



# metro PLUS

THE HINDU

**A protest festival** in Villupuram celebrates every aspect of the palmyra tree **P2**

**ACTOR SHANMUGARAJA'S TRUE SPOTLIGHT IS THE THEATRE** **P4**



# The Thugs take charge

Nearly four decades after the iconic Tamil film *Nayakan*, actor Kamal Haasan is re-uniting with director Mani Ratnam for the much-awaited gangster drama *Thug Life*, which hits screens on June 5. We catch up with the leads

## A curious mind

Why Kamal Haasan describes the film as an "extension of his life"

**Srinivasa Ramanujam**  
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In October 2024, during the promotion of Sivakarthikeyan-Sai Pallavi-starrer *Amaran* at Chennai's Raajkamal Films International (RKFI) office, the person missing from the thick of things was none other than the film's producer: Kamal Haasan.

"*Avar US ku padikka poitaar* (He has gone to the US to study)," was the response from his office, referring to the actor's decision to take off to the US to study artificial intelligence.

At 70, with multiple awards and films in several languages to his credit, Kamal Haasan is widely regarded as one of the best actors in the country. He, however, still considers himself a "student", which prompted him to study artificial intelligence, curious about its use in his field of work.

"We are all part Luddites. That's our problem," says the actor, "That's why I have the naivety to say that I want to learn AI. They kept asking me what exactly I want to learn - which is when I realised there are so many verticals in the film industry itself."

Kamal vouches to keep learning more - which, he hopes, will help him streamline his current film assignments and aid in executing his dream projects. "We are still not good with scheduling, budgeting and delegating. AI will take away the chore in the job and the thinking person inside you has a better chance," he says.

In the US, Kamal Haasan visited the Perplexity AI headquarters, interacting extensively with its CEO, Aravind Srinivas. He also attended NAB 2025 in Las

Vegas, which showcased how AI technologies could enhance storytelling and streamline production processes. "I have never studied in a classroom, so my study continues," he tells us.

It did - on the sets of his upcoming film, *Thug Life*, as well. The film marks the coming together of Kamal Haasan and ace director Mani Ratnam after three decades; their last outing was *Nayakan* (1987), one of Tamil cinema's biggest classics. "Both of us have evolved since then," he says, "He (Mani Ratnam) changed the landscape of Tamil cinema, which influenced filmmaking across India. I believe that the more ethnic you become, the more international you become - this is a quote that Singeetam Srinivasa Rao (director-screenwriter) is quite fond of, and I picked it up from him."

Kamal is probably referring to the globe-trotting action drama in *Thug Life*, in which he plays a gangster named Rangaraya Sakthivel, prompting fans to discuss a possible *Nayakan* link to the current film (Kamal's name in the 1987 film was Sakthivel "Velu" Naicker). "*Thug Life* will make you forget *Nayakan*. Otherwise, we are not doing our jobs well. Maybe chronologically you can say *Nayakan* and *Thug Life*, but out of appreciation, it should be the other way round," says Kamal.

He describes the film as an "extension of his life". "I've been both; I have lived a life and have been a thug in my teens. The kinetic energy will push you to do wrong things when you're young... most people in college do it. I've never been to college, so I might have just been a cruder thug. I'm not proud of it, though."

“

**Mani Ratnam and I have evolved a lot since *Nayakan*. I believe that *Thug Life* will make you forget *Nayakan***

**KAMAL HAASAN**

*Thug Life* has music by AR Rahman, whose music is quite different from that of Ilaiyaraaja, Kamal Haasan's collaborator for a long time. What was the difference? "With Ilaiyaraaja's songs, I was immediately able to say, 'Oh yes, I like this.' But it was different with Rahman. I remember listening to 'Kappaleri Poyachu' from *Indian* (1996) for the first time. I just shrugged, because it was just him singing with a beatbox. But when I saw the final version, ending with 'Saare Jahaan Se Acha'... it blew my mind."

Debuting as a

child actor in *Kalathur Kannama* (1960) when he was just five, Kamal Haasan has acted with generations of actors. Considering his vast experience, did he give his

*Thug Life* co-stars Silambarasan, Ashok Selvan and Trisha an acting tip or two? "My guru was K Balachander (late director), but he did not teach me. He gave me an opportunity and in conversation, I picked up skills."

While the actor's upcoming roster suggests more adrenaline-pumping moments - he has a film with stunt masters-turned-directors Anbariv scheduled next - there is also a growing clamour among fans for Kamal to return to the comedy genre, for which he successfully teamed up with the late comedian-writer Crazy Mohan on many films.

