



# metro PLUS

THE HINDU

**From Russian cutlets to Arabian coffee, here's your ultimate guide to iftar in Chennai P2**

**WHY MANJUMMEL BOYS CLICKS IN TN P4**



**Snakes in my luggage** (Clockwise from below) Whitaker and pet kite in Bombay, 1959; with his first milk snake in Hoosick, 1947; Whitaker with a spectacled cobra, 2020. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT AND JANAKI LENIN



**Gowri S**  
gowri.s@thehindu.co.in

**P**romise me you won't kill a snake – Romulus Whitaker's mother said to the young boy, when he brought home his first milk snake in a jelly jar. He had found it under a rock on the pastures of Upstate New York's Hoosick, where he spent a few of his childhood years. She called the creature beautiful. This precious moment set the tone for Whitaker's life and career in the company of reptiles, big and small.

And, so it should come as no surprise that his life spills over more than one volume of an autobiography. The unassuming American who is hailed as 'the snakeman of India' – for Madras, the man behind the beloved Snake Park and Crocodile Bank founded in 1976 – lays bare his early years in the irreverent, engaging *Snakes, Drugs, and Rock 'N' Roll: My Early Years* (published by HarperCollins), the first part of his autobiography written with author and wife, Janaki Lenin.

Was the title meant to shock? From his home, on the outskirts of Bengaluru, the 80-year-old opens with a hearty, full laugh. "This seemed to be a title that would grab attention, at the snakes level, drugs level or the rock n' roll level. It also reflects the age that I was talking about, the first 25 years of my life. I have had this title in mind for probably 10 years!"

The book is an easy read with interludes from Whitaker's school days, his time in service as a medic for the US Army during the Vietnam war, and at sea as a sailor, among early days of career.

**A long road**  
It took Janaki and Whitaker nearly five years to put the book together. It was no single moment or incident, rather the conversations that the naturalist had with acquaintances and friends – sometimes over a glass of beer – who incessantly ask about what shaped his early life, growing up, and his time in Agumbe, that led to the idea of an autobiography.

Whitaker says, "I guess



**India's very own snakeman**  
Romulus Whitaker recounts memories, with creatures great and small, from the first 25 years of his life in his recently-published autobiography

people just got sick of me telling an individual story, they said, 'we wanna hear it all!'. His early years, sometimes in astonishingly vivid detail, thus came alive.

The details make one wonder about how well documented Whitaker's childhood years were. "Actually, my mom [Doris Norden] can be blamed for a lot of it because she was wonderful! The main person who shaped my worldview was my mother. She saved so many of my early writings, like the letters I sent home from school, narrating the various experiences I have had. Before she passed, she handed over everything she collected over the years. And it's not only the letters that I wrote home, but the letters I wrote to my cousins in America. They were very fascinated by my life in India," he recalls.

In all the hours spent discussing the structure and flow of his memories, he is evidently nostalgic for some parts of his early childhood.

"Even though I was born in New York City and spent a few years there, the move to Hoosick out in the countryside was just magical. That set the tone for the rest of my life, really. I wanted to be out in the wild then, and I am

still the same. If I want to relive something, it would be going back to that place."

He continues, "On a recent visit, I turned over a rock, and lo and behold, there was another snake. I was thinking to myself it is probably the great-great grandson or granddaughter of the snake that I caught back then!"

Through the narrative, the onus Whitaker places on people and relationships is unmissable. A tiny window into his life and move to India, his school days in Lawrence School, Lovedale, and Highclere School (now Kodaikanal International) and his relationship with his Indian stepfather Rama Chattopadhyay, and step-grandparents Harindranath and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, all make the narrative personal.

