

weekend

wknd



FLAVOUR PLAY
Yuvraj Singh enters the culinary arena with KOCA, a bold blend of global flavours and personal food stories **P3**

metro PLUS THE HINDU



Refined maximalism

While the West continues to orbit around quiet luxury, Indian designers at Lakmé Fashion Week offered a counterpoint – maximalism, but measured. It was a season of drama laced with discipline; ornamentation wielded with intent.

Anamika Khanna's Silver Collar collection set the tone. Deconstructed tailoring met opulent embroidery – structured bralettes, high-waisted metallic trousers, and chainmail flourishes. It was less about flamboyance, and more about confidence paired with craft.

Rahul Mishra's The Silk Route, under his prêt label AFEW, drew from flora, folklore, and textile legacies. The collection wove Nature into couture, presenting hand-embroidered ecosystems that rippled with detail but never tipped into excess. The intricacy was intense, but the message – sustainability and quiet wonder – came through loud and clear. The collection highlighted visual exchanges across borders, mirrored in the parallel evolution of India's bandhani and Japan's shibori. A quiet ode to craft, culture and shared histories.

Amit Aggarwal took maximalism in a futuristic direction. His collaboration with tech brand Nothing resulted in a line where Benaras brocade collided with industrial polymers – ballooning trousers, corseted blouses, and sharp tailoring gave tradition a glossy, sci-fi sheen. The palette was monochrome, but the craftsmanship spoke volumes. Falguni Shane Peacock, known for high-octane glamour, showed restraint – relatively speaking. Their collection delivered sculptural jackets, crystal-studded corsets and feathered gowns, but with a controlled silhouette and tonal palette that leaned towards the urban rather than the theatrical. There was still shimmer and drama, but anchored in a kind of futuristic femininity.



At the 25th edition of Lakme Fashion Week x FDCI, designers leaned into craft, emotion, and function, offering fashion that is rooted, expressive, and made for 'now'

Hot off the runway

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In its 25th year, the Lakmé Fashion Week 2025, in partnership with the Fashion Design Council of India (FDCI), was less about spectacle and more about sensibility. Theatrics took a back seat to thoughtfulness, as designers re-evaluated what fashion means in times of change – climatic, cultural, and consumer-driven. There was no singular aesthetic dominating the five-day showcase, but rather a quiet recalibration of technique, proportion, and intent.

From seasoned couturiers to new-gen labels, the collections spoke of dualities – tradition meeting tech, comfort meeting structure, and art meeting wearability. Instead of chasing viral trends, designers leaned into craft. Surface embellishment was purposeful. Colour palettes were restrained. Gender norms blurred. Heritage, once treated with nostalgia, was now layered with a future-facing lens.

New-age luxury: fashion that fits the everyday

This season, Indian luxury moved out of the drawing room and into daily life. On the Lakmé Fashion Week runway, designers redefined what it means to invest in fashion: less fantasy, more flexibility.

Shantnu & Nikhil's Piazza Nova marked five years of their label, S&N. The collection reflected the brand's core idea: heritage tailoring with urban sensibility. Slim *bandhgala*s, printed shirts, and embroidered jackets allowed wearers to mix statement with staple. Designed for the aspirational buyer, it bridged occasion and everyday fashion through modular pieces that lean modern but nod to tradition.

Tarun Tahiliani's OTT Season 2 took a similar route. The focus was on fluidity – layered separates, draped gilets, and convertible silhouettes styled live on stage to highlight versatility. Traditional crafts like *chikankari* and *Rabari* embroidery were recast in contemporary forms, and archival prints reappeared in fresh palettes.

Together, both collections signalled a shift. Luxury was less about exclusivity, more about expression – quietly confident, wearable, and rooted in the idea of fashion as a personal tool, not just a spectacle.



Reimagining masculinity

This year, a quieter menswear revolution took shape – one that moved beyond functional staples to embrace emotional nuance, historical references, and craft-led expression. The GenNext designers moved away from minimalism without tipping into costume, offering garments that were expressive, yet wearable.

Abhishek Shinde, under his label Abhichiq, offered a Sicilian summer through *Ciao* – a collection of handwoven, block-printed separates layered with embroidery and nostalgic tailoring. Oversized blazers, striped shackets, and Bermudas hinted at ease but were grounded in artisanal polish. His approach balanced playfulness with longevity, creating resortwear with structure.

Yash Patil, of That Antiquepiece, drew from archival photographs of the Rana queens of Nepal, blending moulded silhouettes, corsetry and ballroom drama. Though presented as womenswear, the construction-heavy garments (a visual treat of rich detailing with braids, jewels and sheer textiles) shared a meticulous, sculptural quality often aligned with contemporary menswear's move towards androgyny and theatricality.

Somya Lochan's label Quarter took a more introspective route. Her collection, *The Dichotomy of Loss*, was born from a social experiment on grief, translated into garments made from *tanchoi* silk and *himroo* brocade. Embellished with handmade brass buttons and beaded embroidery, the pieces – boxy jackets, flared trousers, and padded coats – were gender-fluid in structure and emotional in tone.

Together, these designers challenged the binary of menswear as either utilitarian or ostentatious. Their work suggested a middle ground: introspective, referential, and unafraid to be emotionally resonant.



The rise of active-leisure

This season, designers brought clarity to a shifting category: clothes that sit comfortably between function, movement, and leisurely indulgence.

Namrata Joshipura continued her exploration of performance-driven fashion with a collection anchored in engineered fabrics like *R|Elan Kooltex* and *GreenGold*. Bodysuits, cropped jackets, singlets, and shorts were cut for movement but styled for the street – mirroring the global mood where activewear is no longer confined to the gym. Breathable textiles and recycled fibres underlined the emphasis on wearability and conscious design.

