently unveiled the first look of upcoming Malayalam movie *Chinna Chinna Asai*, starring Madhoo and Indrans. The first look features the two lead stars sitting on a bench on a terrace in Varanasi. Interestingly, the film's title is borrowed from the popular song from Mani Ratnam's evergreen 1992 Tamil film *Roja* — which was also a breakout film for Madhoo. Shot entirely in Varanasi, *Chinna Chinna Asai* is written and directed by Varsha Vasudev and has music by Govind Vasantha.



One for children
Director S Latha's directorial debut targets children. Titled *Maragathamalai*, this period drama, set in the 18th Century, was largely shot in the Tada forest area, where a grand set was built. *Maragathamalai*, which stars Master Shashanth, Arima, Mahithra and Kalaiko among others, will also feature VFX-generated animals like tigers, dragons and elephants, to appeal to children. Established actors like Santhosh Prathap, Deepshikha, Thambi Ramaiya and Jagan are also part of this project, which is aiming for a summer release.



The operation begins
Bollywood star Randeep Hooda will headline an upcoming military drama titled *Operation Khukri*, based on the military operation that was carried out in 2000 in Sierra Leone. The film will tell the story of a rescue mission that was undertaken to save 233 soldiers who were held hostage in the West African nation by rebel forces. The film will feature Hooda as Major General Raj Pal Punia, who was then a young Company Commander of the 14 Mechanised Infantry. It is based on the bestseller *Operation Khukri: The Untold Story of the Indian Army's Bravest Peacekeeping Mission Abroad*.



Family matters

Mithun Jai Sankar is on a high, with recent Tamil debut *Tourist Family* garnering praise

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Five months after his debut movie *Aavesham*'s release in April 2024, actor Mithun Jai Sankar received a call from Million Dollar Studios in Chennai, asking him to go there for the narration of *Tourist Family*. Mithun and Abishan Jeevinth, director of the movie, spent a day together, understanding the plot and bouncing off dialogues.

The Tamil feel-good comedy is currently running in theatres. Apart from the storyline, it was the experienced cast, headlined by Sasikumar and Simran, which excited Mithun further about the movie that explores the life of an illegal Sri Lankan migrant family living in Chennai. Mithun was roped in to play Sasikumar and Simran's son, Nitushan, a young adult reeling from the family's move to India. The movie deals with the

family's efforts to find their footing in a new place, while evading the authorities.

"Even though I was excited, I was very nervous to speak to them," says Mithun over a phone call from Kochi. "Simran ma'am mostly talked about Malayalam movies, especially *Aavesham*, and Sasikumar sir spoke about his experience working on *Master*, his Malayalam movie. He told me how he tried to learn the language by speaking to people in Kerala, but they all responded in Tamil."



I spent two weeks preparing for my role in Tourist Family, with an emphasis on the dialect. I had great chemistry with Kamalesh, who played my younger brother in the film

MITHUN JAI SANKAR



Other than what he had picked up by watching movies, Mithun had no experience conversing in Tamil.

However, the actor stepped up with the help of Abhishan. Also, the character speaks Tamil in a Sri Lankan dialect, which was dubbed by Mithun. "I spent two weeks preparing for the role with an emphasis on the dialect. Words like *unakku* (meaning you) become *ungalku*, *pesaruthu* (meaning to speak) become *kadhakiruthu*. Everyone in the 'family' was spontaneous with their dialogues, maybe because of their familiarity to the language. But I was not able to do it. They would play around with the dialogues, which I tried later," says Mithun.

