

PHOTOS BY R RAGU



Must try
Payasam, lunch
platter, sweets,
filter coffee.



Must try
Get your hands on the lunch that has paruppu podi, ghee, the usual suspects like sambar, rasam, poriyal and sweet, and a tiffin item. Also try the ammini kozhakattai, vazhaipoo vada, and adai.

The Music Academy

Walnut halwa, chocolate burfi, 27 varieties of rasam, and 50 types of dosa. These are only some of Sastha Catering Service's expansive Margazhi menu this season at The Music Academy.

In its third edition launched on December 15, Venkatesan Krishnan, who runs the show, says that they have been receiving a great response consistently despite the proliferation of several new sabha canteens. "I think it is because we keep the menu updated and fresh. We like to try new things while not deviating from the favourites," he says.

Venkatesan, who has now begun updating reels of his own on social media, enticing sabha-goers with his coffee, snacks and lunch, says that they have kept the lunch prices at ₹550.

"Nothing can outperform the kalyana saapad-style lunch at a sabha with its varieties. We have a new rasam every day that the canteen runs. We are also having new types of thogalay, pachidi, poriyal, and sweets. This is besides the regular snack and breakfast items including bajji, vada, adai and ammini kozhukattai," he says.

He adds that they have a special walnut halwa on the menu this year. "A customer from the US had brought a bag of walnuts about one month ago and wanted us to make a sweet out of it. We fashioned a halwa. It was great and had to be on the menu," he says.

@Sastha Catering Services Porur, TTK Road. The canteen is open from 7.30am to 9.30pm till January 9. Lunch meals are priced at ₹550. For more details, call 9952919460.

Sri Parthasarathy Swamy Sabha

Stepping into their sixth year at this Sabha, Arusuvai Catering Services is back with their most popular offering: the thanga thambala kalyana sappadu. During the Music Season, the lunch menu focusses on the four southern States, highlighting the best of each through a thematic approach.

Soumya Ramesh of Arusuvai Catering Services says that apart from serving meals on gold-coloured brass plates, the team will this year also be using gold-coloured serving utensils and ladles. Even coffee and tea will be served in brass davara-tumblers.

With a mix of traditional and innovative dishes, the lunch menu features 24 items. "This year, we have created a small waiting lounge for seniors, where they can wait until a seat becomes available during lunchtime. We are also trying to prioritise seating for elders and have taken steps to manage the crowd efficiently by beginning lunch service from 11.30am onwards," says Soumya. While lunch is served in pandhi style (seated in rows), breakfast and dinner follow a restaurant format, where orders are taken and food is served at the table.

Arusuvai's coffee deserves special mention. From 7am till late evening, the coffee master Parasuram tirelessly brews fresh decoction and boils milk at a precise temperature to create the perfect filter coffee. Evenings are marked by a spread of innovative dishes, traditional South Indian fare, North Indian items and an array of sweet dishes. Lunch is priced at ₹650. Parking is a major challenge at this sabha, and visitors are advised to plan accordingly.

@Arusuvai Arasu Catering Services, till January 2. The meal is priced at ₹650. Breakfast: 7.30am. Lunch: 11.30am to 3.30pm; Snacks: 4pm to 6pm; Dinner: 6.30pm to 9.30pm. For enquiries, call 9841024446.



Kutcheri breaks, served hot



Must try
Vatha kolambu, Karnataka dosa varieties, Asoka halwa, paal payasam and moru kali and mani kozhukattai.

Mylapore Fine Arts

Into their second year of running the sabha canteen, Adambakkam Balaji Catering (ABC Catering) is better equipped this time. S Saptharishi, along with his three brothers, who has been running the wedding catering service for the past two decades, has created a canteen space that can serve up to 75 people at a time. "First, we have created good flooring without multiple levels, making it senior-citizen friendly. We have also arranged valet parking," says Saptharishi.

The canteen is abuzz with activity by 7.30am, with the coffee counter and breakfast service in full swing. By noon, the team is ready to serve wedding-style ela sappadu, priced at ₹600, which is available until 3pm. From 5pm onwards, the evening crowd gathers for tiffin items such as keera vada, bajji and bonda, along with over 30 varieties of dosa.

"This year, we are focussing on offering 30 types of dosa, alongside staples such as adai with aviya, idli and idiyappam. Our ammini kozhukattai, nombu adai and moru kali are popular," says Srinivasa Narayanan of ABC Catering.