Shivan & Narresh leaned into art-as-leisure with a capsule inspired by French painter-sculptor Fernand Léger. Their resortwear – swim trunks, ponchos, relaxed robes and knit coordinates – tapped into a holiday state of mind, but with deliberate cuts and saturated prints.

Saaksha & Kinni, through their *Myrah* collection for Lakmé's *Sun Stopper* show, used Gujarat's *Adalaj* Stepwell as a springboard. Their silhouettes comprising layered kaftans, printed jackets, and pleated dresses balanced movement with structure. Lycra-infused swimwear sat beside breezy cottons, while sandstone tones and water-inspired blues grounded the palette in place. It was resortwear as a state of cultural storytelling, shaped by geography and intention.



Indie cool: emotion with edge

A new wave of designers leaned into a softer, more self-aware fashion – marked by slow techniques, layered storytelling, and a firm sense of identity. Less trend-chasing, more intention. Less gloss, more grit.

Anurag Gupta's *Metamorphosis* captured this shift. With a palette drawn from dawn and dusk, and silhouettes that eased between structure and fluidity, the collection explored personal growth as a process, not performance. Textures felt grounded, even raw, while 3D-embellished layers and tonal gradients kept things visually sharp. This was not fashion for show, but self-reflection.

Rkive City, the winner of the *R|Elan Circular Design Challenge*, channelled the same spirit through *Reclaim The City*. Their pieces comprising overlays, trousers, and shirts, built entirely from salvaged textiles, revived old workwear and rejected garments into fashion that carried memory, place and subculture. Sleeves referenced municipal uniforms; pockets nodded to everyday street life. Nothing flashy. Everything felt lived in.



Geetika Sachdev

The trend of cricketers launching restaurants is not likely to slow down anytime soon. After Virat Kohli, Shikhar Dhawan, and Suresh Raina tasting success with their culinary ventures, cricket legend Yuvraj Singh is next, with his debut restaurant, KOCA, in Gurugram. Located in Golf Avenue 42, a new high-street complex on Golf Course Road, the 14,000 square feet-restaurant spread across two floors, attempts to attract guests either looking for a fine dining experience or a high-energy atmosphere (or both). While the name KOCA has a Punjabi twang, it stands for Kitchen of Celebratory Arts. For Yuvraj, who is a partner in this venture under Glamosphere Hospitality, good food was a priority. “I want people to visit and enjoy the food here. We don’t want people to come in and say the place is great but the food is average,” he says. With Yuvraj being vegan and having certain dietary requirements, finding limited options on restaurant menus is a put-off. At KOCA, this gap has been addressed. “My wife Hazel and I have travelled to so many countries and there are several memories around food. However, sometimes one feels restricted if there’s not much on the menu. I want to change that with KOCA,” says Yuvraj.

A knockout food menu
The menu at KOCA blends pan-Asian and global influences, inspired by Yuvraj’s international cricketing career and his travels. While Chef Megha Kohli and Noah Louis Barnes were the first to come on board as food curators, the kitchen is currently helmed by chefs Prateek Jha and Adiba Jha from Izumi Dubai. We started our meal with the tandoori avocado hummus (with green chickpea as the primary ingredient), paired with togarashi



shichimi crackers. Instead of doing a typical guacamole with avocado, Chef Prateek went for a tandoori avocado. The centre had a wasabi *chaat*, a welcome addition to the dish. Next came a trio of salads: the Thai mango salad with yuzu, KOCA Caesar salad and the kimchi burrata salad. The first had a burst of citrus flavours deftly balanced by the sweetness of mangoes from Thailand. The restaurant’s take on the Caesar salad was refreshing, but the kimchi variant was the



Flavourful innings

KOCA in Gurugram offers a pan-Asian forward menu with global influences, besides artisanal cocktails in a high-energy ambience

open

(Clockwise from left) Yuzu meringue pie; interiors of KOCA; Yuvraj Singh with wife Hazel Keech; five mushroom risotto. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



best of the lot with the addition of a tomato kimchi jam. There is also a section dedicated to Yuvraj’s childhood favourites, which includes the *rajma* avocado *galouti* and *kadhi chawal* risotto. KOCA’s take on the *galouti* (a vegan option) has crisp *bhakri* replacing the *ultra tawe ka paratha* while *rajma* has been used instead of meat (which you do not miss at all). In the case of *kadhi chawal* risotto, arborio rice has been used as the base while the *pakor*as (that could be softer) are stuffed with a coconut and wasabi filling. One can also order sushi on the menu (they have a Gobi 65 sushi and prawn Koliwada sushi), Neapolitan pizzas, pastas, robata grills and more.

Drinks with a twist
The restaurant’s bar programme, crafted by renowned Italian mixologist Luca Cinalli, has been designed to complement KOCA’s bold flavours. The menu focusses on 12-15 handcrafted cocktails besides offering classics on order. The KOCA Mule, a take on the Moscow Mule with *chai* wine (an infusion of Aamara Montenegro, Martini Rosso

and Indian tea), gin, curry leaf and pineapple, is a drink for those who enjoy a spicy flavour profile. One Thousand Strawberries with Baileys Strawberry, a berry mix and lemon juice is a good option if you do not mind some extra sweetness. The highlight is an ice cube drilled with a strawberry lollipop as garnish. Some other cocktails that are a must-try include Pineapple Sour (a twist on the Gin Sour with coconut fat-washed gin, pineapple and hibiscus cordial), Gooseberry Picante (with gooseberry jam and the rim coated with *pahadi* salt) and the Pandan Negroni (with spiced liqueur, Campari, pandan-infused gin and pandan syrup). Save some space for KOCA’s selection of desserts. The Vietnamese cold coffee, inspired by a beverage of the same name, has an overload of coffee in the form of espresso mousse, Kahlua jelly, espresso crumble and dulce sauce. The Yuzu meringue pie was light and refreshing but the star of the show was The Gamechanger, a dessert that pays tribute to Yuvraj’s personal and professional journey. His aggression on the field has been represented through the hot matcha lava cake while his calm attitude takes the form of nitrogen chocolate rocks. The chocolate soil determines his grit.