The actor shares great chemistry with Kamalesh Jagan, who essays his younger



'Best cinematic experience'

Tourist Family, which is doing well at the box office, is garnering praise from audiences and celebrities alike. The latest celebrity to have given a thumbs up for the film is none other than ace director SS Rajamouli, known for his superhits like *Baahubali* and *RRR*. Rajamouli recently tweeted, "Saw a wonderful, wonderful film *Tourist Family*. Heartwarming and packed with rib-tickling humour. And kept me intrigued from beginning till end. Great writing and direction by Abishan Jeevinth. Thank you for the best cinematic experience in recent years."

brother Mulli. "We had great offscreen chemistry as well. He is more experienced than I am as an actor and would tell me funny stories from other sets. He is a lot like his character," says Mithun, who is also being lauded for the chemistry with a female character, after clips of their proposal scene from the movie have gone viral. Abishan — who has also

played a pivotal role in the movie — would demonstrate what he wants, says the actor. "However, at the same time, he would give me the freedom to explore the character and make it my own," Mithun recalls.

Originally from Poojappura in Thiruvananthapuram, Mithun had a stellar start to his acting life, essaying Bibin in *Aavesham* directed by Jithu Madhavan, starring Fahadh Faasil.

"People still call me Bibin even a year after the movie's release. They come and talk to me. A lot of people saw that movie in Tamil Nadu too, and that's how I even got this role," says Mithun.

A Statistics graduate from Christ Nagar College in Thiruvananthapuram, Mithun joined coaching classes for the SSC exam after graduation. "While I was preparing for the exams, I quit the coaching and started making reels," says Mithun, who later created a YouTube channel, Poojappuranam, with a few friends. The channel made satirical videos about developments in cinema, among other things.

"The channel was the beginning for me as an actor. Before that, as a child, I would shoot visuals in the camera of my dad's keypad phones with my younger brother as my model," he says.

Mithun is currently discussing his next projects. "I just want to do good movies, with a space for me to perform," says the actor.

The shy turtle

***Saving the Bhimanama: Ayushi Jain and a Giant Turtle* highlights the efforts by ecologist Ayushi Jain and the people of Kasaragod to save the Asian giant softshell turtle**



Stories from the wild
Hatchlings of Asian giant softshell turtle being released into the river. ROUNDGLASS SUSTAIN AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

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It was six years ago that ecologist Ayushi Jain arrived in Kasaragod, in search of the Asian giant softshell turtle (a large freshwater turtle). She interacted with the community and eventually spotted the turtle. She went on to document the critically endangered species, with the support of the people, who continue their efforts to protect the turtles. Ayushi's efforts are told in the documentary *Saving the Bhimanama: Ayushi Jain and a Giant Turtle*,

directed by Bahar Dutt and Vijay Bedi, which recently received the award for the best documentary (Jury) at the 15th Dadasaheb Phalke Film Festival 2025.

The 11-minute documentary is produced by Roundglass Sustain. "This documentary is part of the Science in Action series, which talks about scientists and their work through which we know more about the species. Ayushi's story stands out not just because of the turtle but also because of the community's involvement," says Samreen Farooqui, who produced the documentary. She adds, "In spite of being the largest and

rarest, the turtle was overlooked."

The olive-brown turtle, exceptionally long for a freshwater turtle (one metre) and one of the largest, weighing up to 100 kilograms, is called the Asian giant softshell turtle due to its distribution in Asia. It is also known as the Cantor's giant softshell turtle, after Dr Theodore Edward Cantor, a zoologist and botanist. In local parlance, it is often referred to as *Bhimanama* (*bhiman* means giant and *aama* is turtle) and Palapoovan, since its features resemble *palapoo* or the flower of the Indian devil tree.

The only clue that Ayushi, a Zoological Society of London-National Geographic EDGE fellow, had when she reached Kasaragod was a report by a Kerala-based scientist about the turtle being sighted by a fisherman in an estuarine habitat several years ago. "There were hardly any documents available to read about the turtle. So I approached the fishermen who used to get these turtles in their nets as bycatch," Ayushi says. Bahar adds, "The heartening moment was that the entire community was present when the baby turtles were released into their natural habitat. Everyone wanted to be there and the exhilaration of the community was overwhelming."

Watch the documentary on Roundglass Sustain's YouTube channel.

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