"I don't miss him,

because he has left a lot of him in me. We spoke with each other

every day about everything under the sun, including ideologies, puranas and yayatis," recalls Kamal.

Malayalam actor Joju George recently mentioned that Kamal Haasan's iPad has more than 400 scripts, something that the *Thug Life* actor dismisses as an exaggeration. "I might have around 30. And some more, which are not yet completed," he reveals, "There's one lying with me titled *Suryadhaagam*, which revolves around an established godman and his ascent into a living God. It's a bit like Caligula (Roman Emperor), who did not die a good death. My story does not go into that, but it talks about the morbidity of man's hubris."

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## Class meets mass

What Silambarasan learnt by being on director Mani Ratnam's set

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One could feel the gravity of the moment when Silambarasan TR made his grand entry at the audio launch of Mani Ratnam's *Ponniyin Selvan 2* in 2022. It was the star's first major public appearance as 'Atman', a new version of Simbu who embraced spirituality and returned to the limelight after a lull marked by box office duds, controversies, and fitness concerns. But who expected that at an event featuring the likes of Kamal Haasan, AR Rahman and

Vikram, Simbu would get the loudest applause, a clip that went viral on the Internet.

Simbu knows he has a very loyal fan base but the reception he got at the *PS2* event wasn't just from his fans. *PS2* was not even his film. He recalls, "Watching someone get back up instils confidence in people, and that's what I saw there. It felt like the general public was telling me, 'Hey, we respect what you have done, and we want to give back that respect to you.'

A similar scene played out a few days ago at the audio launch of *Thug Life*, the star's upcoming film directed by Mani Ratnam and starring Kamal Haasan, where his speech and presence garnered a lot of appreciation.

Doing *Thug Life*, Simbu says, satisfies a desire most actors harbour. "While watching films like *Thevar Magan*, where two generations of stars would have acted together, any actor would have wished for one such film to happen." That it happened for him in a Kamal Haasan-starrer feels surreal, he adds. "Right from when I was a child, my father showed Kamal sir as my on-screen guru, so I have always looked up to him."

Simbu's role in *Thug Life*, he says, balances 'mass' and 'class.' "I am a peculiar hero with audiences who like both these schools of acting. You can't call me an out-and-out classy actor, nor am I just after mass. I can do both."

Of late, many A-list Tamil stars have come out with films - like *Petta*, *Vikram* and *Good Bad Ugly* - that are dubbed as *fanboy sambavams*; these films feature aspects that appease the die-hard fans of those stars. Simbu's upcoming film with Ashwath Marimuthu also hints at being one such film. "Yes, it is a *fanboy sambavam*, but it will become a film that even those who don't know me would enjoy. *Fanboy sambavams* should be like *Vikram* - it shouldn't just appease the star's fans but be celebrated unanimously by all."



**Love for MJ**

Michael Jackson had the biggest influence in Simbu's life. "From the energy I carried or my style, be it in dancing or singing, it is all influenced by Michael Jackson," says Simbu.



**A gangster saga**

**Thug Life**, which has music by AR Rahman, also stars Trisha Krishnan, Ashok Selvan, Abhirami, Nasser, Aishwarya Lekshmi and Joju George, among others

It showcases Kamal Haasan in a de-aged avatar as well

The film will stream on Netflix eight weeks after its theatrical release, a decision that the makers have described as 'pragmatic'



The march is on  
Silambarasan, Kamal Haasan and Trisha during the promotions of *Thug Life*.  
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

TO WATCH Kamal Haasan's video interview, scan QR code



An obscure village protest festival celebrating the palm tree and the legalisation of toddy, now draws travellers from across the world



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**I**t is 8am and winding roads from the Vikravandi toll gate in Villupuram district have led us to a clearing amidst paddy fields. After three-hour ride from Chennai, we find ourselves at the *pankaaadu* or the palm forest (on April 24) at Narasinganur village. We are here for the Pana Kanavu Vizha or the Palmyra Dream Festival. We are clearly at the right place: the area is teeming with cameras. There are more lenses than people at this point.

This is when we go seeking Karishma.

Harris Karishma, a young woman who has just finished her Class XII exams, and is ready to study Botany in Villupuram, is the reason why many people have travelled all the way to the fourth edition of this festival.

Until now, the Pana Kanavu Vizha was limited to residents of Villupuram as local media had drummed up some noise about it in the past. But this year, more people know that while the festival celebrates the palmyra, Tamil Nadu's State tree, they also know that it is a protest festival fighting for the

# Seasons of the palm

legalisation of toddy, a by-product of the tree, in Tamil Nadu.