KOCA officially opens its doors on April 12, 2025.



Epicurean voyage

The aroma of freshly baked pizza and slow-simmered ragù will fill the air at The Flying Elephant, where Chef Fabrizio Berretta is set to bring a slice of Italy to Chennai from La Piazza, Hyatt Regency Delhi, until April 6. Indulge in Sardinian specialties, handmade pasta, wood-fired pizzas, and more delicacies that are rooted in tradition. The dinner highlights include Baby Lobster Tagliolini in a delicate tomato sauce, truffle ricotta plin with slow-braised lamb ragù, and pizza asparagi e burrata with fresh burrata and asparagus. Paired with a curated selection of speciality wines brought from Italy, wine sommelier Varun Kulkarni will help pair every bite with the perfect sip. Three wines from the region will be on the menu — Clarendelle AOC Bordeaux Blanc, Pasqua Sangiovese Puglia IGT and Pasqua Montepulciano D’Abruzzo.

For reservations, call 8939871128.



Bioluminescence or sea sparkle is locally called ‘Kavaru’, at Chellanam. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Follow the glow

Travel companies have curated bioluminescence kayaking packages as a sustainable and safe way to witness the phenomenon in Kochi

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It is that time of the year in Kochi, when the shrimp farms along the backwaters are sparkling in blue shimmer. ‘Kavaru’ or bioluminescence, the environmental phenomenon that gives the waters an electric blue backlight, is now an event on the tourist’s calendar. People from various parts of Kochi and outside visit the fishing villages of Kumbalangi and Chellanam where it is most visible. Travel and adventure sports companies have curated packages around the phenomenon that usually occurs during the March-April months in these regions. Kayakify, a canoe and kayak tour agency based in Kumbalangi in Kochi, has been offering tours that let tourists explore bioluminescent waters at night. These one-hour sessions take tourists into the shrimp farms in Chellanam on kayaks and canoes. Edwin Joseph, founder of Kayakify, says kayaking is a relatively sustainable and safe way to enjoy the beauty of the phenomenon. “Bioluminescence occurs only when there is movement on the water’s surface, so visitors tend to throw stones and sticks into the water or sometimes even jump into it to see bioluminescence, which could adversely affect the fish ecosystem. With kayaking, the paddles trigger luminescent ripples, which don’t harm the delicate ecosystem,” says Edwin. The tourists are accompanied by trained instructors and will be made to wear safety jackets. “Since we are doing this on a farm, the waters are not deep. It is safe even for very young children,” says Edwin. The phenomenon is only visible at night, so the tours typically start from 8pm and go on till 1am. Arthi Dharmaraj’s travel company Out in Dreams, based in Coimbatore, has already organised two group trips to Kumbalangi in March. “A large part of the popularity of bioluminescence in Kochi can be attributed to Instagram. We usually get a



mixed crowd for these group tours and we get questions about the phenomenon, too,” says Arthi. “Bioluminescence is usually more common in oceans and people are curious to understand how it happens in the backwaters,” says Arthi. “We include a tour of the fishing village, including activities such as casting the net. It is a great way to experience the local culture and food.” Bioluminescence is caused by dinoflagellate algae, which have luminescent properties. Since the phenomenon is caused by a combination of environmental factors, it usually disappears when it begins to rain.

For information, contact @kayakify.kochi and @out_indreams on Instagram.

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The late Dame Vivienne Westwood, the British designer who dragged punk and new-wave fashion into the mainstream in the 1970s, once quipped, “Popular culture is a contradiction in terms. If it’s popular, it’s not culture.” Her disdain for conformity and her love for rebellion were the hallmarks of a career that redefined style as a form of dissent. “Democratic envy,” as she termed it, made people dress alike simply to belong. She preferred dressing for herself – even if no one else approved.

That ethos lingered in the air at Vivienne Westwood’s recent show in Mumbai, staged against the dramatic backdrop of the Gateway of India. The venue – last seen hosting Dior’s pre-Fall showcase in 2023 – came with weighty expectations. Where Dior offered polished precision, Westwood delivered something else entirely: looser, moodier, and far less structured.

Secrecy surrounded the event. There was no pre-show buzz and invites were sent out last minute. A passing drizzle left the air sultry and thick with tension.

The collaboration

The collection, which featured a few archival pieces, was born of a collaboration with Vivz Fashion School in Pune and Aaranya, an initiative led by Priyadarshini Scindia, of the erstwhile royal family of Gwalior. Aaranya’s mission: to preserve traditional crafts, especially Chanderi, famous in Madhya Pradesh, through modern design interventions. Also in the mix was khadi, supplied by the Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC), a statutory body established by the Government of India in 1957. Together, these collaborations were meant to champion craft preservation, sustainability, and cultural exchange.

