



metro PLUS

THE HINDU

This Sunday, Chennai hosts its 16th annual Pride march. Where did it all begin? **P2**

HOW SHRUTI FINDS THE RIGHT BALANCE P4



Cricketer Ravichandran Ashwin turns author with *I Have the Streets*, an ode to Chennai gully cricket

Pitch it up

Play ball Ravichandran Ashwin at his book launch; (below) during a cricket match. S SHIVA RAJ AND KR DEEPAK

organic and real."

And so, *I Have the Streets*, apart from being an ode to the Madras of yore, also gives a peek into Ashwin's middle-class Tamil household. His parents and grandfather, all instrumental in him taking to the game, form pivotal characters, as do his friends. It also takes us into his days at Padma Seshadri Bal Bhavan (PSBB) school, where he met his wife Prithi for the first time.

"The book also shows me having self-doubts and being vulnerable, but that's what makes it real. A lot of people want to paint themselves as perfect, and I'm not perfect."

Spirit of the game

Ashwin is widely considered a 'thinking, competitive cricketer' in the international sporting community now, but he stresses that it has always been that way.

"The game was an avenue for me to compete. Even now, I'm every bit the same gully cricketer who played on the streets of Ramakrishnapuram. It's the same fight I have in me." Ashwin even brings a reference to 'Mankading', a style of dismissal that involves the non-striking batter backing up. "In the book, I recall running out my friend,

Bhuvanesh at the non-striker's end, in street cricket. Many years later, I ran out Jos Butler in an IPL game. It really doesn't matter, because for me, Bhuvanesh is more precious to me than Butler will ever be. The fact that we could go hang out at a soup shop that very evening and have a great time is what makes gully cricket special."

Ashwin is looking to be actively engaged with the game in the future too. Next month, he will play for the Dindigul Dragons in the Tamil Nadu Premier League (TNPL). He is also busy shooting content for his popular YouTube channel, which is a delight for anyone interested in Chennai's two primary loves, cricket and cinema. He will also soon come out with a part two of *I Have The Streets* as well, and also plans to host a cricket quiz sometime soon.

And, when time permits, Ashwin hopes to hit the streets of West Mambalam and Somasundaram Ground in T Nagar yet again, to play street cricket. "I want to do something called 'motta maadi cricket' (terrace cricket), just like 'motta maadi music', a popular music concept. I want to bring back the joys of playing cricket on the terraces." Chennai, are you ready?



A ticket to happiness

Ashwin is a huge fan of films and makes references to cinema in all his content, be it on YouTube or his book. "I've learnt a lot about life through movies. If I watch *Ghilli*, I would like to understand the friendship surrounding actor Vijay and his household rather than me going to Madurai and doing those fights. I resonate with that."

He describes watching Aamir Khan's *3 Idiots* as a turning point in his career. "I saw that movie at the right stage of my life, and it gave me the stamp to say that I am probably on the right path. I was so excited when it was remade in Tamil with Vijay, because I'm a huge fan of the actor as he has multiple abilities — dancing, action and a comic touch."



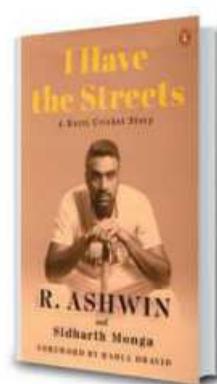
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Ravichandran Ashwin has just hit a pull shot and the ball has landed in a temple next door. On the streets of Ramakrishnapuram in Chennai's West Mambalam, street cricket came alive between four and six every evening. In the Nineties and early-Noughties a young Ashwin would be at the centre of all the sporting action.

After a hectic day at school, it was the sight of a bat and ball and his 'area' friends that would bring Ashwin most joy. Some days, he would be a hero, scoring lots of runs. On others, he would have to beg for *gaaji*, a word popular in Tamil Nadu to describe 'batting'. And on still other days, he would have to face the stern uncle next door, chiding him for breaking the window pane with a monstrous six.

But every day, Ashwin would go to bed dreaming of the events that unfolded in the evening and look forward to



more drama and action the next day.

Today, he is considered India's top off-spinner, has a whopping 500 Test wickets to his name and a proven track record in all formats; yet, the allure of the West Mambalam streets still holds sway. "I would trade anything to go back. The joys of being on those lanes, fighting for those two-three runs and the ball going into the well... all these are great stories," he says, at Taj Coromandel, on the sidelines of his recent book launch.