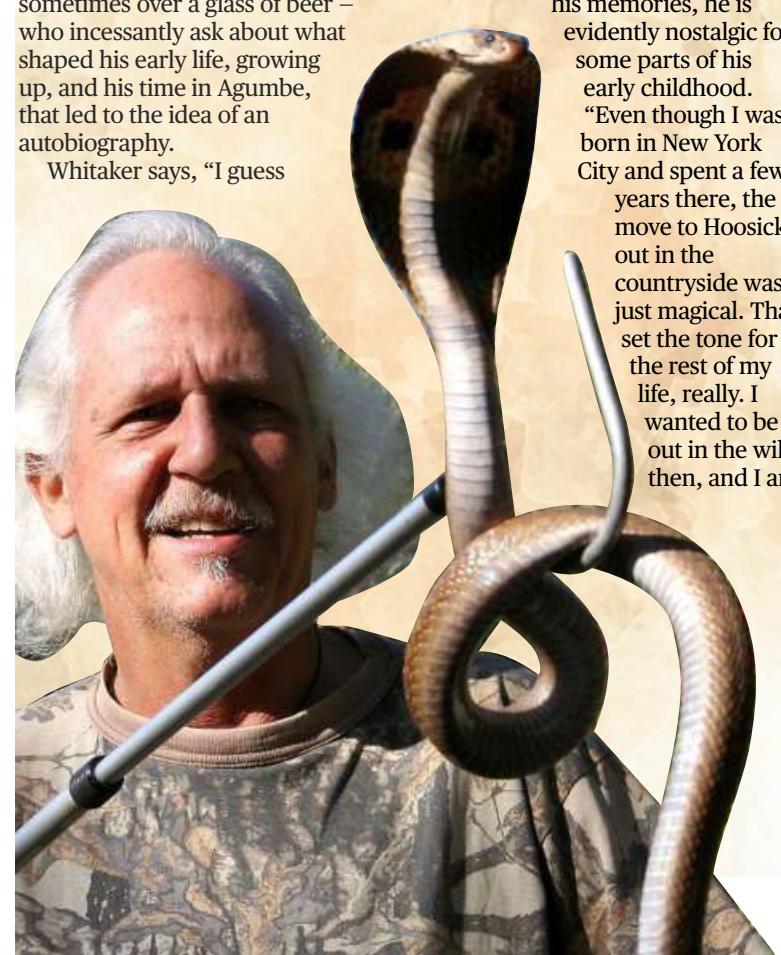
When he started working, a few others became pivotal to his life in the wild. In the US, it was his former boss at the Miami Serpentarium, Bill Haast, and a hero of yesteryear, Raymond Ditmars of the Bronx Zoo, and in India, another hero, a British doctor and herpetologist called Colonel Frank Wall.

A well-lived life lends itself naturally to an engaging read. "Well, it's my story so it's a bit hard not to boast too much but we did try to minimise the 'I, me, mine' adjectives. The combination of my memory, and Janaki's editorial skill is what shaped it," Whitaker adds.

This volume barely scratches the surface of his life's work as a naturalist. "The book shows me as a kid who didn't really gel with academics at all. I had much more fun out in the wild."

He assures, "The second volume is in preparation and we are halfway through it. I have 100 times more stories to filter out, and I am fortunate that Janaki is very clinical about getting the right story in the right place. We have to be meticulous in choosing the best ones."

Most mornings now are spent poring over nuggets of found memories and sheaves of research. More from an extraordinary life await, where all the wild things are.



## Fair winds

For these pilots, navigating the sea is just as easy as the infinite skies

**Sanjana Ganesh**  
sanjana.g@thehindu.co.in

**A**t the Spring Haven Wharf where Chennai's violent summer sun has settled comfortably in the sky, a group of pilots, accustomed to navigating the clouds, is making its way to J80 class sailboats (racing keelboats) at the Harbour, hoping to try their hand at controlling the waves.

For many, who are still in their stiff white and blue uniform, it is their first time onboard a sailboat. "I have lived in Chennai all my life but have never been to

sailing in the sea," says Amrita Ravindran. She is one among 30 pilots from Indigo trying their hand at sailing, at the 112-year-old Royal Madras Yacht Club (RMYC), the oldest sailing club in South India, as part of the airlines' month-long Women's Day celebrations.

"It is pretty remarkable how we have all been given an off on the same day. My biggest draw to take part, was to meet all the other women pilots from Chennai. Unlike corporate offices, we only get to meet our first officers and co-captains. It is nice to meet the other pilots from the

organisation for the first time. Did you know that Indigo has the highest contingent of women pilots in the country?" asks Shailaja Gopinath who has been flying since 1995.

The last time she was on a sailboat, Shailaja says that she was taking it slow. This time, she is happy to get her hands dirty. Amrita adds that the idea of working in teams is also bound to help break the ice and bring the contingent closer.

Honorary secretary of RMYC, Captain Vivek

Shanbhag, says that the mechanics of flying and sailing are not too different and adds that it is usually a cakewalk for pilots. "The aeroplane, like the sailboat, does not distinguish between a man and a woman," he says.

At 11am, the group, armed with bright blue T-shirts and sunglasses, leaves the wharf in four boats. In minutes, they get a lifetime supply of salty breeze and gentle waves lapping by their sailboats.

**Floating along** Pilots from Indigo dip their feet as they sail at the Chennai Harbour. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



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**Taibah**

Taibah sells haleem year-round and not just during Ramzan, offering it in quantities of 200 grams, 400 grams, and 1 kilogram tub options through the month. They have been in the city for five years and have a special Ramzan iftar snack menu called talan featuring dishes like chicken and mutton keema samosas, chicken chutney kebab, Russian kebab and more. "We have set up a display of all the snacks outside the outlet in the evening, starting from 3pm for customers to choose from. We also prepare chicken and mutton biryani for the season," says Sufiyah Merchant, the proprietor.

**Taibah, Sait Colony, Egmore.**  
Available from 3pm.  
For orders, call 8828360426

**Hatimy's**

Well known for its iftar snacks for over 10 years, Hatimy's draws large crowds every evening during this season. Owner Mohammed Patel says, "Out of the 28 items on our menu, crispy chicken is the hottest selling item followed closely by chicken candy kebab and chicken cheese sandwich."