According to Carlo D’Amario, CEO of Vivienne Westwood, the show’s inception began with his visit to India last year, hosted by Priyadarshini. The trip rekindled memories of his travels through Goa in the 1970s, and coincided with his growing interest in India’s



events

The collection was anchored by handspun khadi, ethereal Chanderi, flourishes of chiffon, hints of tartan, and the brand’s signature petal flower headpiece. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



More kitsch than

counter-culture

Vivienne Westwood’s first show in India, was held at the Gateway of India. It merged heritage textiles with runway romance, but the spirit of the British designer’s rebellion felt curiously muted



burgeoning luxury market – currently valued at \$8 billion and projected to reach \$14 billion by 2032. In a poetic twist, the Gateway of India itself features jaali work sourced from Gwalior, linking the royal collaborator to the setting. The idea for the show reportedly crystallised during Carlo’s keynote at Vivz last year. “He fell in love with India – its textiles, its stories,” recalls Vivek Pawar, the school’s founder-director.

Playing with khadi

But translating that love into garments was not straightforward. Getting khadi and Chanderi to the Westwood studio in Italy meant navigating red tape. “The fabric had to have structure,” Vivek explains. “It wasn’t just about heritage; it needed to hold up on the runway.”

The fabrics certainly delivered on texture and lightness. Carlo was especially taken by Chanderi’s airiness. “I was gobsmacked,” he



said. “It felt just right – for India, and for the brand.” But the garments themselves were less convincing. Creative director Andreas Kronthaler – Westwood’s long-time collaborator and husband – focussed on ease and modernity. The result was a collection anchored by handspun khadi, ethereal Chanderi, flourishes of chiffon, hints of tartan, and the brand’s signature petal flower headpiece.

But the silhouettes felt restrained. The repetitive boat-neck corset dress, already seen on Kareena Kapoor Khan and Janhvi Kapoor, became the collection’s default form: pretty, but predictable. The edge that once defined Westwood was softened.

The soundtrack did not help. A jarring mix of Indian classical music and Alisha Chinai’s ‘Boom Boom’ felt more kitsch than counter-culture – less rebellion, more runway theatre. Though the choice of textiles – khadi from KVIC and Chanderi from Aaranya – was rooted in legacy, it felt more like a symbolic gesture than a bold statement. The garments borrowed

Westwood’s visual cues, but missed her unmistakable voice

Still, the show marked a distinct shift in the house’s strategy. Carlo summed it up: “Magazines are great, fashion houses are great, but it’s politics that gets things moving.” The brand now seems to be leaning into State-supported collaborations, cultural diplomacy, and global craft partnerships. Remarkably, the show was reportedly pulled together in under a month – proof of sharp coordination behind the scenes.

Let us not forget: Westwood’s defining collections – Pirate (1981), Mini-Crini (1985), Anglomania (1993) – did not just play with form. They were provocations. She fused chaos with couture, rage with elegance, and protest with pageantry. Climate change, anti-capitalism, consumerism: nothing was off-limits.

The Mumbai showcase was ambitious in scope and symbolic in spirit. But it lacked the rupture, the recklessness that once made Westwood’s runways a battlefield. It was a respectful tribute. But perhaps a little too polite.

Press play on
Presley

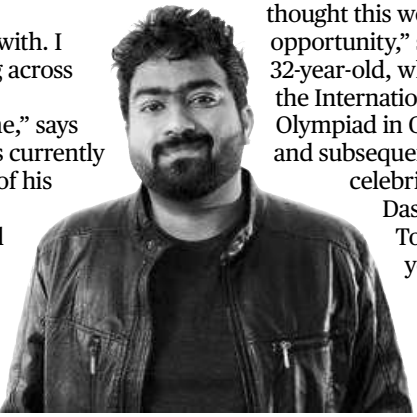
The Chennai-based indie artiste takes his dreamy, genre-fluid sound to Japan this April, embarking on a four-city tour

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Chennai is experiencing a rare week of summer rain. It is sultry, humid, and the smell of mud mixed with the sea breeze carries through the city.

Chennai-based independent musician Alvin Presley’s buttery voice floats between acoustic melodies and soft percussion, never overpowering the pitter-patter of rain, bringing the evening together. “I call myself a ‘genre-fluid’ musician. Deep

down, I want to stick to one genre, but there are so many things I want to explore and experiment with. I keep coming across music that influences me,” says Alvin, who is currently on the cusp of his debut international tour to Japan. His music gained popularity with the



release of his first EP *Fall Today* in mid-2020. ‘Falling Star’, from this EP was playlisted on the Spotify India curated playlist Radar India as well as the Viral Top 50 India playlist.

Playing in four venues across Japan, his tour includes a stop at Tokyo’s Music Bridge, a showcase festival that brings together independent artistes like him from around the world. “I came across the application for this showcase in August last year and applied. I have always loved Japanese culture, so I thought this would be a great opportunity,” says the 32-year-old, who performed at the International Chess Olympiad in Chennai in 2022, and subsequently opened for celebrity comedian Vir Das on his Wanted Tour the same year.

Alvin started his musical journey in 2016 when he was part of a band

Alvin Presley started his musical journey in 2016 when he was part of a band, Attva. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Attva, but his solo career began when the pandemic struck. “During that time, communication was the only thing that kept us sane. I used to go down YouTube rabbit holes, discover new music, and then go live on Instagram to discuss it and connect with people,” he says, adding that during one of these interactions, he met an agent from Japan. “She told me to reach out if I ever came to Japan, and that’s exactly what I did.”

Being a bilingual musician who writes songs in English and Tamil – two languages foreign to Japan – Alvin hopes that music itself will be enough to connect with fellow artistes and audiences. “They are open to accepting new things, and I’m hoping that even if they don’t understand what I say in English between songs, music will do the talking,” he says.

His latest EP, *Pain Geography*, currently features five tracks, all of which he wrote, composed, and produced in 2022. It takes listeners through the universal emotions of loss, pain, anxiety, and piercing nostalgia. “The full album comes out in September this year, and it’s going to have more synth. It will carry an 1980s and 1990s vibe.”