Ashwin has several such stories to share in the book, *I Have the Streets: A Kutty Cricket Story* (published by Penguin Random House India), in which he, along with cricket writer Siddharth Monga, paints a candid picture of his days before professional cricket and the little joys in the cricket-mad streets of Chennai. "Writing this gave me several goosebump moments. Today, people don't play cricket on the streets as much as before. I just feel that after reading this, if someone wishes to be out there in the evenings playing cricket, I would have achieved what I set out to do."

Write approach

The seed of *I Have the Streets* was planted in Ashwin's head as he sifted through many novels — he is a fan of Clive Cussler, Chetan Bhagat and has read all the *Ponniyin Selvan* books — and also binged on the autobiographies of Australian cricketers Steve Waugh and Ricky Ponting.

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traditionally belong with idli, the decadent butter gravy pairs well. A mix of the podi and gravy gives a spicy kick to the idli and the fruity pop of blueberries offers a mildly sweet and tart respite. To a dish that might otherwise seem mushy, the soaked almonds add crunch. However, let's be honest, eating one supercharged idli is unlikely to result in dramatic health benefits, unless you count the glow that comes with social media clout.

The dish is built with several flavours and components. First, an idli is cut and placed in a bowl. Then two spoons of extra virgin olive oil are added, followed by a spicy podi made with shiitake mushroom, aged garlic extracts, Brazil nuts, cloves, cinnamon, curcumin, ashwagandha and more. Then come blueberries and a handful of soaked and peeled almonds. This is followed by a generous pour of butter sauce, made with onions and tomatoes. It tastes similar to the base of makhni gravies. There are more blueberries and almonds before chopped coriander is sprinkled all over.

While only oil and podi seem like elements that

traditionally belong with idli, the decadent butter gravy pairs well. A mix of the podi and gravy gives a spicy kick to the idli and the fruity pop of blueberries offers a mildly sweet and tart respite. To a dish that might otherwise seem mushy, the soaked almonds add crunch. However, let's be honest, eating one supercharged idli is unlikely to result in dramatic health benefits, unless you count the glow that comes with social media clout.

"Since we launched last Friday, we have sold over 300 idlis across branches. People do say that it is on the expensive side but each serving comes with 100 grams of blueberries, imported olive oil, almonds and good quality saffron. However, we have seen people come back to order again. Many also order it online," explains Vishnu.

He also says that this viral idli is just the tip of the iceberg, adding, "There are many dishes that we are working on, which will also come with health benefits. Next is another idli, a non-spicy option. But that's all I can say for now."

An idli for ₹500?

This viral idli comes with blueberries, almonds and a special podi. Here's what we think about it



A DJ in your neighbourhood park

Mixtura Vizha, Chennai's Public Arts Festival launched in 2022, is back offering a diverse blend of genres and artistic forms. For this edition, Mixtura Vizha is partnering with KM Music Conservatory, Alliance Francaise of Madras, Chennai Metro Rail, American Centre-Chennai, Greater Chennai Corporation, The Learning Community Quest, and GlassBox. The festival, organised by Shreya Nagarajan Singh, founder of SNS Arts Development Consultancy, will feature 10 performances across three venues, creating a city-wide celebration of the arts. However, the organisers will not announce who will perform where, instead audiences can choose a venue and enjoy the surprise mix of performances. Featured artistes and performances are as follows: Anbu Kalai Kuzhu (Kanchipuram) - Periya Melam; Subin Sebastian and Gerardo Sanchez Lara - Opera in Chennai; Aashray Harishankar - Contemporary Carnatic and Jazz Ensemble; Audiotropions - The Band; The Sunshine Orchestra Brass Ensemble - Hot Brass; Pavithra Chari featuring Alvin Presley - Chitrahaar Live and key figures from the Chennai Arts Community. There will be a fashion show by Purush Arie, Bharatanatyam by the students of Anirudha Knight and The Balasaraswati Institute and Thedal Theatre Arts will stage a Tamil play, *Eppo Varuvaro*. The evening will end with an exciting finale performance by DJ Greg from 7pm to 8pm at Thiru Vi Ka Park, Shenoy Nagar. The festival is on June 28, 5pm to 7.30pm. Concerts will be held simultaneously at: Thiru Vi Ka Park, Shenoy Nagar, Central Station and The Learning Community at Quest (Besant Nagar).



