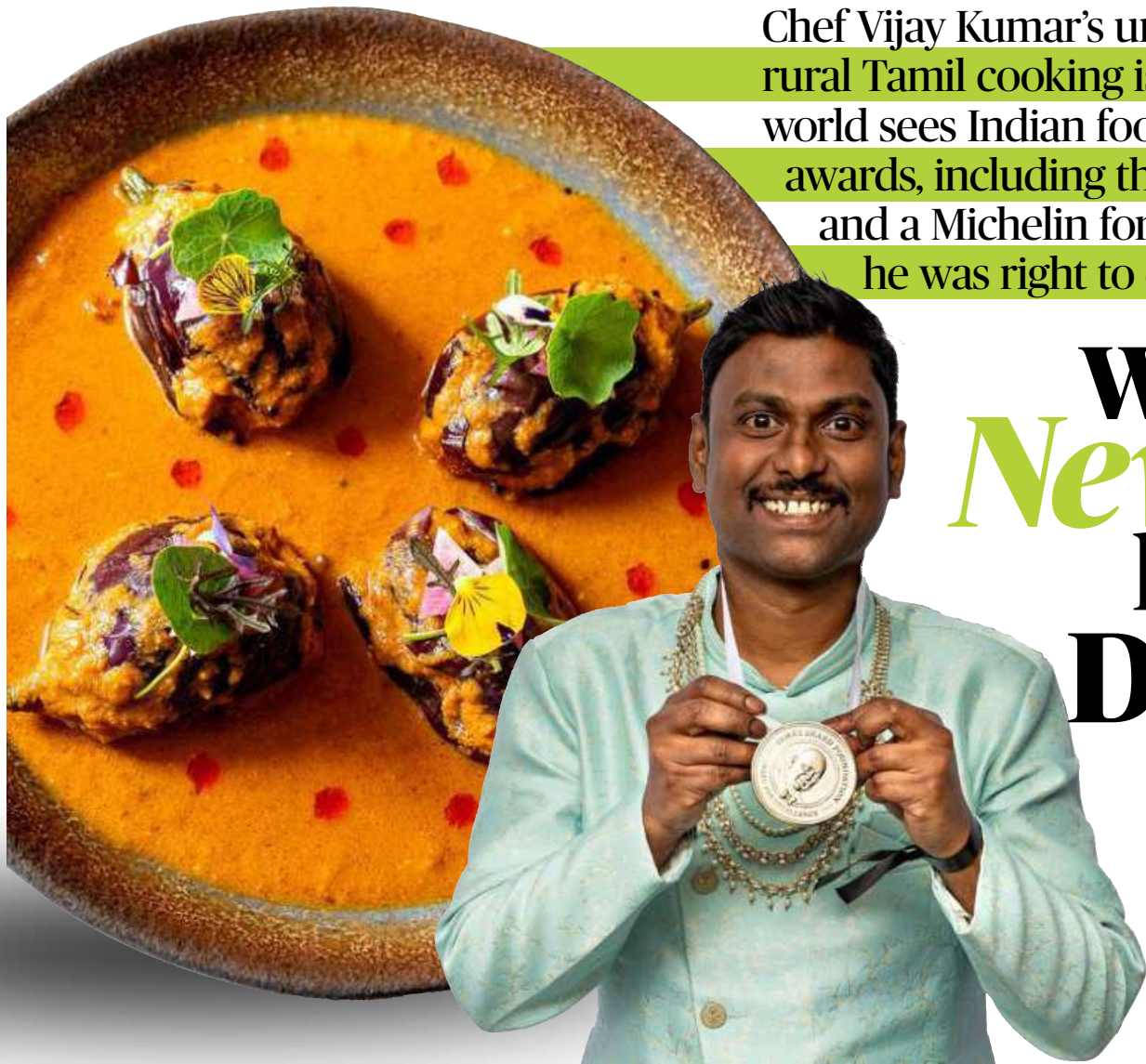




CRAFT ON
YOUR SLEEVE

Designers give aari embroidery, pattachitra, and shibori a contemporary makeover **P4**



Chef Vijay Kumar’s unapologetic rural Tamil cooking is changing how the world sees Indian food. Now a slew of awards, including the recent James Beard and a Michelin for Semma, prove that he was right to celebrate home

Why New York loves Dindigul biryani

(Far left) Gutti vankaya; and Chef Vijay Kumar. PAUL MCDONOUGH AND HUGE GALDONES

Shonali Muthalaly
shonali.m@thehindu.co.in

In the heart of Samudirapatti village, an unexpected flex board now stands tall and proud. Bearing a picture of Vijay Kumar who recently won the prestigious James Beard award for best chef in New York State, the banner declares that the village “congratulates son of Chinnazhagu Ambalam and Kanthammal for winning the award”, helpfully comparing it to the Oscars, to underline its importance to passersby.

In New York, Chef Vijay swivels his chair in delight, holding up his phone to give us a better look at a picture of the banner. His parents wanted him to become “obviously an engineer, or a doctor”, he says, but he defied tradition, much to their disappointment. Now, arguably one of the world’s most celebrated chefs, his restaurant Semma, set in the heart of Manhattan has won a Michelin, and become the first Indian restaurant to top the New York’s 100 best restaurants list. But it was only last week, after he won the James Beard, that his mother was truly impressed.

“She didn’t understand what I was doing for a long time. I tried to explain to her... what is Michelin, what is *New York Times*, but she didn’t understand. Now the whole village is celebrating. They put up a flex for me, near where I went to school. I thought it was funny, but also kind of cool,” says Vijay, with his trademark disarming honesty. “My mom is now, like, my son is doing something big, because the whole village is congratulating her, buying sweets and feeding her...” he adds, visibly thrilled. “And my sister said people were crying in her office when the announcement was made.”