The Japan tour will serve as a preview for his upcoming album. “I have a few songs I want to try out. This show is going to be completely unplugged – just my drummer, Vinay Ramakrishnan, and me” says Alvin.

Pain Geography is streaming on Spotify



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Malayalam

Mohanlal fails to save this sequel



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Symbolism in art is inherently indirect, but in Prithviraj Sukumaran’s *Empuraan* it is thrown at your face, one ‘L’ at a time, to remind us of the omnipotent anti-hero *Lucifer*. Part of a broken cross atop a rundown church falls down, landing in slow motion as an ‘L’. Later, a burning tree branch falls perfectly as an ‘L’. Part of *Empuraan*’s many problems lies in this over-reliance on the internationally notorious, shadowy figure of Khureshi Ab’raam aka Lucifer while relegating his local avatar Stephen Nedumpally (Mohanlal), the central figure of the first part, to a mere guest appearance. Now, *Lucifer* (2019) was a flawed film which in its post-release afterlife was turned into the holy grail of Malayalam commercial filmmaking. *Empuraan* has hardly anything going for it, except for the richness of its production design.

The political intrigues in Kerala, which were at the centre of *Lucifer*, take a backseat as the story goes “international”, involving the typical mix of drug cartels and intelligence agencies we have seen in umpteen films. Playing in the background is the entry of a third political force in Kerala, which is also linked to Lucifer’s sidekick Zayed Mazood (Prithviraj)’s origin story, with all of it building up to a predictable climax.

Murali Gopy’s writing often follows the pattern set by 90s commercial potboilers written by the likes of Renji Panicker in lazily sprinkling thinly-veiled references to real-life political figures and happenings in the narrative. It is a low-effort job which gets tiresome after a point.

In *Empuraan*, all these weaknesses get exposed as the writer fails to create any memorable exchange or scenario even for Mohanlal whom the film literally worships. The man does not face a worthy adversary or a conflict which challenges him. Manju Warrior is thankfully not relegated to the background as women are in such star vehicles.

As for the political messaging, even while seemingly taking a strong stand against communal forces, the screenplay also advances the usual propaganda of these very same forces by painting Kerala politics as a viper’s pit where the primary opposing forces are hand-in-glove with each other and whose secularism is just part of an act.

Some of the pre-release fan theories posted online had more interesting plot lines and character development than in this mediocre screenplay, which has an emotionally vacant core. If only even a fraction of the effort spent in the unprecedented marketing campaign of the film was taken in screenwriting, *Empuraan* might have been a better film.

L2: *Empuraan* is currently running in theatres



Gripping gangster drama

Vikram’s gangster drama fires on all cylinders with ingenious bursts of tension, rousing fan service, ace performers reaching their dramatic zenith and action set-pieces

Tamil

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A meat dealer’s wife steals fried chicken for her hungry daughter from a family gathering of their business rival, a big-shot gangster, after which both the woman and her child disappear. When their disappearance snowballs into an issue involving the police, the gangster’s son is interrupted while digging into a grand non-vegetarian thali, realising his end is near. After a few more developments, the don pleads for his son’s life to a police officer, who shows him his place all the while tapping the bone marrow out of a chicken leg and slurping it in for a quick match-cut – when they both meet again, the dynamics would have changed. In a later scene, a just-wed couple feast at their wedding when the police chime in with news that forever changes their lives. Chiyaan Vikram-starrer *Veera Dheera Sooran: Part 2* is a dramatic dance-off between all these characters, tense and annoyed (perhaps for being interrupted while dining! Maybe this is a warning from writer-director SU Arunkumar to whomsoever concerned).

Jokes aside, Madurai homeboy Arunkumar does bring the flavours of his hometown, advertised by popular cinema, in his first superstar film – the ‘keda virundhu’ and intricate gangster narratives with themes of family, friendship, loyalty, betrayal and revenge.

And, of course, a lot of action, so much so that this gangster drama justifies why fans love using firepower as a hyperbole. It wouldn’t be farfetched to assume how Arunkumar would have pictured the plotting of scenes in his screenplay – a series of ballistic ideas, across calibres, strung together to explode in chaotic tandem. Arunkumar’s film has frequent micro-bursts of ingenious ideas, scenes with ace performers reaching their dramatic zenith, rousing fan service, and background scores that heighten every

Veera Dheera Sooran: Part 2

Director: SU Arunkumar

Cast: Vikram, SJ Suryah, Suraj Venjaramoodu, Dushara Vijayan and Prudhvi Raj

Storyline: A provision store owner and a family man from Madurai gets involved in a dangerous crime network, and his mysterious mission forms the rest of the story



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tension. And as cherries on top, guns, landmines, country bombs and cars explode when needed.

The conflict at the core of this story is nothing new; it’s almost done-to-dust in Hollywood – a yesteryear brute, now retired into the quiet family life, is forced to take one last job when his ex-boss comes knocking on his doors, an endeavour that pulls him back to the world he so desperately wished to stay away from. *Veera Dheera Sooran* more or less falls under this broad storyline – Kaali (a scene-stealing Vikram, with eyes that could melt steel) and his peaceful life as a grocery store owner is interrupted when Ravi a.k.a Periyavar (Prudhvi Raj who hardly smiles in this role) begs him to help finish off a ruthless Superintendent of Police, Arunagiri (SJ Suryah, exorcising yet another devilish cop), to save his and his son Kannan’s lives (Suraj Venjaramoodu plays Kannan, with his Malayalam accent slipping through the Madurai dialect).