On June 30, Chennai gears up to host its 16th annual Pride march. A look back at how this movement for self respect has grown since 2009

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There are certain frames from Mohan Das Vadakara's documentary *Rainbow*, which take us back to the sights and sounds of Chennai in 2009.

In the 21-minute film captured through a handheld camera, one sees a few hundred people congregating around noon by the Labour statue wearing shy smiles. They can be spotted carrying small rainbow flags and placards that read 'Straight is a fine line' and 'I support LGBT rights'.

This is Chennai's first Pride parade, days before the decriminalisation of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. L Ramakrishnan from SAATHII, a public health NGO that has been part of Chennai Pride since inception, speaks to the camera as the film closes: "More people came than we hoped. This has been a success. Looks like we are going to do it again next year."

Fifteen editions have passed since this first overt celebration of sexual and gender identities in the city. What has changed?

For starters, the promenade of Marina beach has altered

Head held high

drastically. The Pride march has travelled to the neighbouring Besant Nagar beach and has subsequently moved to Egmore's Rajarathinam stadium. The few hundred participants have multiplied to become 5,000. A thousand more are expected to participate in the march this year on June 30. The essence of the march, however, remains unchanged.

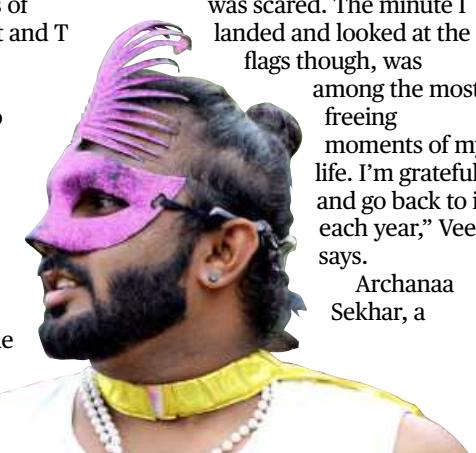
"In celebration, lies our protest," says Jaya, general manager, Sahodaran, a non-profit organisation that protects the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Through the years
Although plans for Pride month begin at the start of each year, three weeks before the march is when Jaya and

other members of the Tamil Nadu Rainbow Coalition, begin working in full swing.

Besides setting targets for raising funds and seeking permission from the Chennai Police and the Greater Chennai Corporation, Jaya says that she takes to the streets of Parry's, Sowcarpet and T Nagar to buy rainbow-coloured sarees and cloth to make flags. The organisers try to liaise for better roads to make the streets accessible to those who use wheelchairs.

"Events for Pride month happen through June



Meet Chennai-based Rahul Sridhar, who raps about funding announcements, the city, and more



This press release can rap

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In the video for his song 'Panam', Rahul Sridhar walks out of an ATM with a wad of notes in his hands. He launches into a rap to his friend, stand-up comic Abishek Kumar about wanting 20 crores in his bank account, and how "it is a vibe bro".

On Tuesday, a rap song of his, but of a very different kind hit the Internet. Rocketlane, a Chennai and US-based B2B SaaS (Software-as-a-Services) firm announced its \$24 million series B funding through a rap music video, written and performed by Rahul. The song 'I like B', not just announces its milestone, but has Rahul rap his way through the corridors of their workspace while chronicling the journey of the company so far. "Hey, we thought let's do a press release, but a tad bit more aesthetically," he raps, in the song. "In 2022, we made a rap song to

announce the company's Series A funding, and it feels great to be able to mark yet another milestone through a song," says Rahul, who also is a part of the marketing team. Music has paved the way for several full-circle moments for him. It was his rap song for a software testing company's 10th anniversary made a few years ago that got him noticed by the head of his current organisation as well.

A quick scroll through this Chennai-based rapper's Instagram account throws up songs he has written and performed – he has things to say about the city, satirises the work-life balance that comes with a corporate work environment, the struggle to find resolve everyday, or even the concept of self care. "Artists who come from extreme poverty, and grew up in troubled environments – this features prominently in rap music. I have had a very privileged upbringing and cannot flex about something I haven't lived through. The songs I write are focussed on my own lived experiences," the rapper says.