Karishma, in an Instagram reel that has now crossed over 19 lakh views, can be seen scaling the palm tree with an unmatched elan, and inviting people from across the world to participate in the festival held at a relatively obscure location. A tourist would not be here without purpose. Her reel on the Thirukovil City Instagram page is a reckoner of how this day-long village festival has used social media to bring forth a conversation about a subject rarely spoken of among common folk. Suddenly, everyone has an opinion about the merits of drinking toddy.

"I would often accompany my father to the palm grove and watch



him climb. I told him that I wanted to try my hand at it and ended up climbing it with relative ease. I had just watched and learnt," she says.



**Light it up**  
Scenes from the Palmyra Dream Festival at Narasinganur village in Villupuram where the *karti* is being lit and climbers are competing in a contest.  
S SHIVARAJ



Karishma is a celebrity here. Dressed in a tracksuit for her silambam performance, she is out on the field giving interviews about the need for legalisation of an occupation practised in her community for years now. She speaks at a selfie station amidst two palms and a clay pot (where toddy is usually stored), that the festival organisers have prepared. "Even little children are given *kallu* (toddy) in our village," she says.

That is not all. At the festival, one can choose to scale two trees using ladders and land at two wooden photo points to cosplay toddy tappers. A tourist could visit a station and watch the arduous process of *padaneer* being converted to palm sugar. In the evening, two highlight events that grab social media eyeballs have been curated. One, a tree climbing competition. The second, an almost mystical coming together of locals and tourists who want to work around palm fronds to create synchronised wisps of fire at night. Each, a sight on its own.

The day, however, begins with an *oorvalam*, a procession around Narasinganur village with drumbeats and dance. For the fruits of the palm, a 'thank you' is in the works through a *padayal* or an offering to the tree. Pots of toddy are placed before the tree and a fire is lit. A village elder takes the first gulp, signalling the beginning of the festival. Right after, a mad rush ensues.

The rest of the festival is spent in people picnicking, watching young girls and boys perform folk dances besides a grievance redressal meet. On the sidelines, several shops selling products made from the palm including jewellery and home articles, are sold. Thousands cue up to buy spring potatoes and kulfis. It is a treat for everyone from eight to 80.

**Breezing in**  
How has the scale of this festival expanded this year?

D Pandian, convenor of the festival and part of the Tamil Nadu Palm Tree Climbers Protection Association has the answer. The first

edition of the festival was small and limited to communities that tapped toddy, an activity currently criminalised by the State Government.

"Every year though, it grew and several volunteers who believed in the cause, joined hands. The selfie stations are their ideas. It has clearly helped," he says.

Sher Jon, a resident of Chennai who is at the festival with three other friends, is in a colourful dress, a garment not often witnessed in the village. She says that she has grown up amidst palms and knows the tree intimately as she has often played with it. "We have palms at my farm too but it's nice to be amidst as many people and trees to witness a festival like this," she says.

Toddy is tapped thrice a day here – in the morning, noon and evening. If you are lucky, you will get to try this sweet, coconut-y fermented white liquid that does not get you immediately high but puts you in a mild state of intoxication. Each tree gives between two and five litres of toddy and each litre here, is priced at ₹100.

By evening, when enough people have consumed toddy, the zenith of the festival is reached. To drumbeats, there is dance. Tree climbers from different parts of the State fight for the top prize of ₹10,000. The sun sets.

As the purple and orange of dusk give way to the comfortable dark of the night sky, a slew of village residents and tourists arrange themselves in neat lines to do the *mavali* or *karti*. This synchronised movement of palm fronds and palm flowers, is lit with a low fire. A local tradition, usually performed at the adjacent Tiruvannamalai district during the annual *girivalam* (a religious procession), is a mesmerising dance of what feels like a local cracker. To instructions on a loud speaker that have, until now, heard only the local band's performance of Tamil film classics like 'Manmadha Rasa', a surreal calm takes over.

On cue, hundreds raise their palm fronds over their head. Circles of fire light up the sky. The festival has come to an end. When one looks up to see what the night has to say, red and green lights from buzzing surveillance devices, twinkle. Palmyra trees do indeed wish upon drone stars.



**Prajwal Parajuly**

**T**o survive the many splendours of Sri City, where I live part of the year, one must get away every so often. Weekending in Chennai is the easiest option. For several of my colleagues, Chennai means concerts. For others, it means stocking up on miso and pesto. For yet others, it means brunch at Pumpkin Tales and cocktails at MadCo. What would Chennai mean to me? I had enjoyed the whimsy of Tulika Books and the gastronomic wonder that was Avartana. I had jumped rope at the Madras Club and had twice eaten the cloud pudding at Kappa Chakka Kandhari.