Interestingly, diners often ask for recipes, which are generously shared in detail. While the food is predominantly no-onion and no-garlic, customers who want Jain food can ask while purchasing coupons. In the evenings, the boli counter, offering seven varieties, is a crowd puller. For lunch, customers need to purchase a coupon and wait for their number to be called. Food can also be ordered through food aggregators such as Swiggy and Zomato.

@ABC Catering Services, Mylapore Fine Arts Club, Mylapore. On till January 4. Meals priced at ₹600. Breakfast: 7am to 10am; Lunch: 12pm to 3pm; Snacks: 4.30pm to 6.30pm; Dinner: 7pm to 10pm. For enquiries, call 9841204614.

Narada Gana Sabha

Vaithianathan and his brother G Ramachandran say that this is their first experience at running a sabha canteen. "We feel like it is our baby," says Vaithianathan who runs Mailam Catering.

This catering service which has been in the wedding business for 23 years now was booked only two days before the season began because the usual caterer at the venue, Sri Saasthalaya catering services, skipped the season due to a dire health emergency.

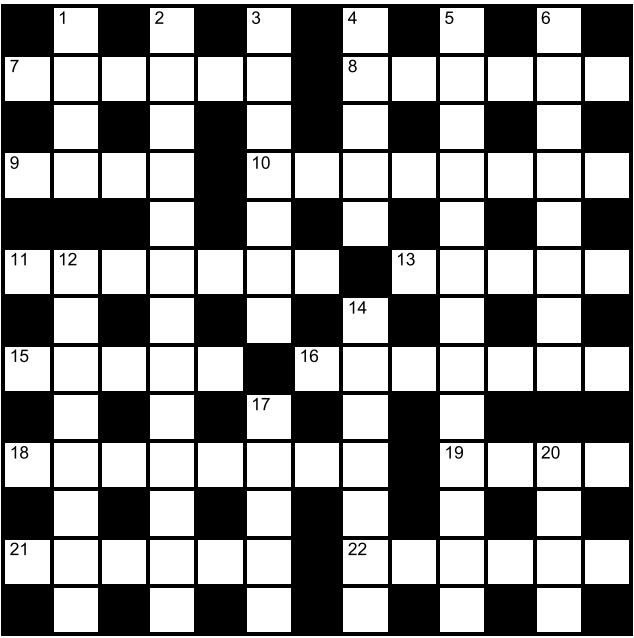


Must try
Elaneer payasam, paal payasam, and their dosa varieties.

"We got the call on December 11. We were up and running by the 13th," he says, adding that they are serving all the usuals – dosa, idli, and coffee for breakfast, and varieties of rice for lunch. "We are however increasing the number of dishes based on the footfall. Soon elaneer payasam, and our signature, paal payasam, will be served too," he says. Over the weekend, Asoka halwa was in the offing. "It is a long season. We are happy to see our menu evolving," he says.

@Mailam Catering, TTK Road. Mini meals are ₹250, between 12.30am and 3.30pm. Breakfast is from 7am to 11am, Snacks/ dinner from 4pm to 10.30pm. Dosa and coffee will be served through the day. Call 9841123972 for details. On till January 1.

QUICK CROSSWORD #32
(Set by Doppelganger)



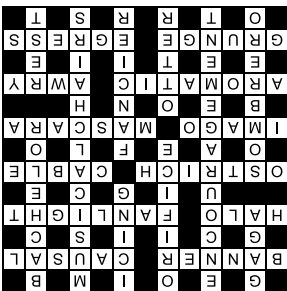
- Across**
- 7 Newspaper headline spanning width of page (6)
 - 8 Happening by chance (6)
 - 9 Luminous ring of light (4)
 - 10 Semicircular window (8)
 - 11 Largest living bird (7)
 - 13 Nautical measure about 600 feet (5)
 - 15 Final stage in life cycle of insect (5)
 - 16 Cosmetic for eyes (7)
 - 18 Having a pleasant smell (8)
 - 19 Twisted to a side (4)
 - 21 Trash (6)
 - 22 The act of going out (6)
- Down**
- 1 Senile (4)
 - 2 Support (13)
 - 3 Small opening (7)
 - 4 ____ on the cake (5)
 - 5 Party game (7,6)
 - 6 Person with first university degree (8)

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



- 12 Wide-brimmed straw hat (8)
- 14 Someone with special interest in something (7)
- 17 Semiaquatic carnivorous mammal (5)
- 20 Period of inactivity (4)

Solution No. 32



S Poorvaja

poorvaja.sundar@thehindu.co.in

In Tamil Nadu, the jamakkalam's bold green, white, purple and yellow stripes, rolled out on the floor, are a quintessential part of many gatherings – weddings, family meetings and other occasions that bring people together.