Where *Veera Dheera Sooran* stands out, for the most part, is how information is withheld and how scenes are conceived. Remember the bite-sized dynamites I mentioned? In the scene where Periyavar speaks to Kaali in private, Kalaivani (Dushara Vijayan; a character similar to her Durga in *Raayan*) signs her son to be her spy in a moment that leaves you in splits – it also reminds you of a scene from Arunkumar’s sophomore, *Sethupathi*. It’s a passing moment, but like in *Sethupathi*, here too, it tells how children of parents with a certain history are raised to be street-smart. Or, perhaps, take how Arunkumar, through a tattoo, a sticker on his moped, and a routine drive home, conveys effectively the endearing romance between Kaali and Kalaivani – an equation central to the conflict.

Be it how Kalaivani reacts when Periyavar comes home, or the detail that Kaali’s house is still under construction, or that a character suffers from a medical issue, many minor points too leave a big impact when they recur, and sometimes, get quite explosive. Some layers make you read the finer lines more intently, like how the mobile phone isn’t used merely

for convenience. Phone calls, devices dying out of charge, and call tracking make big impacts. This is, after all, a thriller set in the present, and over one night, when cell phones can go out of power.

Of course, while the entire film is set in that one bloody night, we do get a flashback that hints at why the film is called ‘Part 2’. It begins with a unique intermission point and ends with a thunderous scene at a police station, but then you wonder if it reveals too much about Kaali’s backstory. This was a world that didn’t bother explaining the different complicated equations, making you piece it all together like a stranger at a party or wait for Part 1 to tell it all. This expository sequence somehow even decelerates the momentum.

That is Arunkumar trading tautness for star elevation and the commercial cinema’s compulsion to spill all the beans. The filmmaker falters in cohesively fusing fan-service mass-masala ideas and his own sensibilities of this gritty, rooted world of crime. Vikram’s introduction card is designed after the title card of *Sethu*, getting quite a response from fans, but its placement hinders your immersion into this world. The plot armour for the star becomes quite evident in an awkwardly staged scene, but we are asked to forgive, for it leads to a great callback to a Vikram classic. The result of this is a surprisingly tapered third act that might not do the film any good.

Yet, even through all that, Vikram keeps us glued to the screens. It isn’t a role that lets him rest under the skin of a character – he hovers over the veneer, dipping into Kaali’s mental make-up when needed, putting on the superstar sleeve at any given opportunity – and he wishes you to see more of him as Kaali. *Veera Dheera Sooran* is what fans of Vikram have longed for, but it isn’t just for them. It’s a grand spicy meal at a muniyandi vilas in Madurai. All meat lovers are welcome here.

Veera Dheera Sooran: Part 2 is currently running in theatres

Salman Khan’s socio-political statement lacks sting

Hindu

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Subversion is not something we expect from a Salman Khan film. Kabir Khan channelled the child in him in a political environment in *Bajrangi Bhaijaan*. In *Sikandar*, writer-director AR Murugadoss seeks to repurpose the star to out-punch his detractors but fails to find layers in Salman’s what-you-see-is-what-you-get persona on screen. Perhaps taking a cue from Shah Rukh Khan’s recent spectacular success with self-referencing in *Pathaan* and *Jawan*, the star has headlined the Eid gift for his fans. However, the present has not been packaged well, as it reads like a PR riposte to the recent events, in and around his personal life.

Salman plays Sanjay Rajkot, aka Sikandar, a Gujarati royal with a heart of gold. A do-gooder, we don’t get to know his business, but his doting wife (Rashmika Mandanna)



feels a tad ignored. One day, he beats up a lascivious boy in a moving plane to protect a woman. The boy turns out to be the son of the home minister, resulting in a war of attrition. A personal loss triggers a wave of emotions that pushes Sikandar into violence.

These days, it seems, there are so many dos and don’ts in Salman’s

image-building or image-saving exercise that the character he plays becomes colourless. He can’t be seen pursuing the gun or the girl. This overt urge to be flawless makes the experience facile, as he invariably ends up like a Santa without a beard.

The writer bleeds his pen to make us understand the syncretic origin of

the character’s multiple names. The story begins with an Eid-type song and ends with a Holi number with ludicrous lyrics where Shambhu rhymes with tambu (pole). Salman is seen in saffron and also guarding an old man in a skull cap. In short, boxes are mechanically ticked off to be politically correct. A home minister (Sathyaraj) with a bald pate protecting an unscrupulous son (Prateik Patil) sends our imagination into overdrive for a while, but the result is pretty ordinary.

Thematic subversion works when the top layer is as fertile as the one beneath. Here, there is hardly anything to skim. The trick is that the audience doesn’t get to know when Salman Khan ends and Sikandar begins. But as it turns out, we find Salman sitting on the shoulders of Sikandar to spell out his good work and grievances. Call it lazy or a case of overwriting, the narrative either works like a surrogate advertisement for his charity work, or sounds like a threat that if Salman is targeted further he will enter the political arena by repeatedly flaunting his fan

following. When he roars, “*Qayde main rahoge toh fayde main rahoge* (If you behave yourself, you will be safe),” it sounds like a reply to the recent attacks on him.

Pritam’s music is just a note above pedestrian. Known for creating a layer of intrigue between the action sequences, Murugadoss’s storytelling is pretty flat here. Filled with bumper sticker messaging, the lessons on organ donation and environmental and moral pollution feel contrived. There is a comment

Sikandar

Director: AR Murugadoss

Cast: Salman Khan, Rashmika Mandanna, Sathyaraj, Sharman Joshi, Kajal Agarwal, Prateik Patil

Storyline: A royal whose heart beats for the common man, a personal loss pushes Sikandar to take on the corrupt system.

against the alpha male as well, but all of it is delivered in a heavy-handed manner with little cohesion, making it increasingly difficult to engage with the plight of the performers.