All delightful experiences, no doubt, but mere footnotes to the one thing that would bring me back to Chennai again and again: the humble idli chutney. The array of chutneys at Murugan Idli, to be specific.

I didn't know what a preoccupation these chutneys would become when I first made my way to the GN Road outlet at T Nagar. An innocuous idli was plonked on my banana leaf, on top of which the waiter ladled out a generous portion of sambar. There they were in white, green, and two varieties of orange – a quartet

## SOUTHERN LIVING

# An anthem for the chutney

Of all the tiffin joints, in all the towns, he had to walk into Murugan Idli. And he was not here for the vibes

of chutneys so flavourful that the idli seemed like an afterthought. There was just the right hint of piquancy, and what was that I tasted? It was sesame, its lavish use genius. I went to Murugan again for dinner and returned for lunch the next day.

It is now almost always my first stop when I get into Chennai.

What is it about Murugan? It is unassuming. But that can be said for any number of Chennai eateries. The service is indifferent on a good day and infuriating on most days. If I am not going for the vibes or the service, why would I submit myself to a meal

sometimes two meals – a day? It's because I am a chutney addict through and through. Nothing else matters – not the crisp rava dosa nor the sambar. Neither the fluffy idli nor the inoffensive uttappam. I eat the chutneys like they are the main course and the idli, the accompaniment. How I love making snaky rivulets on the banana leaf with my fingers, mixing and matching one, two, three or four chutneys with a smidgen of idli, and guiding the concoction to my mouth as it drips down my elbow, yellowing my shirt, and filling my glutinous heart with unbridled joy.

I'd soon realise that few topics polarise Chennai more than Murugan idli. For each foodie who unequivocally declares the restaurant as her favourite, there's the one who froths at his mouth recounting its circumspect hygiene. "Went ... a month ago, and it was ghastly," pronounces my editor, not one to mince words. There are those for whom the lack of consistency jars. "I'll only go to the one across from the Armenian church," my colleague Kaveri once declared. My sister points out that in a city brimming with excellent food, Murugan is middling, but she also forks and knives her dosa, so her opinion doesn't count. Eating Circles any day, some say. There are then the Sangeetha militants. No self-respecting Sangeetha loyalist will out himself as a Murugan fan.

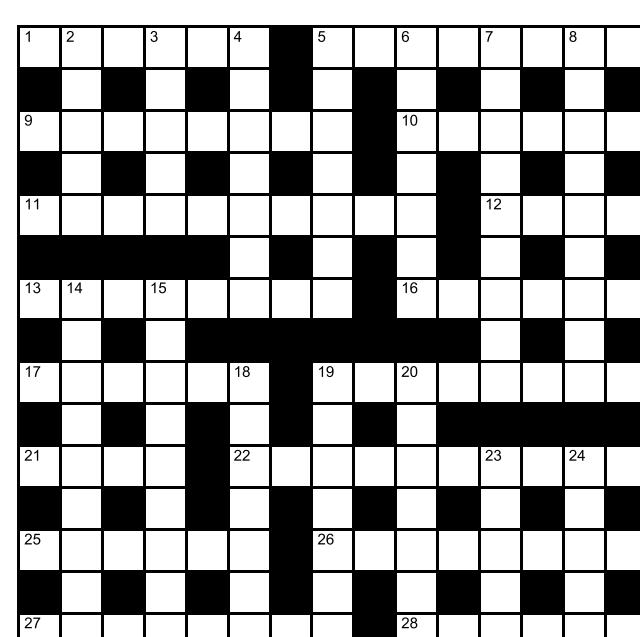
Sure, not every Murugan is created equal. I'll set foot in the Besant Nagar location only for takeaway chutneys and nothing else. Not one dosa I have eaten there has come out warm. Plus, in a neighborhood with Native Tiffins and Vishrant – the idli at the former is so well fermented that renders the chutney useless – a lack-lustre Murugan is just wrath-inducing. I've given the outlet three (three!) chances, and I fully sympathise with those who are unconvinced of Murugan's greatness because it's the one location that can't get anything right. That doesn't mean I will not judge these Murugan haters for dismissing my beloved chain altogether. I shall judge them almost as severely as I do those food writers who describe the idli as a rice cake, the dosa as a crepe and – the biggest horror – the chutney as a kind of pickle.

Friends joke that I am responsible for quadrupling Murugan's profits. But they are wrong. Idli is cheap food. I feel awful that the fourth, fifth and sixth free chutney helpings likely cost more than the 23 rupees per idli that I am charged. To circumvent this guilt, I invariably order a rava masala onion dosa, eating which requires ... another few ladles of chutney. I return to Sri City with more chutney than blood in my veins.