Beginning his journey on Instagram, he started off by asking people for prompts and words based on which he wrote his early English songs. "My songs now have both Tamil and English lyrics. I strongly believe the language should be accessible," he says.

Describing himself as someone who is not musically well-versed, Rahul says he limits his presence to sharing his songs on Instagram(@thehippiewriter) as he feels he can offer a great beat, something comedic, and a visual element, all packaged well. "I feel like at least one aspect will stand out," he says.

Having written, shot, edited and starred in all his songs for a while, it is only recently that he has begun to collaborate with people to star in his videos. Stand up comic and actor Ramkumar Natarajan, theatre artiste Naresh, and Abishek Kumar feature in his last three songs – all of which have racked up views in millions.

Rahul also hopes to bring comedy and music together in a Bo Burnham-esque show. He says, "Incorporating music always makes for an engaging performance experience, and I can't wait to try this."

"In 2022, we made a rap song to



What colour do you choose? Members and allies of the LGBTQIA+ community at different Pride marches over the years in Chennai.
AKILA EASWARAN AND B JOTHI RAMALINGAM

but there are three major ones that people look out for. Vannangal (held on the Saturday before the Pride march), the march itself and Naangal (post the march). "Vannangal is a talent exposition event that encourages one to have no inhibitions. It's wonderful to see members of the community do fashion shows, sing, dance and act in plays," says Jaya.

Ramakrishnan adds that during the Naangal segment of the festival, there is discussion about the Centre and State Government policies that have aided the queer community and a call for advocacy and persistent requests placed for better employment and education opportunities.

Over the years, the Pride march has remained the star of the show. Ramakrishnan says that he now sees young queer people turning up in large numbers, some even marching with their families. Allies also gather to show their solidarity.

Vee says that he took part in the Pride march for the first time six or seven years ago. "I was scared. The minute I landed and looked at the flags though, was among the most freeing moments of my life. I'm grateful and go back to it each year," Vee says.

Archana Sekhar, a

Chennai-based activist, says that the celebratory nature of the event is what draws people to the day. "There is need for funding and volunteers. More importantly though, people need to show strength in numbers when members of the community are subjugated by the system or are in distress," adds Archana.

"During the first march in 2009, we were flanked by the police on all sides for protection. It sometimes felt like they outnumbered us. Post-COVID though, there has been a huge influx of queer people. There is a lot to learn from Gen Z folk (an inclusive term) that tends to proudly assert their identity without lying down," says Felix, a volunteer of Orinam, a support group for members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Pride month may have begun as a result of an uprising in 1969, several continents away, to condemn the police raid of a gay bar in New York called Stonewall Inn. Several years hence, it has left its impressions on a South Indian city and its people. Today, the uprising at Egmore asks mostly for one important right in its chants: "Vendum vendum, urimai vendum. Urimai urimai, kadhalika urimai" (The right to love).

Chennai Rainbow Pride March is on June 30, 3.30pm at Rajarathinam Stadium. Vannangal, the pre-Pride cultural event will take place on June 29 at Amaindhakarai Community Hall, Harrington Road at 5.30pm. For details, log onto chennaiaprime.net.

Akila Kannadasan

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Their's is a family of three like any other.

The parents rush through their morning routine before dropping off their three-year-old at day care; pick her up after work; make dinner, go for walks with her on a stroller... The parents, Vignesh Carboni and Andrea Carboni, share snippets from their everyday lives on Instagram. Dads of Meenakshi has over 82.4K followers, and Vignesh, who chiefly manages the account, attempts to create awareness on same-sex parenting, one post at a time.

Vignesh shares heart-warming photos and videos of his daughter learning to speak Tamil, of him braiding her hair; there are posts about meltdowns before dinner for limiting screen time; another asking parents' suggestions on how to brush their toddler's teeth. Dads of Meenakshi is showing the world that parenting is the same, no matter the gender or sexuality.

Vignesh and Andrea started dating in 2012 when they lived in New Zealand, eventually deciding on a civil union since both of them were keen on having a child. Vignesh, an IT professional from Madurai, travelled abroad for his higher education after college.

"I always wanted to become a dad," he says, adding that taking care of children came naturally to him, especially since he grew up in a rural set-up where mothers left their babies with their trusty neighbours before rushing off to grab a meal or tend to a chore. "I grew up seeing that taking care of kids was not just a mother's job," says the 36-year-old.

The couple went in for surrogacy to have Meenakshi, and Vignesh says that when she came into their lives, they were quite prepared, given

Portrait of a family



This Pride Month, meet a family of two fathers and a little girl, who are hugely popular on Instagram as Dads of Meenakshi

that they had spent a year attending several classes.

"Jennifer, our surrogate, is an expert on post-natal care, and



Two men living together is an alien concept for someone from Madurai. Eventually, when they visited us, my parents gradually understood we were like any other couple

VIGNESH CARBONI

saw that we attended courses every week," says Vignesh, adding that he took six months off work to take care of the baby as Meenakshi's primary carer.

Parenting can be exhausting, especially when both parents are juggling full-time jobs. Despite it all, Vignesh finds time for social media updates.

The reason: "There is no other example for someone like us to show people at home," says Vignesh. He remembers how hard it was for him to come out to his parents. "When parents do not

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Across

1 Do several things concurrently (9)

8 Deplete (3,2)

9 Blue or white cheese originally from Leicestershire (7)

10 Copied (8)

11 Unit of distance (4)

13 Mug (6)

14 Spice, mainly from Indonesia, made by grinding seeds of an evergreen tree (6)

16 River of the Yorkshire Dales (4)

17 Client (8)

19 Distended (7)

20 Lennox or Leibovitz? (5)

21 Unwilling (9)

Down

1 Cartographer (3-5)

2 Diminish (6)

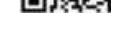
3 Part of the eye (4)

4 Now (2,4,6)

5 Nursery school (12)

6 Crosser of the Rubicon, 49 BC (6,6)

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



7 Author of The Hunting of the Snark (5,7)

12 Take away (8)

15 Old gold coin, worth 21 shillings (6)

18 Group of countries acting together (4)

Solution will appear in MetroPlus dated July 4, 2024.

Solution No. 13590

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Flavours from Malvan
Chef Surekha Walke in partnership with The Raintree on St.Mary's Road has brought solekadi, mackerel tikla, rice bhakri and more as part of the Malvan Festival. Choose from a buffet, set thali and an à la carte menu. The special menu will be available for lunch and dinner at Colony restaurant till June 30. The thali is ₹999 plus taxes, buffet at ₹1,999 plus taxes and the à la carte menu is from ₹275 onwards. For reservations, contact 4225252



Band Cooum

Big city beats

Band Cooum is all set to showcase original compositions, bringing together a mix of genres

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E llathukkume inga happy dhaan." This is parai artiste Deepan's response, when asked about Band Cooum's location for its upcoming concert – Korukkupet. "In this area, most of us do not like sad music. Our tunes, songs... everything is happy, be it for a wedding, or for death. Band Cooum's music is happy too," he says.

A collective focussed on folk, Carnatic, independent, and electronic music, Band Cooum's performance this

Saturday will be its first live public concert in Chennai. The five-member band comprises singer Susha, violinist Shreya Devnath and percussionist Praveen Sparsh, who have a strong background in Carnatic music, and Deepan and 'Rocker' Raji (Rajendran), members of Friends Kalai Kuzhu, who play the parai.

"Half the excitement of being in this band is the process of creating original music together. We have all come together knowing that the focus is going to be on free, safe exploration of music with



We have all come together knowing that the focus is going to be on free, safe exploration of music with no boundaries

SUSHA
Singer

"The kind of music and instruments the band will be performing with, be it the violin, mridangam, or the guitar... there hasn't been a live music performance like this here. It is an opportunity for my people to experience this music," Deepan says.

SUSHA
Singer

Band Cooum debuted in 2022, at the G5A festival in Mumbai. Earlier this year, they had a private showcase in Chennai.

For its first public show in the city, Band Cooum will be performing an all-original set list which blends genres and solid beats, bringing to the fore their varied journeys and experiences in music, while hoping for some dancing from their audience. The atmosphere is geared towards being like that of a street festival with a performance by Deepan's friends from Friends Kalai Kuzhu to kickstart the concert.

"If I were to speak of the genres we dabble in, we come with backgrounds in Carnatic music and parai, but have also thrown in electronic music, a little bit of jazz, and a lot of emphasis on groove. We want the songs to be fun for us to perform, and for the audiences to experience," Susha explains.

In a performance video of its original composition, 'Drum Circle', released by the band, each member plays a percussion instrument. This includes the mridangam, konnakol, floor tom, parai and satti, all of which contribute to the fusion of beats. "We get to place ourselves in unfamiliar musical settings and see what new things the space also teaches us," Shreya says.

Band Cooum will perform at J J Nagar, Korukkupet on June 29 at 6.30pm. Entry is free. They are on Instagram @bandcooum

SATHYAM | ESCAPE | INOX | DEVI | SANGAM | CASINO | ALBERT | WOODLANDS | EGA | PVR - AMPA | PALAZZO KAMALA | TNAGAR AGS | UDHYAM | S2 PERAMBUR | SADAI RAJ | BHARATH | IDREAM | MAHALAXMI | KRISHNAVENI KINNAGAR KASI | KASI TALKIES | IMOX LUX | PVR GRAND - VELACHERY | PVR GALADA - PALAVARAM | PVR ICON VR MALL REDHILLS PVR | ECR - PVR | INOX NATIONAL | INOX MARINA | S2 THIYAGARAJA | MAYAJAAL | MAMANDUR - C3 CINEPOLISH | EVP CINEMAS | AMBATHUR - RAKI & MURUGAN | VILLIVAKAM - AGS | OMR AGS | MADURAVAYAL - AGS KOYAMBEDU - ROHINI | PORLU - GH | THAMBAM - VIDHYA & MR & NATIONAL | CHORMPET - VETRI | KOLATHUR - GANGA PADI - SIVA SAKTHI & LAXMI BALA RADHA | GREEN | REDHILLS - RADHA MOVIE PARK | THIRUVALLUR - RAKI & ROJA & THULASI ST THOMAS - JOTHY | PONNAMALLE - SUNDHAR & VIGNESWARA & BHAGAVATHY | CHENGALPET - SRK & LATHA PALLAVARAM | JANATHA | THIRUNINRAVUR - VELACINEMAS | MINJUR - MANI & KK CINEMAS | MEDAVAKKAM - KUMARAN KANCHIPURAM - BABU & ARUNA & KARTHIKEYAN & BALAJI | MOOLAKADAI - SHANMUGA & PANDIAN | THIRUVOTRIYUR - MSM & ODEAN MANI ANAKAPUTHUR - GANESH & VELCO | AVADI - MEENAKSHI & REMI | UTHUKOTTAI - KUMARI | GUDUVANCHERRY - VENKATESWARA SRI BRINDHA | TIRUTHANI - DURGA & GK GODEN | AMMAYARKUPPAM - BABU | PALLAVARAM - JANATHA | ADAYAR - GANAPATHYRAM MAPPEDU - AVK | KARAPAKKAM - ARAVIND | MANALI - MEENAKSHI | ALANDHUR - SK MERLIN | MANAMPATHY - GK POONGA



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In the vibrant realm of entertainment, where talent meets perseverance, Shruti Haasan, singer, composer, and actor, stands as an example of artistic versatility and social consciousness.

On a bustling Saturday afternoon suffused with anticipation, Shruti walks into the office of *The Hindu* in Chennai, brimming with excitement as a host of journalists waited to shoot: questions first, and selfies later.

As soon as she enters the brightly-lit hall, she wastes little time in holding forth on her latest song, 'Inimel', under the banner of Raaj Kamal Films, which she both composed and conceptualised. The lyrics are penned by her father, actor Kamal Haasan, and the album stars director Lokesh Kanagaraj alongside her. "It was a moment of excitement and creatively challenging to be with my dad," she says.

A musician at heart before entering cinema, the actor-singer highlights how she channels everything in her life through music. "I had no intention of joining the film industry, but cinema has always been around me. It's two really different parallels that run. And it's two different parts of my mind that I use in two different parts of my artistic soul. So it's very different."

Beyond her musical passion, Shruti discusses her diverse roles in both independent and



Shruti the storyteller

Shruti Haasan does not see herself as politically aligned, but she is eager to give voice to women's rights on any platform

A balancing act

Shruti Haasan.
JOHAN SATHYADAS AND DINESH KRISHNAN

commercial films. "For me, it's about finding a balance," she remarks thoughtfully. "I never had a problem being part of big ticket films because, who doesn't want to be part of a film or a story that works? There are films where you are there for three hours and it doesn't work, and there are films where you are there for 10 minutes and it works for you, so it's really a balancing act. For me, a perfect balance is really a commercial film in which I have value."

From Bollywood to Hollywood

Asked about her debut thriller Hollywood film directed by Daphne Schmon, *The Eye*, Shruti shares her experiences of navigating through different film industries, which she is accustomed to.

"My big breaks came through the Telugu industry, and I always say that. It was a language I didn't speak. Today, of course, I do. So it was the same kind of mindset while starting an English film as well."

Her entry into *The Eye* was particularly empowering because of a lot of firsts that marked out the film, from it being an independent English film to her working with the first female-led team; producer, writer, and director.

As the conversation turns to her experiences at prestigious events such as the Cannes Film Festival, where she has

been twice in the years 2017 and 2023, Shruti expresses a blend of admiration and concern.

"It's too much pressure. And what I found super disappointing this time at Cannes is that it was so much more about the clothes and the shoes, and a lot of people didn't watch the movies. I feel we must not forget that it is a film festival, where art is celebrated."



I had no intention of joining the film industry, but cinema has always been around me. It's two really different parallels that run

SHRUTI HAASAN



To watch video interview, scan QR code

Archana Rao
discusses the
costume design
for *Kalki 2898*
AD, a film in
which she used
aged mul
cottons and
discarded
material



The right fabric Amitabh Bachchan in *Kalki 2898 AD*; (below) Archana Rao.

which it is a matter of survival of the fittest, an inverted pyramid city named the Complex that contains essential resources such as food and water, and Shambala that has become a refuge.

Each of these worlds, says Archana, required a particular design approach. She explains with the example of Kasi where people survive with the bare minimum. "We had to think what material would be available and what would they wear if it was the last surviving city. We thought of discarded material such as metals, plastics, rubber and other synthetics... Their costumes had to be a collage of things."

The first character Archana designed for was Ashwathama. "Our

main inspiration was to make him look as old as a tree." Fine mul cotton was put through multiple dyeing processes. "We distressed the fabric to the extent that it looked sheer and the motif of the bark of a tree was printed on the fabric. The fabric itself had to look like it was hanging by its last thread." The multiple bandages that wrap Ashwathama's wounds had to look aged as though they were soaked in blood and turmeric.

Recalling the first look test with Amitabh Bachchan, Archana says, "The minute he tried on the costume, it looked brilliant."

In comparison to designing for *Mahanati*, for which she had references of old movies and photographs, *Kalki* involved a new design language with no reference points, she says. "The whole process was exciting and challenging."



The past comes alive

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

Imagine the possibility of designing the look of a character that is supposedly the oldest man alive. When director Nag Ashwin first narrated the story of *Kalki 2898 AD*, nearly four years ago to Hyderabad-based fashion designer Archana Rao, she was fascinated by Ashwathama, the character inspired by *The Mahabharata*, played by Amitabh Bachchan. She began imagining him in 2898AD, in a science fiction setting. Archana, who had collaborated with Nag Ashwin for *Mahanati* and the short film *xLife* from the Netflix Telugu anthology *Pitta Kathalu*, was game for the creative challenges ahead.

From biopic to science fiction
In the initial stages of *Kalki*, the only condition Nag Ashwin had was that Archana oversee the costume design for the entire film. "It proved to be challenging and a huge shift in my career. Coming from a fashion designer background, I was pleasantly surprised by how naturally I took to costume designing during *Mahanati*." Archana and Gaurang winning the National Award for Best Costume Design for that film was a recognition of the work that went into it.

Kalki warranted a new approach. "I have not been exposed to

many science fiction movies. I knew it would be tough but I was also aware that I would have a fresh perspective. I decided to dive right in."

She stepped in knowing that it would be an ambitious project. "We planned one segment, one character, one task at a time so that it did not become intimidating. For all of us – the direction team, costume design, production design, cinematography – it was like working on several small projects within one big project."

The sub worlds

In a promotional video, Nag Ashwin explains that the story navigates three settings – Kasi becomes the last city in



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