But what if you could carry these iconic colour combinations as structured totes, postman sling bags and more? Indru, a Chennai-based brand is working on doing exactly that, with a vision to make heritage wearable.

For Hari Madhavan and Ramya Balachandran, co-founders of Indru, their connection with the jamakkalam is personal. Ramya hails from Erode, and in 2022, an opportunity to work on a project for the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) on jamakkalam revival had the couple going back to the town of Bhavani.

"We were trying to explore new ways of using the jamakkalam and new designs, by putting a modern spin on it.



Stripes up

Chennai-based Indru makes the jamakkalam's bright purple, green, yellow and orange stripes wearable through their range of bags inspired by the traditional woven carpet



We first had to learn and understand the art behind it, and what is possible and not possible with this," Hari says.

With over 13 years of experience in the bag-making industry with their brand Hydes studio, which designs and sells leather bags and accessories, it was only natural that they gravitated towards working with bags again. "We sat down with the weavers in Bhavani, explained what we were trying to do, and worked on understanding colours, patterns and techniques. We had to start at the design level and work our way up," says Ramya.

In Bhavani, the couple says they learnt more about how weaving jamakkalams was becoming a dying tradition, with only a handful of families still practising the craft. "The weavers are currently

scattered around Bhavani and we had to work with them and understand what their difficulties are. Revival projects like this, we feel, are probably something that will encourage and sustain the craft. The jamakkalam used to make bags for Indru are specially woven by the weavers we work with," Hari says.

Indru's range of bags heroes the jamakkalam and its pops of colour, and keeps their designs modern. While Bommai, a postman sling, has a green, yellow, purple and orange striped jamakkalam pattern, Kadal, a shoulder-sized tote has broad blue and white stripes. The trimmings and handles on the bags are made with upcycled leather. "Functionality has always been the core of our bag making and there are pockets, rear zippers and other small details that we add to make the bags more user friendly. The bags should be something people come back to, and to use for a long time," Hari says.

While customers have the option of customising their bags and getting their names monogrammed, Indru also offers to make bags vegan on request.

"While the nostalgia factor is high with our older customers, the structured bags and the colours seem to appeal to GenZ, who appreciate these bags as a fashion statement," Hari adds.

Bags are priced from ₹6,000 onwards on shopindru.com



Music, unamplified

As part of the Margazhi music season, Soulfest 2025 celebrates pure sound through a series of mic-less concerts featuring TM Krishna, RK Shriramkumar, Amritha Murali, Nisha Rajagopalan, Sikkil Gurucharan and others

S Poorvaja
poorvaja.sundar@thehindu.co.in

At the MS Subbulakshmi Arangam at Asian College of Journalism, Chennai, one does not have to jostle for seats right up in front, in fear of not being able to hear the performers singing onstage. “The technology here goes into how the auditorium has been designed, and not in the use of microphones. The auditorium is so designed such that natural voices convey evenly throughout the space. Whether you’re sitting in the last row or the second, you hear the singers and the instruments with the

same evenness and intensity,” says Sashi Kumar, chairman, Asian College of Journalism. The sprawling space will play host to Soulfest 2025, a series of mic-less Carnatic concerts this Margazhi music season, from December 24 to 28. The series aims to celebrate the pristine quality of voice and instruments, without electronic amplification. Performers as a part of the line-up include violinist RK Shriramkumar, the Sangita Kalanidhi designate for 2025, Carnatic singers Sikkil Gurucharan, Archana and Aarathi, Vignesh Ishwar, Bharat Sundar, Amritha Murali, Nisha Rajagopalan, Aishwarya Vidhya Raghunath, Vijay Siva, Brindha



Sound of music (Clockwise from left) TM Krishna; Nisha Rajagopalan; and RK Shriramkumar. M SRINATH AND JOTHI RAMALINGAM



Manickavasakan, and flautist JB Sruthi Sagar. The festival ends with a concert by Carnatic singer TM Krishna.