Salman’s stiff presence and stilted dialogue delivery add to the woes. The action choreography has little novelty. In the absence of effective camerawork, it seems people queue up to be beaten by a star whose intent is intact but agility waning. Saddled with stock dialogues, Rashmika adds one more film to her filmography where her job is to boost the star’s ego. Sharman Joshi and Kajal Agarwal have little to do to justify their presence. Sathyaraj keeps gritting his teeth as if he knows what could have been done with this material.

With *Empuraan*, which has its own *Bajrangi*, running in theatres, Bollywood can draw inspiration from the South to make a political statement in style.

Sikandar is currently running in theatres

Steven Soderbergh's espionage thriller

Black Bag

Director: Steven Soderbergh

Cast: Cate Blanchett, Michael Fassbender, Marisa Abela, Tom Burke, Naomie Harris, Regé-Jean Page, Pierce Brosnan

Storyline: A mole hunt over dinner with a missing code as Macguffin



English

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This is the season of Michael Fassbender. Just as he lights up our little screens in the excellent espionage thriller *The Agency*, on the big screen, he is George Woodhouse in Steven Soderbergh's *Black Bag*. George, a British intelligence officer, is informed by his superior, Meacham (Gustaf Skarsgård), of a mole in the service who has stolen a code called Severus that will do untold harm to nuclear reactors. Meacham passes George a list of five probables, including his wife, Kathryn (Cate Blanchett), who is also in the service. George decides to invite the suspects, who are also spies, home for dinner. The guests include Clarissa (Marisa Abela), a satellite imagery specialist, Zoe (Naomie Harris), the company therapist, and their partners, agents Freddie (Tom Burke) and James (Regé-Jean Page). When George tells Kathryn of the reason for the dinner, she lightly exclaims, "It is long since we

had a traitor for dinner," qualifying it with "at least knowingly". George tells Kathryn to avoid the chana masala as it is dosed with a truth serum. The truth sets everyone free in varying degrees with some help from a steak knife. *Black Bag*, written by David Koepp, uncovers the truth about traitors, trust and loyalty through conversations – between husband and wife, lovers and friends, and therapist and patient. Through the conversations we learn of Zoe's intensely Catholic upbringing; the fact that George is practically a human polygraph and also that he surveilled his cheating father and took him out to the cleaners; James is terribly ambitious; Clarissa is needy and fears abandonment, after her father walked out; and despite Freddie drinking too much and having trouble being monogamous, tries his best as a parent and lover. *Black Bag* is beautifully written and a gorgeous-looking film. The sharp contours merging into soft, backlit frames lend a luxurious feel. And oh, what magnificent homes these people live in! From George and Kathryn's glass-fronted duplex to Clarrisa's cosy book-lined room and even the

cold, clean lines of the office space, all living quarters are blindingly aspirational. To complement their surroundings, you have an exceptional cast. Blanchett, with her boots clacking authoritatively on the floor while her coats sweep by or her softer-silhouetted blouses with long sashes or demurely sexy lingerie, is the very definition of casual confidence as Kathryn. Fassbender as George, with his thick glasses and fitted wardrobe, might look like the opposite of Kathryn, but he actually perfectly complements her. There is also Pierce Brosnan as the boss, Stieglitz, who is not above getting his hands dirty despite his silver hair, three-piece suit and benign appearance. Apart from the joy of conversations and the real estate porn, *Black Bag* is thoroughly enjoyable for the chance to see Blanchett and Fassbender light up the screen with their enormous wattage, with an able supporting cast.

Black Bag is currently running in theatres

Snippets



Puri Jagannadh to direct Vijay Sethupathi in a pan-Indian movie

Ace Telugu filmmaker Puri Jagannadh has teamed up with Tamil star Vijay Sethupathi for a new pan-Indian film that is set to be released in all Indian languages, the makers announced on March 30. The film is set to be produced by Puri's frequent collaborator, producer and former actor Charmme Kaur. Puri announced the news on his social media handles by sharing a picture with Vijay and Charmme. Notably, the post also mentions that the film will go on floors in June. Other details regarding the cast and crew are yet to be announced. The upcoming film will mark Vijay's third film in Telugu, after *Sye Raa Narasimha Reddy* and *Uppena*.



Chiranjeevi's next with Anil Ravipudi launched

Telugu superstar Chiranjeevi's upcoming film, directed by filmmaker Anil Ravipudi, went on floors on March 30, with a pooja ceremony. Tentatively called *Mega 157*, the film was launched by superstar Venkatesh Daggubati on the occasion of Ugadi. Shine Screens, one of the banners backing the film, shared pictures from the pooja ceremony to announce the news. The event was attended by the likes of Allu Aravind, Dil Raju and Naga Vamsi. Details regarding the film's plot and cast remain unknown, but reports have suggested that Aditi Rao Hydari or Parineeti Chopra might play the female lead.



Sanjay Dutt confirms film with Salman Khan

Bollywood actor Sanjay Dutt on March 29 confirmed working with Salman Khan on a new action film. Recently, Salman at a press meet disclosed that he will feature in a big, 'rustic' action film with Sanjay. The actors had famously collaborated on the romantic musical *Saajan* and the comedy film *Chal Mere Bhai*. At the trailer launch for his upcoming horror-comedy film *The Bhootni*, Sanjay Dutt praised the trailer for Salman Khan's *Sikandar*. On reteaming with Salman, he added, "It is an action movie. I am very happy that I am working with my younger brother after 25 years."