Prajwal Parajuly is the author of *The Gurkha's Daughter and Land Where I Flew*. He loves idli, loathes naan, and is indifferent to coffee. He teaches Creative Writing at Krea University and oscillates between New York City and Sri City.

## METROPLUS QUICK CROSSWORD #5

(Set by Doppelganger)



**Across**

1 To go frequently or habitually (6)  
5 To defeat by taking too far (8)

9 Remoteness from habitations (8)

10 Relating to the narrow middle section in the cover of a book (6)

11 Someone's weakness (10)

12 Make in the past? (4)

13 Bacteria resistant to most antibiotics? (8)

16 There is only one \_\_\_\_\_ copy of the book (6)

17 To \_\_\_\_\_ is the first step in fighting a fire (6)

19 Carried out in good faith (4,4)

21 A confusing network of streets (4)

22 Sweet item made from sap of a famous Canadian tree (5,5)

25 Extremely unpleasant (6)

26 Contaminated by 2D (8)

27 The side lying between a specified angle and a right angle (8)

28 Sideways drift of a boat from its course (6)

**Down**

2 Intestinal disease causing bacteria (1,4)

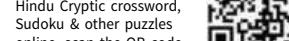
3 Elsewhere in Latin (5)

4 Constantly repeating this to give the impression of conversation. (7)

5 Once upon a time is a fairy tale's traditional \_\_\_\_\_ (7)

6 Basic distinctive quality of something (7)

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



7 A theme which recurs throughout a novel (9)

8 The base camp of Mt Everest is \_\_\_\_\_ in the winters (9)

14 Showing a lack of security or alertness (9)

15 French playwright who died in 1902 (5,4)

18 French in a body (2,5)

19 Members of a Christian group who are followers of John the \_\_\_\_\_ (7)

20 Whatever action is necessary (7)

23 A pawnbroker can also be \_\_\_\_\_ Sam (5)

24 The open area in an amphitheatre where gladiators fought (5)

**Solution #5**



16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28

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Beneath the surface (Right)  
Archana Sankaranarayanan freediving in the Philippines; (below) a picture of the diver. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

# Licence to dive

From working in a law firm to breaking national records in freediving, Archana Sankaranarayanan is redefining adventures underwater

In the latest *Mission: Impossible* film, Tom Cruise's character Ethan Hunt dives nearly 500 feet into the ocean to retrieve something key to his mission – surviving a torn diving suit, freezing temperatures, and a dangerously long breath-hold. While it makes for thrilling cinema, reality is starkly different. For most people, descending even 60 feet underwater without breathing equipment is a risky proposition.

But for Archana Sankaranarayanan, it is a competitive pursuit and one in

which she now holds multiple national records. Based in Chennai, Archana is the deepest female freediver in India, holding national records across all four depth disciplines of the sport: Constant Weight, Constant Weight Bi-Fins, Constant Weight No Fins, and Free Immersion. She began her record-breaking streak at the AIDA Mabini Depth Quest, held from May 1 to 6 this year in Mabini, the Philippines, where she set four national records, including surpassing one of her own. Just two weeks later, at the Hug Cup in Panglao, also in the Philippines, she broke two more records, both of which were also her own.

Freediving is the sport of diving into the depths of the ocean, with minimal or no gear



and no oxygen support, and Archana has dived as deep as 35m (115 feet approximately). Just a few years ago, Archana was living a very different life – that

of a corporate lawyer. "It was my dream job. I saw all the glamour and felt like I was in the TV show *Suits*," she says. But a scuba diving course in the Andamans changed everything. Soon after, she quit her job and moved to the islands to begin working as a scuba diving professional.

It was during her time there that she stumbled upon a video of freediver Shubham Pandey. "I couldn't understand how he was staying underwater for so long." Within months, she had messaged him, signed up for a course in Bali, and booked a one-way ticket.

"I had no goal of being the deepest woman freediver," she says. "I just wanted to break one record in the Free Immersion category because I was comfortable with that." With this, she has become a rare athlete, and one of the few Indian women to make a mark in a sport that is still finding its footing in the country. According to the 32-year-old, freediving is more a mental sport than a physical one.

Archana's progress came with discipline and a steep learning curve. After her initial course in Bali, she continued training in Murudeshwar, Karnataka, where she dived at Netrani Island. Then she trained with freediving school Apnea in Bali, with an all-women's team and later with renowned freediving coach Sergei Busargin in Thailand, who helped her master one of the sport's most challenging categories: Constant Weight No Fins (CNF). "I have struggled with food, protein intake, and losing bone density. But I trained every day. I am privileged to be able to get access to this kind of coaching. I'm sure there are better freedivers. I've seen fisher women in Tamil Nadu who go deeper in a sari to pluck seaweed," she says.