A new musical edition While the auditorium, which has been architecturally designed for natural acoustics, has hosted concerts for the music season over the last few years, this is the first edition of Soulfest. With Asian College of Journalism also celebrating its silver jubilee year, all concerts will be free for the public to attend, with only registrations required. “Hearing pure sound that hasn’t been amplified makes for a more immersive experience. This is not just of the voice, but of the percussion and everything else. All of it comes together so beautifully,”

Sashi says, of the concert experience audiences can expect. In its first edition, Soulfest has been curated by Gowri Rammarayan, writer, playwright and singer, who says the artistes they approached for this festival were all delighted to perform without microphones. “Today’s musicians are largely trained to sing into microphones. There are many factors that come into play; including the right voice modulation and how to achieve a balance so that the instruments do not drown out the vocals. We are also used to amplification at a level much higher than necessary. So when you have mic-less concerts, you need to have artistes who are absolutely willing to take up the challenge,” she says. Keeping in tune with the name of the fest, every artiste will speak about, and perform one song that has touched their soul, or a piece they have a special connection with. “We were keen on having a balance of both male and female performers, and also have an all-women ensemble take the stage with singer Brinda Manickavasakan, who will spotlight the compositions of Musiri Subramania Iyer. Archana and Aarthi will sing in as many languages as they can. We will celebrate Muthuswami Dikshitar’s legacy through Vijay Siva’s concert,” Gowri says, about the programming. “We were also very keen on having RK Shriramkumar for a solo concert, to honour and celebrate him as the Sangita Kalanidhi designate this year,” she adds.

Soulfest 2025 will take place from December 24 to 28 at MS Subbulakshmi Arangam, Asian College of Journalism, Taramani. Register for free at theticket9.com/#!/ms-subbulakshmi-voice-rang



Rosewood palettes @ AxWC Objects

Co-founded by architect-designer Neeti Marji (of wooden lifestyle brand, Woodcocktails) and Ankit Yogi of Overseas Traders (woodmaking specialists), the brand turns factory offcuts into design-forward objects. “We work with four-five different species of wood, allowing every wood to express its grain and colour,” says Neeti, adding that the brand based in Hubli-Dharwad sources timber responsibly through Karnataka Forest Department auctions (they auction dead and fallen trees). Her picks for the holiday season are the rosewood coasters (₹899 for a pair) made from *Dalbergia latifolia*, a durable hardwood known for its unique grain patterns. Another option is the rosewood art palette (₹399) crafted with the same wood. woodcocktails.in

Patchwork love @ Upvalued

Discarded upholstery textiles turn into patchwork laptop sleeves, cushion covers, and totes at Richa Mishra’s Benagluru-based brand that she launched in 2023. “We focus on circularity, significantly reducing landfill waste and we also partner with local artisans,” says Richa. The brand veers away from new products every season and instead focusses on new designs. “With designs that emphasise durability and high functionality, it encourages mindful consumption and prioritises slow, quality fashion.” Upwards of ₹700 on upvalued.com



From rosewood palettes and artisanal toys to handmade journals and chilli oils, here is how to gift with a purpose this festive season

The 2026 conscious gifting guide

Nidhi Adlakha
nidhi.adlakha@thehindu.co.in

Still looking for that perfect gift? We suggest ditching the mainstream market and looking into what India’s homegrown makers have to offer. After all, it is where you will find the most unique gifts. Be it small batch chilli oils, folk-art inspired toys or textile offcuts being turned into bags, here is our list for the 2026 gifting season.



Handmade journals @ Ekatra

A public space designer by profession, Aishwarya Jhavar worked in Ladakh, Uttarakhand, and Pune before moving back to join her family-run brand Ekatra full-time three years ago. The women-run, gifting collective based in Kota, Rajasthan, has a community of over 250 women artisans across India. “We focus on handmade, design-led products that blend functionality with purpose and traditional techniques,” says Aishwarya. Their catalogue comprises wedding and corporate gift boxes, journals, notebooks, utility pouches, and more. Upwards of ₹500 on ekatrahandmade.com



Colourful koodais @ And Alt Foundation

This not-for-profit organisation based in rural Tamil Nadu is “working towards long-term skill training, creation of meaningful livelihood opportunities and community inclusion for adults with disabilities,” says co-founder and director Anu Alex. The Foundation is led by three co-founders, with the other two being Aarabhi Badri, a special educator and artist, and Ghana NB, an artist invested in social justice. The product catalogue comprises botanical-printed and woven koodais, notebooks, cards, laptop sleeves, tote bags, pouches, lamps, stoles, and cushion covers. “We collaborate with artists and designers to build creative, skill-based pathways for individuals with diverse abilities thereby enabling them to learn, earn, and thrive within their communities,” she adds. Upwards of ₹350 on andaltfoundation.org