The price range starts from ₹35 and goes upto a maximum of ₹150. The mango pudding is the most popular dessert on its menu. Try and get there early to avoid crowds.

**Hatimy's, Mannady Street.** From 3pm to 11.30pm.  
For details, call 9790952531

**Abid's**

Executive chef Mohammed Nizamudeen has introduced a few new items for Ramzan such as the Turkish lamb adona kebab, Russian cutlets, chicken cheese cigars and peri peri grilled chicken. The Arabian-style kebabs and snacks are the popular items.

Abid Zahid, who runs the restaurant says, "This year we are providing vada along with nombu kanji as it is a popular combo in Tamil Nadu."

They continue to offer an iftar buffet, as well as a spacious prayer hall. Abids adds



**Abid's is on Spurtank Road.** To order, call 9841284703

that each year, they sell over 500 kilograms of haleem per day during Ramzan. This creamy mutton haleem is so popular that people buy it in party packs of three kilos. "Until recently, we used to fly down chefs from Hyderabad to prepare haleem and Hyderabadi food. But now, we have a team of cooks from Hyderabad in-house permanently," says Abid.

They also have iftar takeaway boxes.

End with their marasi Arabic pancakes made with honey and dates.

**Abid's is on Spurtank Road.** To order, call 9841284703

Craving live music under the night sky? Head to Muttukadu boat house for a Pink Moon boat concert

**Moonlight melodies**

**Sangita Rajan**  
sangitarajan.pb@thehindu.co.in

Live music concerts have been added to everyone's wish lists lately. A musical experience to perhaps add to yours, is one under the moonlight in the middle of the ocean.

The Madras Commune (TMC), a community of artistes, has been conducting intimate concerts for over two years featuring both new and established singers. Local eateries, rooftops and cafés have been their venues so far.

Their latest venture is the Pink Moon concert, which is hosted off the coast of the Bay of Bengal. "We live in Thiruvanmiyur opposite the beach, and thought that we should do a concert in the ocean," says Ashwin Kashyap R, founder of TMC, adding that figuring out the technicalities and logistics was challenging.

"The Madras Commune experiences started because of my wife Maalavika Sundar, who is a singer. We have done 18 such experiences so far," he says.

Here, audience members embark on an eight-seater fisherman boat from Muttukadu boat house, and are taken out into sea, where the artist performs on another boat. The audience boats are placed in a semicircle around the performance boat. "I'm a commercial

**Ocean stage** Singer Sathyaprakash Dharmar at a previous edition of the Pink Moon boat concert. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

pilot and coming from a flying background, safety is very important to me. I knew I had to engage the fishermen community because they know how to be safe," he says.

Collaboration with the Tourism Department (TTDC) was key. "TTDC Managing Director Sandeep Nanduri, IAS, suggested using all the boats at Muttukadu, making it a joint tourism venture," explains Kashyap.

Boats are anchored and tied to bamboo poles on the morning of the concert so that they stay still even when the water level rises in the night due to high tide.

The first concert, aptly named after the full moon it coincided with, was held in April last year. The name stuck, even if the moon does not always cooperate. Each boat carries a lifeguard. Silent generators on a separate boat power raised speakers with no subwoofers, to ensure that marine life is not impacted.

**The next edition of Pink Moon boat concert will be held at Muttukadu boat house on March 25. Tickets on in.bookmyshow.com at ₹2,250.**



# A laden table

**Chitradeepa Anantharam and Shabnam Kamli**  
chitradeepa.a@thehindu.co.in

**From traditional haleem to a vegetable mandi, team MetroPlus explores this year's iftar menu**

**Zaitoon Signature**

Zaitoon Signature's Ramadan Nights offers a serene hangout spot, complete with cups of masala tea. Their *a la carte* menu is quite exhaustive with over 110 items including haleem, snacks, tea, Malabar snacks and some of the signature Zaitoon dishes. They have live counters for fried chicken with mac and cheese, bhuna ghost pav, kanthari prawn skewer, gnocchi and much more, says Shameer Hameedali, operations manager. Their iftar boxes contain a milk shake, tawa roll, chicken kizhi porotta and more.

**Zaitoon Signature** Ramadan Night at its Nungambakkam outlet is open from 4.30pm to 1am. Iftar boxes are available from 4pm to 7pm and are priced at ₹550. Call 7092322223

**Matsya**

This year for the first time, Matsya, the popular vegetarian restaurant is offering a Ramzan buffet spread featuring 24 Arabian dishes. "Our chef Boo Kannan who was extensively trained in the Gulf region for many years has reimaged popular Arabian dishes, and made them vegetarian," says Ram Bhat of Matsya. Chef Kannan says that in addition to Arabian coffee or qahwa, there will be nombu kanji as well as a mezze platter, falafel, and a vegetable mandi. Try the Arabic dal, vegetable salan and an assortment of Arabic breads such as sesame bread, coconut raisin bread and kuboos.