This meta-comedy is an absolute riot

Apple TV's latest comedy is Hollywood flambéing itself to star-studded, side-splitting perfection so meta, you just know Rogen hand-rolled it with love

English

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Hollywood loves nothing more than making movies about itself, but if we're being perfectly honest, often more than not, those projects play like self-indulgent fever dreams (not you *Babylon*, we love you) – a dozen limp, inside-story, behind-the-scenes snooze fests that assume the audience actually cares about the daily torments of powerful people with infinity pools. But in Apple TV's latest (and possibly greatest) attempt at industry satire – their saving grace for those rushing to cancel their subscriptions until *Severance* returns for its third – Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg have built a feverish funhouse mirror of Hollywood that warps reality just enough to make its satire sting without sacrificing its riotous laughs. The 10-episode comedic odyssey into the eternal push-and-pull between art and commerce, follows Rogen's Matt Remick, a lifelong cinephile who lands his dream job running Continental Studios, only to find that the job requires him to systematically strangle the thing he loves. That Matt reduces Martin Scorsese to a sobbing wreck in its first 30 minutes tells you everything you need to know about what Rogen and life-long collaborator Evan Goldberg are doing with this show. *The Studio* is so meta it practically folds in on itself like a self-loathing screenplay about a screenwriter writing a self-loathing screenplay. It's a Hollywood satire where Hollywood stars play Hollywood types ruining Hollywood, while actual Hollywood implodes in real time. And what makes it so damn funny is how it skewers the film industry with a precise, no-holds-barred savagery, only possible from people who both adore and absolutely loathe the industry they work in. *The Studio* is a show about an industry devouring itself as we speak. But its satire takes a different route from the gold

The Studio

Creators: Seth Rogen, Evan Goldberg, Peter Huyck, Alex Gregory, and Frida Perez

Cast: Seth Rogen, Catherine O'Hara, Ike Barinholtz, Chase Sui Wonders, Kathryn Hahn and way too many cameos

Episodes: 10

Storyline: Matt Remick is the newly appointed head of the film production company Continental Studios. He attempts to save the floundering company in an industry undergoing rapid social and economic changes

standards of lampooning Hollywood's peculiar brand of self-mythology. Rather than focusing solely on vapid actors or embittered screenwriters, it zeroes in on the corporate mismanagement of creativity itself. Rogen's Matt is a neurotic, film-obsessed exec suddenly thrust into the driver's seat of the embattled Continental Studios, where every decision could result in either a career-defining masterpiece or a box-office implosion. He's a true believer, a Letterboxd-genre of cinephiles who still speaks reverently about the magic of cinema, even as he greenlights an algorithm-driven blockbuster designed to sell merch. With the pressure of keeping his overlord happy (Bryan Cranston in deliciously terrifying form as CEO Griffin Mill) while wrangling unhinged artists, and fragile egos, Matt finds himself fighting to preserve the very thing he loves, while also actively destroying it in the process. He came into this job wanting to make great movies, but quickly realises his real role is to keep the machine running, even if it means killing Scorsese's script for a harrowing historical drama about the Jonestown massacre to make way for a family-friendly, CGI-soaked Kool-Aid Man blockbuster à la *Barbie*. The supporting cast is a murderer's row of dysfunction, each more gloriously unhinged than the last. Ike Barinholtz, as Matt's coke-fueled, sycophantic second-in-command, operates with the energy of a man who has simultaneously read *The Art of War* and done an unspeakable amount of Adderall. Kathryn Hahn is an absolute menace as the marketing executive Maya, who treats PR disasters like a form of performance art. Chase Sui Wonders, as the too-cool assistant-turned-executive, delivers every line with a brilliant deadpan detachment. The show knows industry archetypes but it pushes them just far enough into kitsch territory to be both terrifyingly real and endlessly entertaining. What makes the series so addictively good is that it's rapid-fire of weapons-grade celebrity cameos. The relentless barrage of self-referential A-listers laughing, weeping,

self-immolating, and occasionally foaming at the mouth, honestly makes it feel like all of Hollywood got incredibly shit-faced and crashed on Rogen's couch. Legally, I can't name many names without Apple sending a hit squad, but trust me – Rogen and his team haven't just assembled the most ridiculous guest roster in TV history. Rogen and Goldberg, who direct every episode, structure the series like a frenzied backstage farce, with long, unbroken tracking shots that make every scene feel like it could collapse at any moment. One of the best episodes, is a feverish single-shot half-hour in which Matt accidentally ruins a meticulously choreographed take on a Sarah Polley film set. The duo trade a languid, voyeuristic camera for something more frenetic and stressful, making us feel every delirious moment, as we watch Matt ping-pong from one disaster to the next. If the series has a weakness, it's that its excess may sometimes feel overrun and more familiar than anticipated. But what *The Studio* nails is the sheer exhaustion of it all. How each decision is a compromise, each win is fleeting, and each loss could end it all. By the time the finale rolls around it's clear that Matt has lost whatever control he thought he had. There's an almost *Succession*-like thrill in watching him flounder, except the stakes aren't life or death, nor are they the fate of a billion-dollar conglomerate. They're something far funnier: the Sisyphean task of making a half-decent movie in an industry hellbent on churning out branded sludge. *The Studio* knows Hollywood is a machine fuelled by nostalgia, hypocrisy, and the blind pursuit of prestige, where artistic integrity goes to die, only to be resurrected as a branded content deal. And yet, beneath all the biting mockery, it betrays a begrudging fondness for movie magic. Because for all its ridicule, the dream factory still knows how to sell the illusion. And that might just make *The Studio* the most honest show about the business in years.

The Studio is currently streaming on Apple TV with new episodes dropping weekly