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Our Margazhi Canteen Schedule @ Chennai
SRI THYAGA BRAHMA GANA SABHA - VANI MAHAL
(46TH ISAI, IYAL, NATAKA VIZHA - 09.12.2025 TO 15.01.2026)
KRISHNA GANA SABHA
(69TH Margazhi Mela - 12.12.2025 to 03.01.2026)

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Venues In Chennai
Ashok Nagar: Lakshmi Hall, 50/40, 100 Feet Rd, Near Ashok Pillar, Opp. CSI Church - 600083
Cathedral Road: Dass Community Hall, No.55, Opp. Maris Hotel - 600086
Egmore: Guild Of Service, 18, Casa Major Road - 600008
Anna Nagar: D. K. Kalyana Mandapam, W-114, 3rd Avenue, Near Round Thana - 600040
Ambattur: Arul Jothi Kalyana Mandapam, 162 A, Redhills High Road - 600053
OMR K.V.L Kalyana Mahal, 161, Opp. Accenture, Opp.Bharat Petroleum
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Art-inspired play @ Gubbachhi The brand was founded by husband-wife duo Abhijith and Pallavi Shetty to introduce children to India’s rich repository of art. “Gubbachhi’s current offerings include stackers, soft toys, puzzles and pretend play toys. Our bestsellers are the Folk Art Series featuring wooden puzzle blocks, the Kutumba set of family dolls, and a rangoli puzzle set,” says Abhijith. Upwards of ₹599 on gubbachhi.com



On fire @ True Condiments

Shradhanjali Sarma’s idea to take her homemade chilli oil to the world was born when her friends kept coming back for more. Her friend Ajupan Sonowal, who now leads the business, saw her recipe’s potential and decided to turn it into a brand. “Together, we crafted a Signature Chilli Oil (₹129) made for the Indian palate. It is an Indianised version inspired by traditional Chinese and Korean oils, but designed to complement local, indigenous foods from every State,” says Shradhanjali of the brand based in Guwahati, Assam. The duo also has a Bhoot Jolokia Chilli Oil (₹229) that uses the region’s famed fiery chilli. true_condiments on Instagram

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Akila Kannadasan
akila.k@thehindu.co.in

L Keerthana is at the peak of her carrom career. She won three golds in the 7th Carrom World Cup held earlier this month in the Maldives and was awarded ₹1 crore by Chief Minister MK Stalin a few days ago. Yet, when asked about her future plans for the sport, she says: “I want to help other players from my academy taste the same success,” adding: “I shouldn’t be the only one winning medals. There are so many players like me in my neighbourhood of New Washermanpet who love carrom and are good at it. They should win too.”

The 22-year-old wants to now focus on training players at the Carrom and Coaching Academy (CCA) where she plays. “Boys and girls there are so happy for me; they’ve been cheering for me from the time I entered the World Cup. I hope their parents get to see them win in the near future.”

Ever since she returned to Chennai from her historic win at the Maldives – a gold each in women’s singles, doubles, and team events – she has been on the move, meeting local politicians, celebrities, and senior carrom players. There has been a massive outpouring of love for her. Away from the glare of cameras and phone calls in the quiet of her home in Washermanpet,

North Chennai’s carrom champ

L Keerthana from Old Washermanpet has created history by winning three golds at the 7th Carrom World Cup in the Maldives



Eye on target L Keerthana won a gold each in women’s singles, doubles, and team events at the recently held 7th Carrom World Cup in the Maldives. B JOTHI RAMALINGAM



Keerthana is thinking of her late father R Loganathan.

“He was the one who initiated me into carrom,” she recalls. Loganathan was a loadman. He loved the sport and developed an interest for it by observing the many carrom players of North Chennai. “He held my hand to show me how to strike when I was three years old,” she says.

After his death, when she was 15, Keerthana stopped playing. She also had to discontinue school to support her family financially. Her mother L Indirani was a house-help back then. “I started working in a steel workshop nearby,” she says, adding that there were four mouths to feed at home. “My friends would go to play, and I would head to the workshop,” she says. “I felt bad for how my life had turned out, but I didn’t have a choice.”

Help arrived in the form of M Nithyarajan from Royapuram. Father of two children who were also into carrom, he noticed Keerthana’s talent during her many games with his son. He encouraged her to continue playing, offering financial support and also setting up CCA for young players such as

herself. Keerthana played day and night. She loved the sport much like her father and had a natural flair for it. She credits her coach and Arjuna-awardee Maria Irudayam from Vepery who is the secretary of the Tamil Nadu Carrom Association and R Amudhavanan, secretary, Chennai District Carrom Association, for advice throughout her journey.

It was Keerthana’s two golds in the 52nd Senior National Carrom Championship in New Delhi in March this year that secured her a spot in the World Cup. “But to travel to the Maldives for the match, I needed ₹1 lakh,” she says. J Meghanatha Reddy from the Sports Development Authority of Tamil Nadu helped organise a meeting with the Chief Minister for funding. “I was able to travel to the Maldives thanks to his intervention,” she says.

Keerthana trained from 4am every day for the World Cup in the months leading up to the match. “I would play at the academy till 8pm with short breaks for lunch and breakfast,” she says. “Everyone at home made space for me. No one would call me on my phone once I left for the academy. They knew how important carrom was for me. How I valued my training.”

Keerthana hopes to spend the prize money on her house. “It often gets flooded with water from a canal nearby,” she says.

It will be among the first things she will do as World Cup champion.



Shifting gears Leela Rani and Mohana in a film still. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Meet the auto queens

All about this Tamil social documentary that talks about the struggles and self-confidence of women and transgender transport workers

Srinivasa Ramanujam
srinivasa.r@thehindu.co.in

“Rowdy Baby, please come forward,” announces Mohana Sundari. And, Leela Rani takes centrestage.

Leela Rani and Mohana Sundari confidently step on the stage at the Chennai screening of documentary feature, *Auto Queens*. Even as these two lady auto drivers share their stories, cheering them on among the audience are many other auto drivers in the city along with their families.

These two are the protagonists of *Auto Queens*, which raises a toast to many a strong-willed woman trying to make a name for themselves in a male-dominated transport sector.

As the camera veers through the busy lanes of Chennai along with the autorickshaws, a story emerges – that of joy and laughter, sandwiched with tales from their own lives. Leela Rani says, “As a lady auto driver, we have been pushed to the brink. We have been abused and taunted, but today, we feel that we have a voice in this society.”

She is referring to the birth and growth of Veera Pengal Munetra Sangam (VPMS). Registered in April 2024, the VPMS aims to ensure better working conditions and monetary benefits for its 600-plus women autodrivers.

Shot within 16 days in various locations in Chennai, *Auto Queens*, directed by Sraiyaanti for Storiculture, showcases the everyday life of lady auto drivers in the city

and the trials they undergo. It was also recently showcased at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA), making it the first Tamil short documentary to be screened there. Sraiyaanti says about the experience, “The audience loved it and the response was overwhelming. Though they were unfamiliar with the language, they were able to grasp its essence clearly and watch it with deep emotional engagement.”

VPMS, supported by a non-profit organisation called the Alliance for Community Empowerment (ACE), represented by Vijay

Auto Queens, directed by Sraiyaanti, highlights the work of VPMS, a cooperative of women auto drivers

Gnanaprasad, has been making waves since their inception. Their team members won prizes and hearts at Coop, a competition held at IIM-Kozhikode that promoted cooperative entrepreneurship. More recently, one of its key members and protagonists of *Auto Queens*, Mohana Sundari, won the Kamla Bhasin Award 2025, awarded to celebrate individuals working to challenge patriarchy and promote gender justice; she is the first winner from Tamil Nadu to bag this prestigious honour. Mohana says, “The film battles for equality. We (VPMS) should be an inspiration for women, especially those in the transport sector, across India.”

Sangita Rajan
sangitarajan.pb@thehindu.co.in

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a connoisseur of classical music, during Margazhi, must be in want of a sabha concert. Musical legends, the torch-bearers of the season, take over large auditoriums, drawing audiences in the thousands. But Chennai never stops there.

Across the city, musicians, singers, dancers, and artistes spill into sabhas big and small, and the committed listener moves through traffic and time itself, chasing one raga after another.

This year, however, an unconventional set of classical concerts will unfold not in a sabha, but beside softly whirring coffee machines at Beachville Coffee Roasters.

The shift was driven less by novelty, and more by a shared sense of possibility. “We’ve been trying to build more community-oriented events at the café,” says Divya Jaishankar, founder, Beachville. “Margazhi is a season that revolves entirely around music and dance. After Aalaap organised a 13-day concert series for their 13th anniversary earlier this year, it felt like that format could be adapted to fit inside a café – more intimate, for a shorter duration,” she says.

For Akhila Krishnamurthy, founder, Aalaap Concepts, the logic of the café is also about timing. “In Chennai, a few hours after lunch, people instinctively want a cup of coffee. So we placed the concerts at 3pm,” she says.

The format, she adds, mirrors the Margazhi routine without replicating it. “People come, listen to a kutcheri, and drink coffee. The music stays fully classical. What changes is how close you are to it, and how naturally it fits into the rhythm of the day.”

Ragas over coffee

As Margazhi fills Chennai’s sabhas, a parallel Carnatic concert series unfolds inside a café, where proximity, timing, and format reshape how the music is experienced



Musical sips (Clockwise from left) Beachville Coffee Roasters; Girijashankar Sundaresan; Vignesh Ishwar; and Srinidhi Pennathur. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Singer Girijashankar Sundaresan, who will be performing with kanjira artiste Sundar Kumar sees the café format as a way to return Carnatic music to its emotional essentials. “Classical music doesn’t have to be confined to auditoriums,” he says. “It can exist as an intimate conversation between a small group of people.”

His concert, Viraha, is built entirely around the idea of longing. Accompanied only by a kanjira, he performs

without a melodic support instrument. “Without the violin or veena, the sound becomes very close, very present,” he says.

Vignesh Ishwar treats the café setting as a prompt to rethink musical structure rather than atmosphere. “Alternative spaces make us reconsider how we present a concert,” he says. “The expectations are different, and that changes how both the artiste and the listener engage with the music.”

His performance is conceived as a continuous one-hour immersion in Raga Kambhoji, accompanied by the thavil played by Sunil Kumar and the kanjira.

“The thavil isn’t just rhythmic, it’s melodic too. It accompanies the alapana, the improvisation, everything,” he explains.

The set unfolds without breaks, one idea flowing into the next.



“If someone listens, feels curious, and wants to explore the music further,” he adds, “that curiosity itself is the success.”

At 21, Srinidhi Pennathur, the youngest performer in the series, sees the café concert as a gentle entry point rather than a rupture. “For someone unfamiliar with classical music, a setting like this can spark curiosity,” she says. “It makes you wonder what else the music has to offer.”

Her performance is a

violin-ghatam concert with percussionist Ranganathan, a pairing she describes as intimate and responsive.

“The ghatam gives a softer push to the violin. It allows the music to breathe,” she says. Beyond format, the freedom of the series matters to her. “It gives artistes room to think about presentation, to explore ideas and emotions within the classical framework, but in ways that feel personal.”

Together, the concerts offer a quieter parallel to Margazhi’s familiar circuits, one that trades scale for proximity and formality for focus. In a season defined by abundance, these performances make a case for listening closely.

A Carnatic shot, the classical music concert series is hosted by Beachville Coffee Roasters from December 22 to 28. For tickets, visit @beachvillecoffee on Instagram.



Sari serves

Who says six yards can not serve aces? Celebrate World Sari Day with a playful twist as pickleball meets tradition. Drape up, rally on court, strike a pose, snap pictures that celebrates the sari as stylish, comfortable and game-ready. On December 21, from 3pm to 5.30pm at Pickleball Point, Ashok Nagar. For registration call 9941018210.

STEP OUT



Emerging voices

Confluence returns with its second edition, showcasing 30 emerging artists from across India. Curated by Sushila Prakash, the exhibition brings together diverse contemporary voices — from traditional forms such as Madhubani and Kerala murals to bold abstractions and realism. From December 19 to 21 at Lakshana Art Gallery, Alwarpet. Entry free.



Bar migration

Here is a holiday bar takeover alert! This Sunday afternoon, MadCo lends its bar and kitchen to Bengaluru’s Soka. Behind the bar, Avinash Kapoli and Krishnakumar bring Soka signatures like the Pi Pi Martini, and Not A Goat. In the kitchen, Sombir Choudhary serves Soka’s cult Nano Plates. December 20, 12pm to 6pm on madco_chennai for reservations.



Holiday table

Christmas Eve in Chennai takes a trans-Atlantic turn as chefs Goku and Aru channel their New York years into a memory-led feast. Drawing from holiday tables, and classic American comfort, the menu moves from mulled cider to roast turkey and mac and cheese. December 24, 7.30pm, Hanu Reddy Residences. Tickets on hanureddyevents.com

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Actor
Regena
Cassandra
on her
20-year
journey in
films and the
joys of
preparing for
a character

Bhuvanesh Chandar
bhuvanesh.chandar@thehindu.co.in

“When I was younger, I used to romanticise the rain a lot. I couldn’t drink tea or coffee very often. So, when it rained, I would imagine myself reading a Mills & Boon novel and drinking tea or hot chocolate.” With clouds converging outside her residence in Chennai, actor Regena Cassandra gets quite nostalgic as she sits with us for a freewheeling chat.

I ask her what the name ‘Latha’ brings to mind, and she smiles – that is the name of the character she played in her debut film, *Kanda Naal Mudhal*. “I was 14, the youngest on the set, and I

As time goes by

Stepping stone
Regena Cassandra. SHIVA RAJ S

was supposed to look 20. I played this girl who elopes and comes back pregnant!”

She grins, recollecting how she got to work with a female director (V Priya) in her very first movie. “And Nandhini” – director Nandhini JS, who then assisted Priya – “was the one who would help me tie my belly and my saree. It brings back a lot of memories.”

Kanda Naal Mudhal was released in 2005, which means that Regena has been a film actor for 20 years now. Having grown as someone who would not easily celebrate special occasions, Regena says that she has learnt not to be so hard on herself. This is an occasion she would celebrate wholeheartedly.

“You tend to learn and unlearn things, and this year has been about going out of my comfort zone.” That she is still pursuing what she had started without much thought makes her happy. “It’s nice to look back and see that this has worked out. Also, all of those years have made me very present. So, even though 20 years have passed, I still feel like this present moment means a lot,” she says.

Given Regena’s diverse filmography, it would be hard not to see a film lover in her. To much surprise, she says that it was film acting, not films, that has always spoken to her. “I just enjoy the process of doing different expressions for different characters. So I did not watch films and go, ‘Oh, one night I will have this celebrity status.’”

The actor – who, interestingly, studied Psychology to understand human behaviour – says she gets a kick out of delving through the many layers that make her characters.

“I really enjoy waking up and deciding how this character will look and behave in a particular scene. It’s about working on a scene with my team, my director,

my hairstylist, makeup artist, co-director or the AD; or figuring out dialogues, reading my scene and adding to it, asking questions, and seeing it translate from paper to screen...I love that process,” she says.

While she may not have chosen to do such an unconventional role in *Kanda Naal Mudhal*, Regena has grown as an actor who chooses many such offbeat roles amidst routine offers. In fact, as she recollects, there was a time when both her item number, ‘Saana Kashtam,’ from *Acharya*, and the trailer of *The Rocket Boys*, in which she played Mrinalini Sarabhai, came out on the same day.

I would love to have dinner with Dr Brian Weiss, a psychiatrist and author. I am fascinated by concepts like past-life regression and progression, which he speaks about a lot.

REGENA CASSANDRRA
Actor

However, the actor says that it was never a conscious decision to keep switching between the two schools of acting.

“I have never gone out and said I want to do this film. I’ve just been blessed to pick such roles, or for such roles to be offered to me.”

2025 was quite an eventful year for Regena. Her performances in both *Vidaamuyarchi* and *Jaat* turned heads, and up next, she has *Mookuthi Amman 2, Section 108, The Wives*, and a long-unreleased Tamil project set to release.

She does not have a 2026 resolution, but is resolute that some changes are in order. “I feel like whatever has carried me these years has been good enough till now, but things can get better. I think these coming years are going to see a difference.”



Homebound goes places
Neeraj Ghaywan’s sophomore feature, *Homebound* has been shortlisted for the 98th Academy Awards in the Best International Feature Film category. *Homebound*, produced by Karan Johar and starring Ishaan Khatter, Vishal Jethwa and Janhvi Kapoor, will advance to the nomination round along with 15 others in the category.

Hollywood director Martin Scorsese serves as the executive producer on *Homebound*. It tells the story of two childhood friends, Shoaib (Ishaan) and Chandan (Vishal) who chase a police job that promises them dignity but are trapped in India’s brutal socio-political reality. The film is based on journalist Basharat Peer’s 2020 *New York Times* article, Taking Amrit Home.



Action meets emotion
Acclaimed Hollywood director Michael Bay, known for helming movies like *Bad Boys* and *Transformers*, will be making his Indian film debut as he is set to collaborate with producer Vinod Bhanushali’s banner, Bhanushali Studios for an upcoming film, that remains currently untitled.

It will feature music by AR Rahman and will be helmed by Anthony D’Souza, who has directed films like *Boss* (2013), *Blue* (2009), and *Azhar* (2016). Speaking about the collaboration, Michael said in a statement, “It will be an exciting chance to mix Hollywood’s action style with the heart and emotion of Indian storytelling. Working with Rahman, Vinod, and Tony is a chance to create a new kind of cinematic experience. Tony’s vision, especially how he handles scale and emotion in his movies, will make this collaboration really fulfilling.”

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