For dessert, there is saffron rice kheer.

**The Arabic Food Festival is on till March 24, at its Adyar and T Nagar branches, for lunch and dinner. Buffet costs ₹680 per person. For details, call 8610171993**

**Ambur Canteen**

Ambur Canteen, which showcases home-style Ambur food, has joined the bandwagon of places that serve iftar specials in the city. One of the co-owners of Ambur Canteen, Mohamed Samee, says, "The menu that has been curated is exactly what families in Ambur break their fasts with." The menu includes mutton keema kanji, mutton biryani, Ambur bade (vada), chicken roll, chicken cutlet, bread halwa and a mocktail. All this is priced at ₹500.

**Ambur Canteen, Habibullah Road, T Nagar.** To order, call 8925142541.

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- Across**
- 1 Trick played on a victim (9,4)
  - 8 Braid (7)
  - 9 V-shaped indentation (5)
  - 10 Drag (4)
  - 11 Message sent electronically to be delivered in written form (8)
  - 13 Nub (of a nut?) (6)
  - 14 Reflect (6)
  - 17 Eyeshade (3,5)
  - 19 Wickedness (4)
  - 21 Go bad — confuse (5)
  - 22 Threatening (7)
  - 24 Government department (7,6)
- Down**
- 1 Drink — burst (3)
  - 2 With sharp corners (7)
  - 3 Soften (4)
  - 4 Paid a brief visit (6)
  - 5 Underwear or nightclothes (8)

Solution will appear in MetroPlus dated March 28, 2024.

**Solution No. 13576**

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**Entertainment on a budget**

Movie fans who love the theatre experience often find themselves digging a hole in their pockets with tickets and popcorn. India's largest multiplex chain, PVR INOX has launched a passport for a limited 50,000 subscribers, which will let you enjoy four movies for ₹349 a month, or 12 movies for ₹1,047 over three months on weekdays. On March 18, PVR expanded the services pan-India. Get your passport on the PVR website or app.



**With trolley tanks and 'pukka' colours, Chennai's Mint Street is all set for a resplendent Holi**

**Sanjana Ganesh**  
sanjana.g@thehindu.co.in

**D**inesh Soni, the owner of the iconic Anmol Lassi shop on Mint Street, is a semi-permanent fixture in the area. The brusque yet affable man, in large sunglasses and light cotton kurta, can be seen beckoning customers, new and old, to try his kesar lassi for nearly 363 days of the year. In five days though, his shop is scheduled for its first annual holiday.

"Mint Street is the 'raja area' of Chennai during Holi. Anyone who wants to celebrate the festival has to come here. It is where all the action is. Monday will be a dramatic fest," he says, speaking of one of the city's original North Indian settlements. Every Holi, colours take over the street with walls, roads and people, resembling a paint palette. There is music boozing in corners and food flowing out of small shops. "From the starting point of the street to the white walls of the Shree Chandraprabhu Jain temple, one will witness a sea of people on the day," he says.

Dinesh makes Holi sound like a sport and himself, a player. "It has been five years since I retired," he says. "It is for the youngsters now," he says.

Twenty metres from his shop, a group of children is out with their mothers to buy their first set of Holi colours for the season. After some negotiations and tears, they settle on purchasing a 'trolley tank', the latest trend in the world



**Colours of the rainbow** Children looking to purchase water guns and balloons ahead of Holi at Mint Street. B JOTHI RAMALINGAM

of water guns. "It holds a lot of water and can be lugged around because it has wheels. The other guns, resembling AR-15s, are also selling well," says S Bharati.

For three generations, Bharati's family has been selling fruits in the area. One week before Holi, their stations transform and their faces often have specks of green, purple and pink. "We buy colour at the wholesale shops on Devaraja Mudali Street and sell them in smaller packets here.



From Thursday onwards, we are anticipating massive crowds. Besides the pink, green and purple colours that tend to sell the best, there is also the silver and gold that tend to do well," she says.

**Iridescent shades**

Over the last four years, the sale of organic colours has increased with more people preferring to purchase packets of this marginally more expensive product (a 100grams packet costs ₹50 versus the regular colours that cost ₹30) because it rubs off with one wash. K Raju, a wholesaler running K. Manavaliah Turmeric Kumkum shop, says that it does not irritate the skin. "A lot of school-going children and employees in corporate offices prefer to play with this material," he says.

For hardcore Holi fans, S Vijayalakshmi's stall opposite the Jain temple, stocks up on 'pukka' or long-stay colours. This salesperson says that she has

played Holi in these very streets since she was young. She comes back every year, now with her children. "We also make decent sales on the day of the festival," she says.

Another seller, V Ramani says that the usual mix of balloon, glitter and slime, will be sold on Saturday and Sunday under the radar. "People come all the way from Coimbatore, Tindivanam and Villupuram only during the weekend," she says.