India, and specifically South India, has been celebrating because this is being seen as a win for regional cooking, which has been dismissed on the world stage for so many years. Backed by Roni Mazumdar and Chintan Pandya, who run the popular restaurants Dhamaka and Adda in New York, Vijay was given the freedom to not just cook the food he grew up eating, but also to celebrate it.

CONTINUED ON
» PAGE 3

PRESENTS

nuwa

Natural Diamond Jewellery

Inspired by abstract and modern forms

FLAT 30% OFF

ON WASTAGE OF ALL GOLD, UNCUT & GEMSTONE JEWELLERY.

UP TO 30% OFF

ON DIAMOND VALUE.

Offer valid till 10th Aug, 2025

*Conditions apply

pick of the week



Crafting drapes

Known for reviving hand-block printing since 2013, Gujarat-based one-craft label Vraj:bhoomi will host an exclusive exhibition at The Amethyst Room, Chamiers. Expect reimagined classics,

hand-block printed co-ord sets and the brand's much-loved originals. Vraj:bhoomi was born for the contemporary revival of textile craft, nurtured by the desert artisans of Kutch.

The garments, starting at ₹3,950, will be on display from 10.30am to 7.30pm from June 25 to July 6 at The Amethyst Room, 106, Chamiers Road.



Conscious choices

This weekend, The Honest Hustle Collective is spotlighting craft, community and conscious choices with an array of products ranging from food and clothing to hosting

workshops and more. Expect pichwai paintings by Naveen Soni, organic vegan lunch by Safe Food Focus, South Indian comfort snacks by Kaylir Canteen, African drumming circle by Yogathalam, and sustainable clothing brands like Tula, Aavaran (Udaipur), Porgai (Sittilingi valley) and more.

Visit Alliance Française of Madras today and tomorrow, 10.30am to 7.30pm.



Pitter-platter

Pluviophiles would agree that the rainy season is best enjoyed with a piping hot cuppa and nosh, so wear those gum boots and march to Savva Rasa. Its Monsoon Food Festival has a line-up of

dishes that supports digestion and immunity; think aromatic soups, comforting snacks, and indulgent desserts.

Highlights from the lunch and dinner menu include nandu rasam, chicken paniyaram, kari kanji, sheer kurma and more.

On till July 6; noon to 3.30pm and 6.30pm to 11pm. A meal for two costs roughly ₹2,200. For reservations, call +91 9940091899



(Left) Zohran Mamdani greets voters in New York City; with his mother, acclaimed filmmaker Mira Nair. AFP AND REUTERS



POP IT LIKE IT'S HOT

The Mamdani mayhem

Everything about Zohran Mamdani, the Indian-origin candidate for the post of New York mayor

enthusiastically celebrating his victory in the Democratic primary – a portion of the New York Mayoral elections. The chronically-online Indian millennial and Gen Z audience suddenly seemed to know far more about Mamdani and voting in New York than facts about their own Members of Parliament.

All this, and the guy isn't even mayor yet.

What about him has captured the fancy of a young Indian voter base that rarely gets out to vote and cannot name the Member of

Legislative Assembly representing their constituency?

Is it his A) humble and relatable off-the-rack suit, tie and Casio demeanour B) several hundred Hindi references, appealing to the Indian diaspora C) work with communities including the Blacks, gays and the immigrant population? D) simple good looks and youth or E) ability to use public transport and walk long distances. (You are allowed to choose over one option).

Politico says, "Critics scoffed at the 33-year-old democratic socialist's pie-in-the-sky agenda.

And then he trounced everyone."

I'd like to think that Mamdani has struck a chord with young voters globally because he knows how to work social media. His Instagram reels speak to a generation that seeks what he promises: affordable housing, free transport and decent use of taxpayer money. They also want to see their pestilent youth represented in the office. It's why Mamdani's campaign deliberately uses clear fonts and easy chants in colours Gen Z loves. I now know how much food at a halal cart costs even though I have never set foot in America, let alone eaten at one.

While he is now being hailed as Lenin's second coming in

Level up

Zaddy: You might think this is some interesting portmanteau that Gen Z came up with but it really is just what it sounds like, a sexy, charismatic daddy who is usually older. Now you know why Zohran is called Mamzaddy.



(Clockwise from below) Chef Vishesh Jawarani, the founder of JSan; pork tonkotsu; and the facade of JSan designed by Vishesh's architect father Somesh Jawarani. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



and elements of *wabi sabi*, the concept of embracing imperfections. "In a world obsessed with perfection and constant upgrades, *wabi-sabi* reminds us that there's value in simplicity. It teaches us to slow down and appreciate what's real; the weathered, the incomplete and the transient," says Vishesh.

Reverence for craft

Vishesh has perfected three distinct noodle styles, each of which is tailored to complement different broths, right from the rich, umami *tonkotsu* to the milky-white, wholesome *paitan*.

A ramen lover knows that the *tori paitan* featuring a creamy, rich chicken-based broth is a contrast to the more popular *tonkotsu* ramen, which uses pork bones. While the *tonkotsu* broth is distilled down to its essence over two days using the age-old *yobimodoshi*



technique, which lends it a velvety finish, the *tori paitan* broth, is a medley of chicken carcasses, feet, skin, and wings, continuously broken down and stirred to extract maximum collagen for 12 hours.

The tuna tartare and sea bass ceviche are mention-worthy openings to the meal, as is the mushroom *chawanmushi*, a silken egg-custard – and we didn't miss the sushi at all.

Though the ramen does most of the talking, one must remember to save room for dessert. The Honey Butter Shokupan is jiggly and buttery; a simple and soulful sweet ending, topped with Madagascar vanilla bean ice cream, whipped cream, and seasonal fruits... We had it with mango, of course.