Even as she racks up national records, Archana is already thinking about who might break them next. "I hope someone else comes and beats all my records so I can come back and beat them again."



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Dive into the world of culinary creativity by using it on pastries, a topping for pancakes, or even as a dip for crackers.



"CONSUMER CONNECT INITIATIVE"

### When the coast is clear

Play beach volleyball while munching on pizzas by the sea. At the blue flag beach in Kovalam, an event titled Surf and Slice has activities for kids and adults alike. Make the most of the summer at this event organised by Deepblue Stories in collaboration with Barracuda Surf Club. @Blue flag beach, Kovalam. On May 31, from 3pm to 7pm. Fee is ₹2,900 per person for kids and adults. For details, call 9488672158.

## UP NORTH

### Glasshouse in the Sky

The taste of North meets rooftop elegance at Up North. Savour bold flavours, sip on inventive cocktails and soak in panoramic views of the city skyline for the ultimate rooftop experience

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ALL ACCOR LIVE LIMITLESS



### The tie-die route

Saanskrutie's Bandhani Mela is back with its several tie-die patterns on print. At the store, take a look at blouses, chaniya cholis, sarees, skirts, kurtas, dress material, besides materials with bandhani textiles, Kutch work, anarkalis, and other patterns in cottons, silks and Chanderi. They also sell oxidised jewellery. @Saanskrutie, Alwarpet. On till May 31, 11am to 8pm. For details, call 9798861033.

### Unlock the surreal

An evening of black-and-white surrealism with artist Tanuja Ramani from Cloudy Sky Studio awaits those who enjoy paints and brush. Here, one has the opportunity to create art that sticks to the theme. The session will start with an introduction to surrealism. The artist will then teach techniques like shading, cross-hatching, and creating depth using a single colour. One can transfer the finished piece onto a hand-painted T-shirt, tote bag or poster. @Backyard, Adyar. On May 31, 5pm to 7pm. Fee per person is ₹700. Tickets are at [instamojo](https://instamojo.com).





**Tasty meetings** (Clockwise from far left)  
A selection of the food at Sortd; and the matcha and Jim Jam latte. SANGITA RAJAN AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

avocado dosa, idlis, and vada fritters, an even crunchier spin on the medu vadas with an egg curry alongside the usual chutneys and sambar. If you are a bread fiend like me however, the Sri Lankan sausage curry bun, a pillow bun stuffed with sausage curry and an egg scramble with a flavourful coconut sambol is the way to go.

The menu is a healthy mix of comfort and flair. We sip on some steaming hot chicken and drumstick soup, and also try a wholesome quinoa khichdi with edamame and crisp peas, both perfect for light, filling comfort meals.

There is also the Sathappan chilli chicken, with perfectly cooked bits of chicken, roasted bell peppers and cauliflower, all tossed in a garlicky, honey glaze.

Chef Gopal's inspired regional creations make for the more interesting additions to the cafe's menu. The perfectly cooked lamb poppers, for instance, are served on a bed of jammy tomatoes and onions, and are accompanied by a tamarind rice and potato roast. The tamarind rice needs to be a punchier accompaniment.

What is a workspace without caffeine? There are cold brews, a South Indian, as well as a Vietnamese filter coffee. While the Jim Jam latte is a bit too sweet, Sortd gets an iced matcha drink right and does not resort to making it cloyingly sweet. The strawberry coconut matcha here is perfectly balanced and refreshing.

The team behind Sortd is more than happy to play off the name of their cafe. Manoj explains that both the space and the menu are designed to suit a wide range of experiences; whether it is a family dinner, a solo coffee date, or a team meeting. "This is going to be a community space. You are sorted if you come here – for anything," he says. Japtej echoes the sentiment: "Anyone who walks into Sortd should feel sorted."