Over the years, the nature of Holi in Sowcarpet has changed. G Ashok Kumar, who has been running a kadi-kachori stall on Mint Street since 1984 says that it was once limited to the Marwari community living in Sowcarpet. Now however, college students throng the area on Holi day. It crosses culture and several Tamil brethren often take part, he says. It has amplified the scale of the celebration, he says.

"Holi is the day where one reconciles with the enemy. This year will be no different," he says.



# Notes on a nation

From rare photographs of Gandhi's assassination to canvases of resistance

— The Asian College of Journalism campus is now home to two unusual exhibits by SAHMAT



Gowri S  
gowri.s@thehindu.co.in

In the walls of the Asian College of Journalism today is art that begs a second glance. At first, it may seem amateur-ish. But a closer look reveals layers – of resistance, activism and opinions that defy fear. Superimposed on unassuming hessian sheets are words and images of over 280 writers, artists and activists, each driving home the importance of unity and defiance.

Take for instance, artist Pushpamala N's image of a writing slate that carries an ode to Rohith Vemula or photojournalist Pablo Bartholomew's photographs of 1970s

Bombay where late thespian Gurcharan Singh Channi performed his radical street theatre production *Disturbed Area*, that spoke of State violence and political conflict. Titled *Hum Sab Sahmat*, a pandemic project, the display pays tribute to SAHMAT's (Safdar Hashmi Memorial Art Trust) 1991 exhibition titled *Images and Words* where artists were encouraged to react to the political climate of the time, using any medium.

#### Frozen in memory

Curated by Ram Rahman and Saarthak Singh, an allied fascinating exhibit of photographs by Henri-Cartier Bresson, Margaret Bourke-White and Max Desfor titled *The Light Has Gone Out*, conceptualised last year, takes us through the moment and aftermath of Gandhi's assassination. It is a study on how photojournalism proves pivotal in shaping a nation's history.

Ram is also one of the founders of SAHMAT says, "Some of these images have never been seen before. The idea was to bring out this moment in our history, particularly at this point in time. It was also to remind people why Gandhi was killed and who killed him. The photographs show how personal stories and practices perfected the way the event got documented and reached the public booth."

Spread across the corridors and on wooden structures erected at the entrance, are messages that touch

**Time stands still** (Left) A panel of photographs from *LIFE* magazine dated February 16, 1948; (above) an artwork by Gargi Raina. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



#### More to come

Last weekend saw a captivating, and almost conversational performance by Gaana Vimala, who belted out many Ambedkar anthems written by herself, followed by two Tamil plays, *Idam* and *Mei* directed by artist and activist Pralayan. In tandem with the exhibits on display are:

**On March 22, 5.30pm onwards:** Performance as Politics: Song and Dance by Nirthya Pillai, vocal and nattuvangam: Janani Ramesh; flute: Devaraj; mridangam: Ganeshan, followed by Dafs Musical Concert by Muslim Fakirs.

**On April 5, 5.30pm onwards:** Chennai Kalai Kuzhu will present King Mahendravarma Pallavan's *Mathavilasa Prahasanam*, dramatised and directed by Pralayan.

*The displays are on till April 18; entry is free*

environment, some about the rise of communalism, while others were commenting on women's rights and the attack on universities and on the Delhi riots. It was a lot of working on one image with a text to make sense of the narrative."

The format, which is unaffected by the space of display, was designed with accessibility at its centre. The show has travelled to Shantiniketan, Bhopal, Ajmer, Jaipur, Himachal Pradesh and protest sites since its inception.

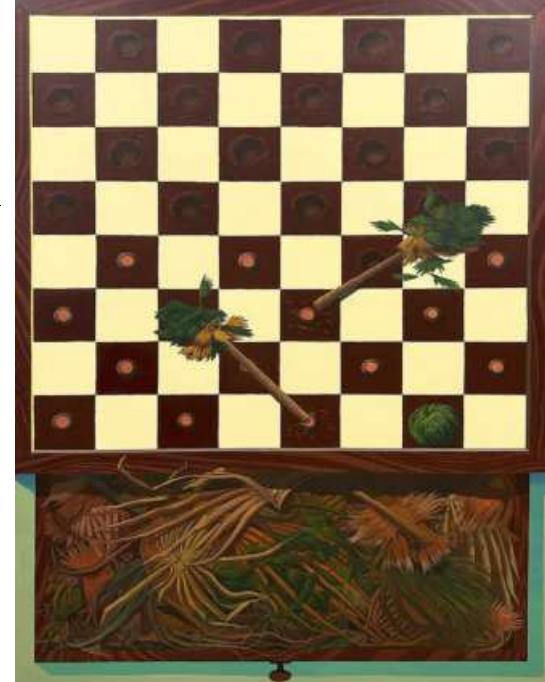
Aban says, "The idea was to talk about where India is heading, and perhaps not agreeing with the direction it's heading. It was a deliberate decision to involve writers, artists, photographers, journalists..." On each sheet is *Hum Sab Sahmat* written in multiple languages, signalling the multicultural nature of the opinions.