A turning point

With a couple of Business degrees under his belt, Vishesh had first tried his hand in different vocations, then segued into the Culinary Institute of America, after which he sharpened his knife at some of New York's most-celebrated Michelin-star restaurants like Daniel, Atoboy, a Michelin Bib Gourmand Korean-American restaurant, and Mari, a Michelin-star Korean handroll omakase spot. At JSan, he is ably supported by his dynamic sous chef, Swamini Mandlik, who brings her own Michelin-star experience from Le Pavillon in New York, along with an unassumingly quiet focus, giving every dish laser-sharp precision and balance.

Why the love for Japan, we ask Vishesh? "When I travelled to Japan, everything I had admired from a distance came to life. Eating at small ramen shops, visiting Sakai city and having a custom Japanese knife made to my preferences were unique experiences," he says, adding "Building relationships with knife makers, chefs, bartenders and experiencing the culture's reverence for seasonality and simplicity, made me fall in love with it on a deeper level."

JSan, located in Goa, next to Cliff's Monty Guesthouse, in Anjuna, is open on Monday, Wednesday and Thursday (5pm to 11pm) and Friday, Saturday and Sunday (noon to 3pm; 7pm to 11pm). A meal for two costs approximately ₹3,500

It's a mango summer

Peppered with interesting facts, *Mango: A Global History* takes a deep dive into the history and cultural connotations of the king of fruits



A snapshot of the Manggahan Festival in the Philippines SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Nidhi Adlakh

nidhi.adlakh@thehindu.co.in

Not many know that the origin of the mango lies in Northeast India, or that grinding stones and pottery dating from 1500 BC and belonging to the Harappans revealed traces of the fruit. If you would like to deep dive into the history of the king of fruits, *Mango: A Global History* by sisters Constance L Kirker and Mary Newman is a great starting point. Launched as part of the Edible series (published by Pan Macmillan), the book traces the fruit's history, cultural significance, and geopolitics.

While there were no mangoes in Ohio, where the sisters grew up, their travels in the Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Cambodia contributed research for the book.

The book, says writer and culinary historian, Constance, "explores the properties of mangoes through the lens of the five senses". "There is a component of texture to mangoes as the juices and fibres stimulate those senses. Even the sound of someone sucking on a mango pit evokes the senses," she says.

Something Queen Victoria certainly would not approve of. The book highlights how the queen, 'a great champion of etiquette and elaborate table manners' expanded the use of cutlery worldwide and a mango fork was designed during the Victorian

period. *Mango* also has references of how the British did not 'savour the sight of Indians squatting on the floor and sucking on mangoes, with the juice flowing down their elbows. They often referred to it as the 'bathroom fruit', and instructed their Indian servants to confine the mess of mango eating to the bathroom'.

Of all the facts and interesting finds that the duo discovered during its research, they were most surprised by the "almost fanatical, universal, and personal attachment that people in countries where the fruit flourishes have for their variety of mangoes".

"People don't just 'like' their mangoes, they 'love' their mangoes with a devotion unmatched by any other fruit in the US or Europe," says Mary. The well-curated recipe section in the book features a mango menu with mango wine/lassi/tea; starters such as raw mango rasam, *aamras*; mains like *aamchur* chicken, Haitian mango chicken; sides like the Vietnamese green mango salad; and desserts including mango float, mango barfi, and more.

"Since our book is a global history, the mango recipes were all taken from historical sources from around the world," says Constance. The recipe for mango curry, for instance, is taken from food writer Soity Banerjee's conjecture of what a 2,000-year-old curry may have been like.

Mango: A Global History is priced at ₹599 and is available online

Gargi Guha

There is a focussed attention to detail that goes into making the perfect bowl of ramen, elevating the dish to a global cult. This has been aced by Chef Vishesh Jawarani, the founder of JSan – an Izakaya Gastro pub that opened its doors to Goa early this year. Vishesh brings with him his Michelin star halo from New York, along with an unabashed passion for Japanese pub grub, to this 'ramen mecca'

– a pilgrimage site for ramen lovers. "Ramen is a beautiful paradox; it looks simple but is incredibly complex. It has taken a lot of research and experimentation to come up with the recipes of each ramen at JSan. The key is balance," he reveals.

Japanese-inspired spaces

JSan has a gentle flow and aesthetic, with a few elements of surprise. The space is designed by Vishesh's architect father, Somesh Jawarani, with the central theme of *yūgen*, or grace,

CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

Says Vijay, “My hometown is Natham, near Madurai. My dad was from Samuthirappatti and my mom is from Arukkampatti, which is super tiny. When we went there for school holidays, there was no TV, no electricity, nothing. My grandparents would take us hunting and fishing. We would forage for snails in the paddy fields and cook them in a mud pot. It was such simple food, but it tasted so good when we ate it off banana leaves – I miss all those moments.”

So he, Chintan and Roni decided to take a risk, and recreate that meal in the food capital of the world.

“We cook unapologetic food – we want to cook just how we cook back home,” says Vijay. “It took us so long to have the guts to do this – even when we started Semma, I was really scared. Who is going to eat snails on the menu? Who is going to eat goat’s intestines or deer? It was very risky, but we took a chance. Someone had to do it.”

That was not all. Just like the food, they decided the menu would also be unapologetically South Indian. “We made sure the names of the food were in Tamil, Malayalam, and Telugu. The moong bean dish, for example, is Mulaikattiya Thaniyam on the menu. After all, Italian and French restaurants list their dishes in Italian or French.”

Of course, there were push backs and some inevitable negative comments from diners more used to stereotypical Indian fare, like chicken tikka masala, vindaloo and naan. But Semma’s loyal clientele, specifically the Indian diaspora clapped back fiercely. Most memorably television host, model and author, Padmalakshmi, went



Why New York loves Dindigul biryani

on Instagram to declare “Semma isn’t made for you; it’s made for us. And I’m pretty sure if nobody but Desis went there for the rest of its existence, it would still be booked

solid for the next decade.”

“I have never felt this much love in my whole life,” says Vijay. “I feel like I am a child of Tamil Nadu, a child of India actually. India has been celebrating so hard... I am still trying to catch up on all my Instagram DMs, I am still overcome.” He adds, “When I look back at my journey I just get goosebumps. I can’t express how blessed I am. I know I use this word all the time, but I have to keep using it.”

It was always tough to get a reservation at Semma, now it seems close to impossible. He holds up his phone, “I have 1,290 people waiting for reservations tonight, and we can seat 65. People are also standing in 100 degree Fahrenheit heat to get in, from 4pm. I feel so bad we can’t



(Clockwise from above) Chef Vijay; Dindigul biryani; dishes at Semma; and the poster at Samudirapatti village. JHIENES MOREIRA, OUTFIT BY NDNY IN NEW YORK, STYLING BY VAISHALI FROM NDNY AND PAUL MCDONOUGH



seat more of them.”

However, even as guests stand in line for his cooking, Vijay craves food from home. “My mother does a really good fish curry, nice kurma and idli, idiappam... She is a really amazing cook,” he says.

She has not been to New York, or eaten at Semma yet, so the last thing he made her was rice and sambar before leaving for the US. “She is a a tough critic. Very hard to please,” he confesses.

“I haven’t been in India in years, even before COVID – things have been happening back-to-back here,” Vijay says, adding that he looks forward to coming home. “I want to touch the soil and just get its blessing. I am thankful to everything that soil gave me. I want to eat on a banana leaf, to take rice and sambar, and mix it all with my fingers,” he says.

Among his list of things to do when home, he has been asked to speak at his old school in Samudirapatti. “They want me to tell my story to the students, as they feel it will inspire them. I think I have lot of responsibility now. I always work hard, but I think I need to work harder.”

Vijay has been thinking about what to say to the students, who pass by his flex banner everyday now.: “Keep trying. Nothing is easy in life. If it comes easy what is the point? I remember when I went to this school, for two years I had to walk two kilometres in bare feet – I had no shoes, because we couldn’t afford them. But I would not change any of that, because it has led me here.”

In the groove

This evening, an immersive cultural event titled One Night in Toki-O will take place at the city’s Library Blu. Hosted in collaboration with city-based creative collective Odé and Toki Suntory Whisky, the event will ‘draw from traditional Japanese aesthetics and reinterpret them through a contemporary Indian lens’. Guests can indulge in an evening of music, and Japanese-inspired cuisine and cocktails. Musician Unnayana will headline the evening and perform a five-hour vinyl set. Today, at 8pm. At The Leela Palace, Chennai. Tickets on sortmyscene.com.



Venue In Chennai
Dass Community Hall
No.55, Opp. Maris Hotel - 600 086
Cathedral Road

Org. by: Surya Agency Pvt. Ltd.



A taste of Thai

Soy Soi brings the bold and vibrant flavours of northeastern Thailand to Chennai with its Isaan Thai Food Festival. Known for its spicy, tangy, and herb-rich dishes, Isaan cuisine offers a rustic and refreshing take on Thai food. The festival menu features specialties like som tam mamuang (green mango with tender coconut), nam prik ong (a chilli dip with minced chicken and prawn), and pik gai yang (grilled chicken wings in northeastern spices). The chefs say their focus is on using fresh ingredients and creating strong flavours. At Soy Soi, Kotturpuram. On till June 30. Noon to 11pm. Cost for two is ₹1,550. For reservations, call 7397774857.

AIM for SEVA
Educating Rural India

Swami Dayananda Saraswati
Arsha Vidya

Ramam Bhaje

A MUSICAL CELEBRATION OF LORD RAMA

JULY 19, 2025
SATURDAY | 6:30 PM

SIR MUTHA VENKATASUBBA RAO
CONCERT HALL
(Lady Andal School Campus) Chetpet, Chennai

A Multi-genre, Multi-language Musical Fundraiser Concert

In support of
SWAMI DAYANANDA KRUPA HOME
Residential facility for individuals with developmental delays

SOORYAGAYATHRI (Vocals)
Adarsh Ajaykumar (Violin) | Vishwas Hari (Mandolin) | Kripal Sairam (Mridangam)
Prasanth Sankar (Tabla) | Rohith (Extra Percussion)

For enquiries:
☎ +91 95000 60153
🌐 www.aimforseva.in

TICKETS ON
OMDnD
www.mdn.in

SCAN TO
BOOK YOUR
TICKETS

Ground Floor:
₹1,000 | ₹750 | ₹500
Balcony:
₹250 | ₹150

BIG3 EXHIBITIONS PRESENTS

THE ARCHITECT & INTERIOR EXPO 2025

DIAMOND SPONSOR

SIMTA Astrix
WINDOW, DOOR AND INTERIOR SOLUTIONS

CO-SPONSOR

Peveeta Steel Doors
Doors for Residential and Industrial

120 COMPANIES

7000+ VISITORS

120 LEADING BRANDS

120+ PRODUCT DISPLAYS

JUNE 2025

4 DAYS EXPO

26 THU | 27 FRI | 28 SAT | 29 SUN

HALL - 1, CHENNAI TRADE CENTRE, NANDAMBAKKAM, CHENNAI

10.00 AM to 7.30 PM

FREE ENTRY

Organized by BIG3 EXHIBITIONS
For Enquiry Call **98840 36873**

/BIG3 EXHIBITIONS
www.big3exhibitions.com

*Conditions Apply / *Below 10 Years age Children not allowed

A

Tamil

A froth of contrivance floats



Bhuvanesh Chandar
bhuvanesh.chandar@thehindu.co.in

You find many big, ambitious ideas, all promising to come together in an engaging investigative thriller, in director Nelson Venkatesan’s *DNA*, starring Atharvaa and Nimisha Sajayan. Unfortunately, these ideas remain disjointed isles of potential.

Take, for instance, how we are introduced to the protagonist, Anand (Atharvaa), a heartbroken man who has given up on life and spends his time drinking and wallowing in self-pity. We learn that he is burdened by something tragic that has happened to his ex-lover.

Then we are introduced to Dhivya (Nimisha), a mentally challenged woman. Nelson wishes to make a strong case for those who stigmatise mental illnesses or use the offensive term “loosu” (meaning dumb). But then, is Dhivya suffering from cognitive development issues, or is she suffering from Borderline Personality Disorder, or is she an intellectually disabled woman who also suffers from BPD?

It is ironic that the film maps out her ‘illness’ and doesn’t help us understand what goes on in her mind. What did she see in Anand that made her agree to the alliance, or what did she understand when Anand saved her from embarrassment at their wedding and declared

DNA

Director: Nelson Venkatesan

Cast: Atharvaa, Nimisha Sajayan, Balaji Sakthivel, Ramesh Thilak

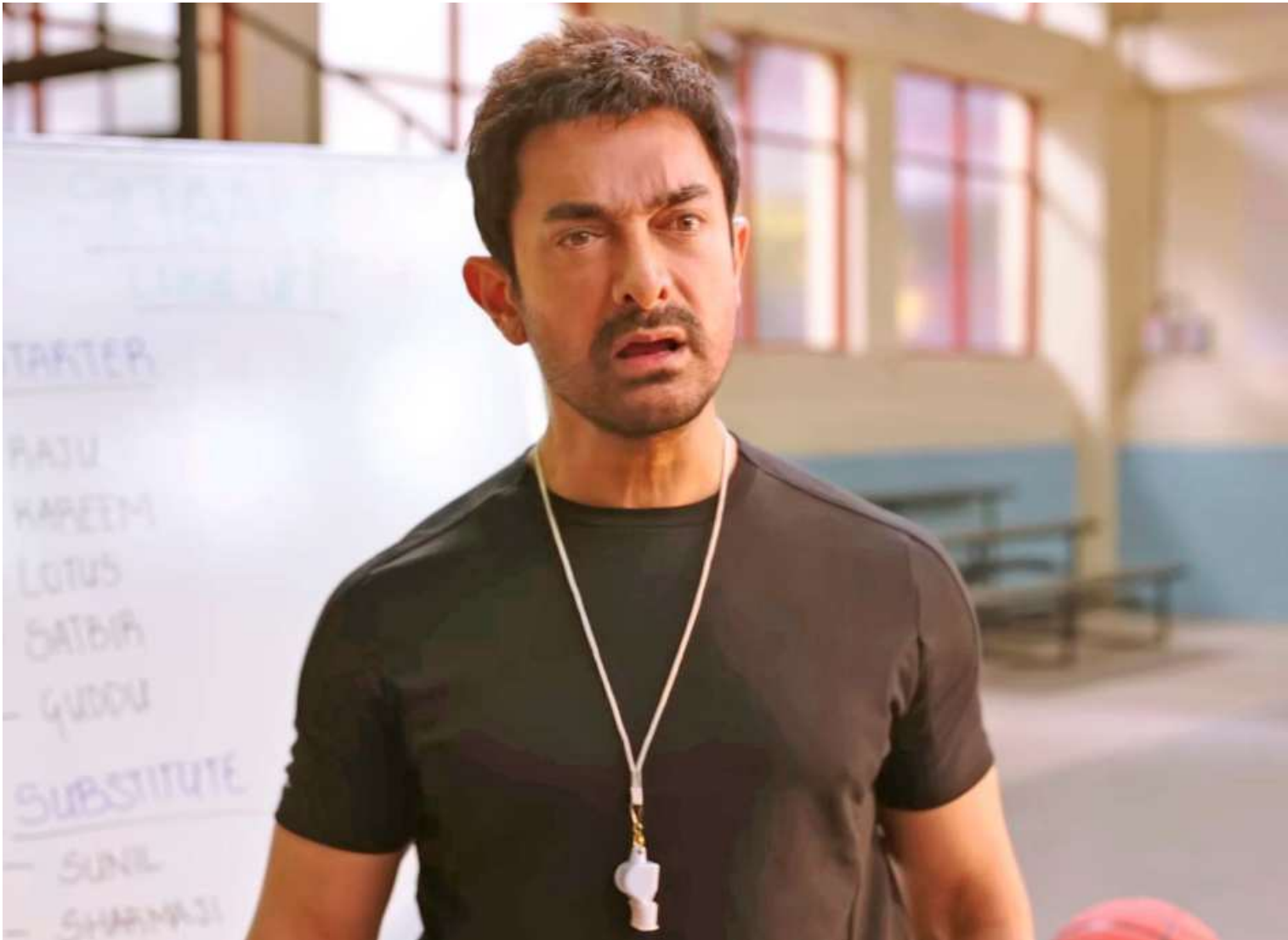
Storyline: A mysterious case of newborn babies being swapped at a private hospital unravels dark truths

this isn’t her baby but somebody else’s. Neither Anand nor her mother believes her, and the chief doctor, upon learning of Dhivya’s mental condition, suspects that she’s suffering from post-partum psychosis.

You would expect a story about a test of faith between the couple and an investigation that makes you question fact from fiction, but that isn’t the case here. We know what had transpired, and the rest of the film is about the ‘how’ – because Nelson, in a scene preceding this, decides to reveal a trump card and spoon-feed information. When one takes a step back, everything, from the initial scene that follows a road accident to how police officer Chinnasamy (Balaji Sakthivel) and Anand figure out some major clues, feels awfully convenient.

DNA, while it carries its noble intentions on its sleeves, seems to be the work of a less confident writer-director, one who starts his film with a soup song in a bar and ends all hope with an item song in a bar that serves no purpose. And you thought such trite ideas were no longer part of the genetic fabric of mainstream Tamil cinema.

DNA is currently running in theatres



Aamir Khan’s moral science class

An ideal Aamir Khan film can be both entertaining and edifying. Despite its good intentions, *Sitaare Zameen Par* is just annoying

Hindi

Shilajit Mitra
shilajit.mitra@thehindu.co.in

There is a self-aware moment in *Sitaare Zameen Par* that nicely parodies the moral science cinema of Aamir Khan. A team of neurodivergent basketball players has won a precious free throw in a losing game. Their coach, Gulshan, can’t stop pep-talking the player about to take the shot. Satbir (Aroush Datta) loses his head and yells out. “Sir, *pehle aap chup rahiye*,” he thunders, telling Gulshan to shut up. Khan – one of the most didactic superstars India has ever produced – needs to surround himself with more Satbirs.

In his directorial debut, *Taare Zameen Par*, a landmark film from 2007, Khan played Nikumbh, a sensitive art teacher who mentors a dyslexic child in a boarding school. The audience, too, felt mentored meaningfully by Khan, their hearts and minds broadened by a thoughtful, virtuous star. Khan spiked his hair and dressed up in a clown suit for the role. Yet, every so often, we spotted a halo behind his head.

The halo is smartly hidden from view at the start of *Sitaare*. Yet, Khan’s contract with the audience has remained unchanged. Billed as a spiritual sequel to *Taare Zameen Par*, and remade from the 2018 Spanish drama *Campeones* (Woody Harrelson starred in a 2023 English-language version), *Sitaare* echoes the first film’s mission: raising awareness

Sitaare Zameen Par

Director: RS Prasanna

Cast: Aamir Khan, Genelia D’Souza, Dolly Ahluwalia, Aroush Datta, Gopi Krishnan Varma, Aayush Bhansali

Storyline: An imperious basketball coach trains a team of players with intellectual disabilities



Scan the QR Code for more entertainment news.

about neurodivergence. This it does in the most predictably teachable fashion. Every scene or callback is calibrated to yield a lesson, a realisation. An ideal Aamir Khan film can be both entertaining and edifying. But when the balance tilts, it’s just annoying.

We meet Gulshan as a cocksure assistant coach in Delhi. He is imperious, insolent, insufferable. As the story begins, he’s suspended from his job for the minor intemperance of socking his superior in the face. To make things worse, he’s arrested and pulled up in court for drunk driving, getting off with three months of community service. He winds up at a centre for adults with developmental disabilities. The team he meets – a cheery bunch of nine, with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Down Syndrome – is as convinced of his ineptitude as he is of their worthlessness. My favourite is the suave Sharmaji (a charming Rishi Sahani), who takes one look at Gulshan and declares, “*Naya coach gadha hai* (the new coach is an ass).”

In the court scene, Gulshan uses the word ‘pagal’ (mad) to describe people with intellectual disabilities, raising the hackles of the judge. However, since it’s Aamir Khan playing him – and not Rajkummar Rao or Nawazuddin Siddiqui – we know a change is swiftly around the corner. Because Gulshan is the ostensible idiot in the story, a man of moderate height and an inflated ego, the secondary and tertiary characters have to fill him in, explaining chromosomes and the varying shades of ‘normal.’ “*Jo baki logo se alag hote hai, unke liye kisi na kisi ko ladna padta hai*,” his mother, played by Dolly Ahluwalia, tells him. Gulshan’s marriage has hit a snag, yet Sunita (Genelia

D’Souza) is a constant pillar of support. The setting is ordinary Delhi. Why is everyone behaving so nicely?

Unlike the affecting Ishaan Awasthi, whose isolation from his family formed the emotional crux of the first film, the neurodivergent characters in *Sitaare Zameen Par* don’t get elaborate backstories or journeys. Instead, sweet, sentimental montages sum up the basic facts of their lives. Only one character, Hargovind (Naman Misra), is granted something resembling an arc. Neurodivergent existence is explained in terms of its utility to mainstream society. Director R.S. Prasanna and writer Divy Nidhi Sharma fight shy of messiness and complexity, serving a blur of happy faces. They must ask themselves: by painting these characters as ungrudging, inspirational figures, are they serving the theme of inclusion or simply perpetuating a positive stereotype?

As actors get older, some of the self-seriousness wears off, and the audience is all the better for it. Despite the frequent digs at his height, Khan isn’t as uproariously funny here as he was in *Secret Superstar* (2021). Time and again, everything loops back to him. The on-court action is mediated almost entirely from his point of view, and the actor’s famous songs – ‘DK Bose,’ ‘Papa Kehte Hain’ – are yanked into service. Even as Gulshan runs away from responsibility, Khan can’t run away from his: holding the public’s arm and guiding them into the light. “Let me explain,” he says. And the halo reappears.

Sitaare Zameen Par is currently running in theatres

Sekhar Kammula’s brave film is imperfect, yet compelling

Telugu

Sangeetha Devi Dundoo
sangeethadevi.k@thehindu.co.in

Kuberaa is driven by its director and his ambitious tale that does not pander to the starry aura of Dhanush, Nagarjuna Akkineni, and Rashmika Mandanna. Sekhar makes them play characters – men and women inhabiting a complex world driven by money, power and greed. The narrative is not perfect. Yet, it is a brave one.

In broad terms, *Kuberaa* is the story of a capitalist exploiting those who are below the poverty line. A multi-billionaire (Jim Sarbh as Neeraj Mitra) believes ‘fame is power’. He lives in a Mumbai high-rise. At the other end of the spectrum are those who beg for alms, whom this film describes as the ‘invisible’.

The first hour unravels the different worlds. A pacy opening sequence establishes the power games. Jim Sarbh does not miss a



beat as the cold, calculating antagonist. His ability to speak Telugu, with all the intonations, is a bonus.

Sekhar introduces his key players in a non-formulaic manner. When

Dhanush, as Deva the beggar, comes into view, the audience cheer. The writing gives him, and his associates, enough material to work with as the narrative takes a close look at the life of beggars. Even if groomed and

dressed up in the best of suits, can they grasp what is happening around them? Can they be exploited for the bare minimum needs of food and shelter? A telling sequence shows the lack of dignity in their death.

These polar opposite worlds cross paths with the help of CBI officer Deepak Tej (Nagarjuna), now behind bars for just doing his job. Nagarjuna plays a man in turmoil, one who wants to do the right thing but is manipulated to go against his conscience.

Niketh Bommi’s cinematography and Thota Tharani’s production design establish the uber-luxurious world of Neeraj Mitra, with imposing structures that dwarf those who work for him. Substantial portions of the film unfold in real locations, from Mumbai’s landmarks to the garbage dumps, and all of this adds credence to the narrative.

The narrative comes to a boil once the cards are revealed and a cat-and-mouse game for survival begins.

If three characters – representing the uber rich, the middle class, and the lower strata – caught in a tangle

is not enough, a fourth character brings an edge to the drama. The quiet yet effective introduction shot of Rashmika Mandanna as Sameera is worth a mention.

Some of the best portions are when the film is in a thriller zone with the possibility of the tables turning. There is trust, betrayal, and a quest for redemption.

However, the final portions are a tad unconvincing. It appears as though the director, who has written

the film with his long-time associate Chaitanya Pingali, wanted to move away from a predictable path and instead, deliver poetic justice. The transitions between a few sequences also feel abrupt.

A few deft touches that work in favour of the narrative are the nuggets of Deva’s childhood and his tenacity to survive. Deva’s frequent query about the day of the week and how it ties up to food and religion is a smart observation.

Kuberaa leaves a few questions unanswered towards the end. These niggles stop the story from being wholly compelling. Music composer Devi Sri Prasad who deftly switches between the different worlds, makes us overlook a few rough edges with his score.

Kuberaa falls short of being a gamechanger. But it is a brave film from a director who has often stepped away from the norm, and raised pertinent questions. That is ample reason to cheer.

Kuberaa is currently running in theatres



Elio

Directors: Madeline Sharafian, Domee Shi, Adrian Molina

Voice cast: Yonas Kibreab, Zoe Saldaña, Remy Edgerly, Brandon Moon, Brad Garrett, Jameela Jamil

Storyline: A space-obsessed boy gets a chance to meet aliens and save worlds

Tale of longing and belonging

English

Mini Anthikad Chhibber
mini.chhibber@thehindu.co.in

Have we not all wished at some point in our lives to escape into magical, colourful worlds where everyone gets us? So it is with 11-year-old Elio (Yonas Kibreab), who after losing his parents, comes to live with his aunt, Olga (Zoe Saldaña), a US Air Force major. Olga gives up her dream of becoming an astronaut to care for Elio.

Things are not going well for aunt and nephew as Elio takes every opportunity to communicate with aliens, begging them to abduct him. When conspiracy theorist Melmac (Brendan Hunt) insists

aliens have responded to the Voyager I's communication, Elio sends a message causing the power to go out and Olga to nearly lose her job.

Furious with Elio, Olga sends him to camp where he gets into a fight with two boys Elio tricked for their HAM radio. Just as things are getting hot for Elio, he is spirited away by the aliens from the Commiverse, an intergalactic hub where beings from different planets share knowledge. They welcome Elio imagining he is "Uh Earth's" leader.

Elio is all set to become ambassador when the war-mongering Lord Grigon (Brad Garrett), annoyed at being rejected as ambassador, decides to destroy the Commiverse. Elio promises to negotiate with Grigon and stave off the attack. After quickly studying how to be the ace negotiator he is

pretending to be, and making crib notes on his palm, Elio sets off to face Lord Grigon.

While on Grigon's spaceship, he makes an unlikely friend in Glordon (Remy Edgerly), Grigon's equally larva-like cuddly son. With clones, super computers, carapaces loaded with flamethrowers and other weapons, a dangerous asteroid field, a daring space flight and important lessons on belonging, friendship, family and home, all comes right in the end in bright pops of colour and action.

Elio is a creative masterpiece with zany aliens including Questa (Jameela Jamil) who resembles a radiodont (an ancient arthropod) and OOOO (Shirley Henderson), the shape-shifting liquid supercomputer.

A perfect holiday film, *Elio* shines through with gentle warmth and wit, taking parents and children along on an intergalactic adventure swaddled in vivid hues and humour.

Elio is currently running in theatres

Snippets



David Fincher might revive Mindhunter as a Netflix trilogy

After years of fan requests, filmmaker David Fincher's critically acclaimed psychological crime thriller series, *Mindhunter*, might return soon, in a different format. Actor Holt McCallany, who starred as FBI agent Bill Tench in the series, has revealed that the project might be revived as a trilogy of films on Netflix.

"I had a meeting with David Fincher in his office a few months ago, and he said to me that there is a chance that it may come back as three two-hour movies, but I think it's just a chance," McCallany said in an interview with CBR.

Mindhunter, based on the book *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI's Elite Serial Crime Unit*, premiered on Netflix in 2017. Set in the 1970s, it followed a special F.B.I. team.



Ajay Devgn announces Son of Sardaar 2, sets July release

Ajay Devgn is set to return to comedy with *Son of Sardaar* 2, the sequel to his 2012 action-comedy *Son of Sardaar*. Directed by Vijay Kumar Arora, Devgn reprises his iconic role as Jassi, and revealed the first poster and release date of the film on Thursday.

The sequel marks his return to lighter, comic roles after a series of serious action films including *Singham Again*, *Shaistaan*, *Bhola*, and *Maidaan*.

Joining him in *Son of Sardaar* 2 is Mrunal Thakur, with whom he shares the lead. The ensemble also includes Sanjay Dutt, Sahil Mehta, Kubbra Sait, and Ravi Kishan.

The film will release in cinemas on July 25.



Vijay plays the true leader for the masses in H Vinoth's film

The makers of Tamil star Vijay's upcoming movie, *Jana Nayagan*, released the film's first glimpse on the occasion of the actor's 51st birthday on June 22. The film will be released in theatres on January 9, 2026, during Pongal. Directed by H Vinoth, the film marks Vijay's last outing before he gets into full-time politics.

Titled 'The First Roar', the video begins with the words *en nenjil kudiyirikum* (to those who live in my heart), the famous line the actor-politician utters at the beginning of his public speeches. The glimpse video introduces Vijay as a cop wielding a blood-stained sword. *Jana Nayagan* is touted to be a political actioner.



Wes Anderson on autopilot

The acclaimed auteur's latest is a densely packed scrapbook of recycled Andersonia, and not even the blessed charm of Michael Cera can salvage it

English

Ayaan Paul Chowdhury
ayaan.paul@thehindu.co.in

Wes Anderson has always made beautiful cinematic snow globes, immune to external messiness.

Minutes into his latest (and perhaps most terminally fussy) confection, it's clear this isn't top-shelf Anderson. It might not even be bottom-shelf. It's as if he's shredded his greatest hits and glued them back together with unchecked indulgence.

Set in a fictional 1950s Middle Eastern country that resembles a Suez-era Cairo, *The Phoenix Scheme* follows the billionaire arms dealer and infrastructure savior Anatole "Zsa-Zsa" Korda (Benicio Del Toro) as he attempts to outmaneuver a death plot, reconcile with the nun-daughter he abandoned in a convent, and bankroll a mega-project across a desert. The plan involves dubious shoeboxes, various foreign dignitaries, and divine intervention. At one point, Bill Murray appears as God. It is *not* as delightful as it sounds.

In theory, this angsty, *Tintin*-like adventure should be a riotous romp, but in practice, I found myself trapped for nearly two hours inside a ledger with

The Phoenix Scheme

Director: Wes Anderson

Cast: Benicio del Toro, Mia Threapleton, Michael Cera, and too many more of the 'Anderson Ensemble' to name

Storyline: A wealthy businessman appoints his only daughter as sole heir to his estate and embarks on an adventure to secure the future of his empire

fancy illustrations. There are pages upon pages of immaculately calligraphed industrial espionage and entomological trivia that's all underscored by a steady drip of aesthetic self-congratulation.

Anderson's compositions have never been more elaborate, and that in itself is saying something. Each shot is like a diorama designed by an obsessive. We glimpse Renoir paintings, hand-drawn logbooks, fruit-themed grenades – everything, save for any semblance of emotional investment, is in perfect alignment. For all the ornamentation, *The Phoenix Scheme* is curiously barren.

Del Toro's Korda is of mythic contradiction. He's a titan of industry, a crumbling patriarch, a possible murderer, and a man with nine adopted sons housed like rare collectibles in his palazzo. Del Toro plays him laconically, but it's far too taciturn a role to work. Newcomer Mia Threapleton, as Liesl, the nun-daughter dragged back into daddy's dealings, also attempts to inject vinegar into the script's saccharine rhythms, but their emotional arc falls frustratingly flat.

The evergreen Michael Cera, however, is the unsurprising balm. As Bjorn, a soft-spoken Norwegian tutor-slash-secretary-slash-American spy-slash-exposition vehicle, Cera offers a twitchy earnestness and an adorable accent that cuts through the stylistic fog.

The rest of the cast – Tom Hanks, Bryan Cranston, Riz Ahmed, Scarlett Johansson, Jeffrey Wright, Benedict

Cumberbatch, Mathieu Amalric – float in and out of the frames. What was once the charming idea of the 'Anderson Ensemble' has curdled into a parade of cameos, each trotting out banter like it's on a metronome. Pace is not the same as momentum, and quirk is not the same as character. These are truths Anderson seems increasingly unwilling, or unable, to accept.

The Phoenix Scheme is not without its moments of wit, for it's hard to imagine any Anderson film entirely bereft of charm. But its pleasures are abstract and academic, the kind that encourages YouTube frame-freezing video essays and production design dissertations more than anything else. There are ghosts of better Anderson films haunting its hallways but none of them fully materialise.

At its best, Anderson's cinema has always conjured the eccentricities and nostalgia of childhood recollected in tranquility. But *The Phoenix Scheme* feels nothing more than a proud auteur rifling through his own legacy in search of novelty.

It's a 'monumental' work by Anderson, in the sense that it's a very, very boring edifice of lavish masonry. Its craftsmanship may impress on a second viewing, assuming you survive the first. Myself, I feel very safe.

The Phoenix Scheme is currently running in theatres