*Sortd Cafe is at CV Raman Road, Alwarpet. A meal for two costs ₹1,000. Contact 7200416603 for enquiries*

## STEP OUT



### Unravelling love and trauma

Experience an intimate journey through love, memory, and freedom in *The Meaning of Malar*, a powerful Tamil theatre production by Karpanai Kudhirai. Performed by a talented trio, this emotionally rich play explores the intertwined lives of three characters bound by shared histories and silent longings. With a poetic, nonlinear narrative, it challenges traditional storytelling and invites audiences into a deeply human world of trauma and hope. The play is a compelling piece of contemporary Indian theatre that blends raw emotion with structural innovation. @Idam, Kodambakkam. May 31 and June 1. Tickets priced at ₹350 and ₹500 at www.karpanai.com. For details, call 9986744842



### Birds on canvas

Step into a vibrant world where art meets conservation at Brushstrokes of Endemic Echoes, a solo exhibition by wildlife illustrator Suresh Ragavan. Through finely detailed illustrations, Ragavan captures the beauty and fragility of India's endemic birds, especially those of the Western Ghats. His work blends scientific precision with artistic sensitivity. With over three decades of experience, he brings a unique perspective to the role of art in ecological storytelling. Visitors can expect an immersive experience that celebrates biodiversity while raising awareness about the urgent need to protect endangered species and their habitats. @DakshinaChitra, Muttukadu, On till June 2; From 10 am to 6 pm (extended to 7 pm on weekends; closed Tuesdays).

# Ctrl+Alt+Espresso

**Sortd, Chennai's newest cafe** brings together functional work pods and an eclectic menu featuring cold brews, avocado dosas and berry salads

**T**he tables at Sortd have rounded edges to comfortably rest your elbows on. The lights on the ceiling in the work pods there can be dimmed or made brighter, depending on the meeting in progress, the weather in Chennai, or the mood. The walls are written on, and the shelves are stacked with Rubix cubes and spinners for anyone who has the urge to click a pen or fidget through a meeting. I am handed a fidget spinner when I sit down to chat with the team behind this space.

If you have ever side-eyed someone in a cafe taking a loud phone call or earnestly chatting away on a Zoom meeting amidst all the coffee and chaos, what Sortd has to offer might seem most timely, and a rather interesting experiment for the city.

Satha Annamalai and Kalpana Rao, the founders, say they got chatting a couple of years ago about the idea for a space like this. "As someone who runs an IT

services company, I realised that people were becoming less enthused about coming into the office, and instead wanted to meet occasionally in a place where we could be productive and have good food," Satha says. Kalpana says she also began to wonder about why people head to a cafe in the first place when there is no privacy or quiet. "Sortd has been conceived as a space not just to come in and work, but for those who enjoy being a part of a

community. You can wear your earphones here and type away seated in a work pod, all while the cafe's regulars walk in and out for coffee and food," she says.

Sortd comes with work pods to work out of; small, aesthetically designed meeting rooms that can seat up to 10; and a larger room on the terrace that can hold at least 40 people.

Japtej Ahluwalia, partner at Sortd, and co-founder of BORN (Beyond Ordinary Restaurants and

Nosh) points out that the work spaces are not relegated to a single floor and are instead, spread across both floors, alongside tables for the regular visitors. The work pods and meeting rooms can be reserved on an hourly basis through an online system which will become functional shortly.

"We do not want to be branded a 'work cafe,'" says Manoj Padmanabhan, partner Sortd and Japtej's co-founder at BORN. "This is a unique place, and the food and experience has been thought through. You can be productive here or use the space for entertainment. We are not a work cafe," he reiterates.

The menu is more than indicative of how serious the team at Sortd is about making their food experience shine. The cafe has an extensive, eclectic menu, where one can find everything from salads with pomegranate molasses to tamarind rice with kola urundai and a deconstructed Madurai vada curry. Chef Gopal declares grandly that he was keen on working on a menu that is not the usual for Chennai, elevating the regular cafe food experience.

The breakfast platter we sample comes with a mildly-flavoured

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## Art of articulation

**Luisa Montalvo, the World Champion for Public Speaking 2024, was in Chennai recently**

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In 2013, Luisa Montalvo says she remembers walking into a Toastmasters meeting in South Texas having seen a flyer put up on the door of a library. "Everyone there immediately introduced themselves. It was very inviting, and a warm feeling," she recalled.

While she had briefly been a part of a Toastmasters Club for a few years from 1989 at her workplace, the club wound up, and she did not join another until 2013. "I realised I should have gone looking for a club then, but once I walked into the library meeting, I knew I should be a part of this again," she said.

Recognised as the World Champion for Public Speaking by Toastmasters International in 2024, Luisa was in Chennai over the weekend to be part of Toastmasters International District 120's annual conference Discover 2025. Comprising over 4,500 members from Tamil Nadu and Puducherry, District 120 spans 175 community, corporate, and college clubs.

The people in Chennai, Luisa said, were warm and receptive. "What Toastmasters

often winds up being without you noticing is that you become part of a family. You can go anywhere in the world and meet people, and when you come back the next year, all of you once again catch up and bond," she said.