The picture of Gandhi's cremation shot from above is a fascinating one for many reasons, says Ram. "The story is that Cartier-Bresson used his small Lyca camera to move around and take some pictures and when he couldn't get up on the *machan* (platform), Max Desfor, offered to take some pictures on Cartier-Bresson's camera." Two weeks later, one of those pictures appeared in *LIFE* magazine with an attribution to Cartier-Bresson. "I found that fascinating, how do you then credit an image is the question." The picture of a young Gopalkrishna Gandhi by the funeral pyre was one of the other rare finds, a picture that Ram did not know the existence of.

He concludes, "A lot of these images bring alive a history that you have known. But a visual record of it somehow makes it more tangible and closer home."

## Colliding canvases

The Chennai Biennial spotlights 50 Indian and Korean artists



S Poorvaja  
poorvaja.sundar@thehindu.co.in

**T**here is a sprawling field of yellow against a strip of blue sky – all on canvas in a painting titled *Spring in Jeju* by Son Ilham at the Lalit Kala Akademi. Not too far away, a herd of deer stands majestically against a starry sky painted in hues of green and black in *Magesh Ramachandran's A Placid Dream*.

At Confluence, the fifth edition of the Chennai Biennial organised by InKo Centre and K-Art International Exchange Association, the works of 50 artists from South Korea and India are on display, chronicling a range of perceptions – Nature, people, and the world around them. While the Biennial usually showcases the works of contemporary Korean artists, this edition has contemporary artists from India displaying their work to mark the 50th year of Indo-Korean relations. After making a stop in Jeju and Busan, the exhibition is now in Chennai.

"The works on display are a homage to the artists' perceptions and how their empirical experiences are at the heart of their work. Twenty-five different artists were selected from across India, and their works are a reflection of the vibrancy of the country, and all the culture, tradition and heritage it brings alive," says Ashrafi S Bhagat, art historian and critic, who has curated the paintings of Indian artists. The Korean paintings have been curated by Kim Injun, an artist and critic, who says that the works of the Korean artists are filled with emotion and spirit that reflect their individuality.

"I am always in a romantic relationship with Nature, and this is my interpretation – a surrealistic one. I have always been fascinated with nightscapes and I connect whatever I see to the human emotion," says Vidya Sundar, about her painting *Autumn Serenade*. Vasuki Lakshminarayanan's painting *Togetherness In Harmony*, has a gathering of women of all ages, and an elephant and a tiger set against hues of blue and green.

"We are treating Nature with ease, and are slowly forgetting to harmonise with it," says Song Yujin, whose work *Timing Game\_Checkmate*, tells

**A coming together** Timing Game\_Checkmate by Song Yujin. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

the story of Jeju island and its relationship with the palm trees there, which are being affected by the changing climate and environs. It is hard to miss the myriad styles from the two countries, and yet how effortlessly all the art comes together.

*Chennai Biennial 2024 is on at Lalit Kala Akademi, Greams Road, till March 26. Visit [inkcentre.org/chennai\\_biennial2024.html](http://inkcentre.org/chennai_biennial2024.html) for information.*

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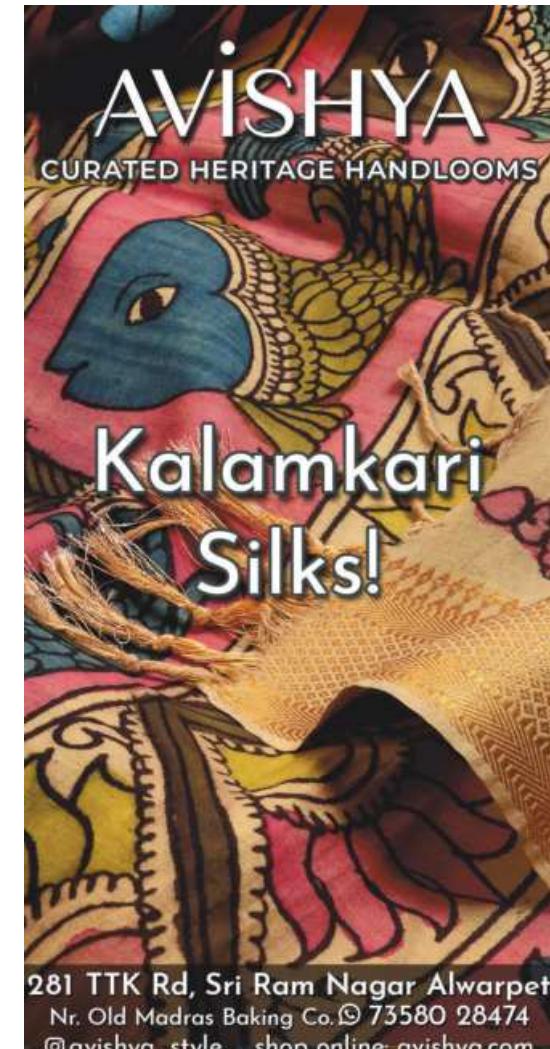

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**Malayalam cinema's motley crew**  
A still from *Manjummel Boys*. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

# All about the boys

**Beyond 'Kanmani Anbodu': A look into the success of Malayalam film *Manjummel Boys* in Tamil Nadu**

**Bhuvanesh Chandar**  
bhuvanesh.chandar@thehindu.co.in

In one of the most pivotal moments in the sensational Malayalam survival thriller *Manjummel Boys*, a flashback cuts to a close-up of actor Soubin Shahir. The crowd in a packed screen in Chennai erupts cheerfully. Over the last decade, Soubin has established himself as a star performer in Malayalam. However, a sporadic Malayalam cinema viewer from Tamil Nadu might only know him as the guy who acted in *Kumbalangi Nights*, and last year's blockbuster *Romancham*. What makes a fan from Tamil Nadu welcome the actor like they welcome a Tamil superstar? The truth seems to be that Tamil audiences have found a star in *Manjummel Boys*, but it is not Soubin or Sreenath Bhasi; it is the film itself.

Almost a month since it was released in theatres, director Chidambaram's *Manjummel Boys* continues to have a dream run in Tamil Nadu. According to theatre sources, though films of Malayalam superstars Mammootty and Mohanal have historically pulled reasonable crowds to select few theatres, the craze post 2015's blockbuster *Premam* has ushered a new wave of Malayalam cinema viewers in Tamil Nadu.

"Malayalam films still only play in multiplexes. And even if they are showcased on single screens, it's the Tamil-dubbed version," says

Vishnu Kamal, owner of Kamala Cinemas, Chennai. Thanks to good word-of-mouth promotions, *Manjummel Boys* started screening even in single-screen theatres from the second week of its release. "Manjummel Boys is 'the' film that has saved theatres this March," adds Vishnu.

Filmmaker Halitha Shameem says "the kind of response the film received even in interior Tamil Nadu is surprising. I only thought it'd do well in cities, towns and the film festival circuit".

Halitha is right about the reality in southern Tamil Nadu. Srither S, joint secretary of the Tamil Nadu Theatre Association, says he was shocked to see the response to from interior Tamil Nadu.

"A decade or so ago, when a Malayalam film released, only a handful of centres like Tiruchi, Chennai and Coimbatore used to play them. Never have I seen a

non-dubbed Malayalam film being played in places like Thiruvarur, Aranthangi and Jeyamkondan."

According to Srither, *Manjummel Boys* has earned a share of ₹12 crore from Tamil Nadu. Produced by Soubin's Parava Films, the film is currently the highest-grossing Malayalam film of all time at ₹200 crores. What has made *Manjummel Boys* such a phenomenon in Tamil Nadu?

#### Looking back

Based on a real-life incident that transpired in 2005, *Manjummel Boys* tells the story of how a vacation to Kodaikanal becomes a nightmare for a bunch of friends from Kochi when one of them unexpectedly falls into a crevice in the Guna Caves, which got the name after Kamal Haasan's 1991 film *Guna*. If you follow social media closely, the most pivotal aspect that catapulted the film to fame would seem

obvious: the use of the famous 'Kanmani Anbodu' song from *Gunaa*.

Halitha, however, feels it would be shallow to just credit 'Kanmani Anbodu' for the success of the film. "Manjummel Boys is exceptional craft-wise," says Halitha.

Being a film about a bunch of boys choosing friendship over everything else also seems to have worked in *Manjummel Boys*' favour. Ruban, the owner of GK Cinemas, Chennai, says that much of the bookings in his theatre are bulk bookings. Historically, films like *Boys*, *Chennai 28*, and *Saroja* have worked in Tamil and the lack of such films in recent years might also be a reason, says Halitha.

What also seems to have worked in its favour is the long drought of good commercial films in Tamil to pull crowds to

**The most pivotal aspect that catapulted the film to fame was the use of the famous 'Kanmani Anbodu' song from *Gunaa***



the theatre. As Srither points out, after Vijay's *Leo*, which was released in October last year, none of the Tamil films have managed to taste considerable success in theatres. "The theatre business is purely profit-motivated and so if any film that is cleared by the censor board would work for the audiences, we are ready to screen them," says Srither.

Even after its release, there has not been a Tamil release that has come even close to challenging *Manjummel Boys* in its run. "If a big star film like Vijay's *The Greatest of All Time* or Rajinikanth's *Vettaiyan* or Ajith Kumar's *Vidai Muyarchi* had been released alongside *Manjummel Boys*, the collections would have split; but that is not the case," says Vishnu.

Is the success of the film in Tamil Nadu a one-off situation, or can it do what *Premam* did? "I believe *Manjummel Boys* will introduce Malayalam cinema to a larger audiences just like *Premam* did," says Halitha. But Ruban and Sridhar disagree.

"2016's *Pulimurugan* was the biggest hit from Malayalam here, and only 2018 managed to surpass that. So, producers in Malayalam cannot expect the same kind of reception for all the films," says Ruban.

But, who could have expected a film like this would shatter all box office records?

Perhaps, *manidhar unardhukolla idhu manidha kaadhal alla*.

# What's your problem?

Why actors Benedict Wong and Liam Cunningham signed up for this live-action adaptation of the acclaimed Chinese novel

**Gopinath Rajendran**  
gopinath.raj@thehindu.co.in



**M for murder**  
(Clockwise from left) Liam Cunningham as Wade, Benedict Wong as Da Shi. NETFLIX

Wong in the Marvel Cinematic Universe since *Doctor Strange* (2016).

In *GoT*, Cunningham played Davos Seaworth, a humble and loyal counsellor to Stannis Baratheon; a much-beloved character. In *3 Body Problem* though, the veteran – in what seems to be a diagonally opposite role – plays Thomas Wade, a charismatic leader of the world's most elite intelligence operation. "If you were in trouble, he would be a good man to have on your side. He is not someone who you would like to be your enemy," says Cunningham.

Unlike Cunningham's Thomas Wade, Wong seems to play a character who is quite analogous to his real-life persona. He is Da Shi an ex-intelligence officer turned no-nonsense detective who investigates mysterious deaths within the scientific community.

"Apart from the accent, similar to

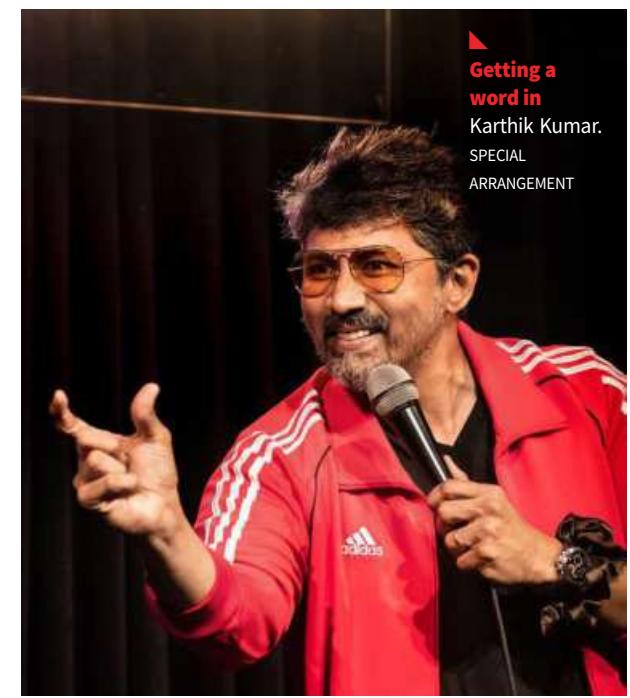
what Liam said, our characters will get the job done. He works in counter-terrorism, he's an operative but he is also quite a loner who has been fired and promoted as well. We can say he has failed upwards (laughs)," says Wong.

Cunningham is also working with talents like John Bradley and Sir Jonathan Pryce who were also his *GoT* co-stars. "A reunion with the boys" is how Cunningham addresses the question of collaborating once again with them. "I hadn't seen the script, I didn't know if they wanted me for a week, but I shut the other job down. Luckily enough, the part was Mr Wade and it was a fine decision."

*3 Body Problem* is set to premiere on Netflix on March 21

# Male gaze

**Why Karthik Kumar's stand-up special, *Aansplaining*, is releasing in theatres**



**Srinivasa Ramanujam**  
srinivasa.r@thehindu.co.in

that they are doing and question them, but in a fun manner," he explains.

Karthik Kumar is still putting together material for his next stand-up, something that he promises will also make audiences think, but for now, he is also busy narrating a film script to prospective actors. It will be a story about

fatherhood and what being a father means. "I really love directing," says Karthik, whose debut directorial feature *Super Senior Heroes* released in 2022, "I'm going into this

**I want to be able to make people re-look things that they are doing and question them, but in a fun manner**

**KARTHIK KUMAR**

knowing well that it takes a lot of time and effort and doesn't pay well. It's a thankless job, because it is probably the closest thing to parenting, in the arts."

That *Aansplaining* hits theatres in March augurs well for it, as this month is considered a dull month at the cinemas. "Niche screenings are bringing in audiences, as has been proved by re-releases of cult classics. This is alternative programming for cinema halls."

From the stand-up comedian's perspective, a theatrical screening could well be a "new playground," as Karthik Kumar puts it. "But the only playground is, and will always be, live."

*Aansplaining* is releasing on March 23 in select PVR INOX Cinemas in Chennai, Bengaluru and Coimbatore