Stating that the beauty of Toastmasters is how supportive they are as a group, Luisa said that they do not believe in shame, guilt, or embarrassment and instead, thrive in a positive environment.

At the conference, several young members took up the stage, to participate in the finale of the district championships speaking contests in different formats. Luisa too emphasised on the positive impact this would have on youngsters, enabling them to build confidence and leadership roles.

"When you go job hunting with Toastmasters on your resume, it sets you apart since it tells the employer you are looking to improve yourself," she says. "Whether you are a teacher looking to improve your confidence, or someone who wants to do presentations better at work, this will help any kind of fear with regard to public speaking," she adds.

The Hindu was the print media partner for this event.

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**S**ince his debut in *Virumaandi* in 2004, M Shanmugaraja has essayed diverse roles in Tamil cinema. Interestingly, he seems to have played the villain in over 80 films.

"That's on reel. In real life, I have been charting a course for contemporary theatre with a social intent," says Shanmugaraja with a smile.

The actor was in Tiruchi recently to conduct a 21-day workshop and stage the drama *Uyir Nandru* (Life is Good) with an amateur cast to raise awareness about the perils of drug addiction under the auspices of the Aruppukottai Sugalayam, affiliated to St Joseph's College.

Shanmugaraja is among the few South Indian artistes to have trained at the National School of Drama (NSD). "In the 1999-2002 batch, out of 80 candidates, 10 men and 10 women were selected," he recalls. "When I started studying at NSD, I did not really think of becoming a movie actor. My specialisation there was in design and direction, because I wanted to work for the community."

**Early start in drama**  
Born in Therkkukkatoor, Ramanathapuram district, in 1974, Shanmugaraja grew up watching

## Theatre for the people

**M Shanmugaraja, well-known for his roles in Tamil films, has a thriving career in theatre too**

and learning folk arts such as silambam and oylattam. "My father was a bus driver and my mother, a homemaker. My formative years were spent in Madurai, where I became interested in writing poems and watching plays. Theatre

introduced me to the idea of studying Tamil Literature at American College," he says.

"By 1992, I had started playing small roles in dramas, and was quite experienced in Tamil theatre when I reached NSD. I had worked closely with Professor S Ramanujam, who had studied in NSD in the 1980s."

Among his NSD mates, Shanmugaraja remembers Pankaj Tripathi, who acted in his diploma production, and Purva Joshi fondly.

"I am happy to see them doing well in Hindi cinema," he says.

The actor met Fr Francis Jayapathy, of Arrupe Sugalayam, in 2007, when the Jesuit academic was invited to conduct a workshop at

The Hindu College in Nagercoil, on ritual drama during a month-long theatre festival organised by NSD. "He saw our valedictory play *Kuthirai Mutta* based on the story of Paramartha guru, and asked us to stage *Thotta Pudi Sami*, on the dangers of alcoholism, for fishing communities in the tsunami-hit coastal areas of Tamil Nadu," he says.

The success of *Thotta Pudi Sami* came as a surprise to its creators. "I have seen hard-nosed fishermen weeping when they watched the play, possibly because it reminded

them of their own lives," says Fr Jayapathy. "We followed it up with *Thanthai Pol Iruppavan* on how children are affected by their parents' alcoholism, that was also well-received by the fisherfolk," he adds.

**Changing concerns**  
Decades later, both the vices and the nature of addiction have changed. "We are facing a huge wave of smokeless tobacco products that have got children as young as 10 and 12 in their clutches. The number of drugs doing the rounds is scary.

Addiction to smartphones is also becoming very common among young children. Parents and educators are not equipped to deal with this, which is why we need to create a platform for discussion through drama," says Shanmugaraja.

*Uyir Nandru*, which debuted in Tiruchi last week, examines the life of its hero Adi, who falls into the abyss of substance abuse as a schoolboy, and ends up on the streets as an adult, until he is rescued by a loving partner. Performed in the style of street theatre with minimal props, the 40-minute production concluded with interactions with recovered addicts.

Shanmugaraja hopes to take the play across the State, to raise awareness about substance abuse.

He has been holding plays on social causes in Sri Lankan refugee camps annually since 2007. "Theatre doesn't pay much, so I have often invested my film earnings on funding my stage pursuits," he says.

Shanmugaraja credits his family, particularly his spouse Manickaselvi, a senior secondary Tamil teacher in a Government school, for supporting him in his artistic pursuits. "My wife accompanied me to Delhi, and worked there while I attended NSD," he says.



**Curtain call** (Left) College students rehearse their lines at St Joseph's College in Tiruchi; (above) and actor M Shanmugaraja. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT