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THE HINDU

Learn lessons on life and entrepreneurship from Chennai's women auto drivers **P3**

**THE VILLAINS OF JOJU
GEORGE'S PANI** **P4**



The Deepavali weekend brought with it an overdose of sweets and snacks. With sights now set on the other end of the spectrum, customers are turning to DIY meals, balanced bowls and salad subscriptions. How do brands that join Chennai's ever-burgeoning food scene stay relevant in this niche, but competitive market?

Balancing act

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Freshlings

When Freshlings began a subscription service for greens during the pandemic, it saw customers attempting to make everything from scratch – from pesto to palak paneer. It was not long before Future Farms, the parent company decided to put their produce to good use as well. "We now send out nearly 400 meals a day from our kitchen," says Mathangi Kumar, head, product.

With 26 independently different salads on their roster, Freshlings, founded by Sreeram Gopal, Preeta Suresh, and Mathangi, has monthly subscriptions for either three or five days a week. "We were keen on being a simple, nutritious meal plan that people could turn to. While we started off with five salads, this would be monotonous for a month and we worked on expanding our menu as people expect and enjoy variety, from Mexican to Mediterranean salads," Mathangi says.

Taking on bulk orders for corporates and catering to smaller gatherings at homes as well as larger events meant innovating with a nutritious, balanced approach to finger foods and snacks. "Our DIY Taco Kits are a big hit for children's birthday parties. At a recent high tea, we made Vietnamese paper rolls but put a spin on them with the coconut raw mango sundal," Mathangi shares.

Monthly salad subscriptions start from ₹3,600 onwards. Contact 9940420758 for more details.

The Good Life Eatery

In the run up to the festive weekend, The Good Life Eatery (TGLE) announced yet another edition of its bootcamp – a two-week programme where the goal is sustainability achieved through simple, science-backed nutrition. "The meals are customised according to the customer's calorie deficit requirement with regard to the portion sizes and macros," says Jayashree Ramamoorthy, founder. The bootcamp which began after the festive weekend, has seen an uptick in interest.

When TGLE launched in 2020, it started off with subscriptions for regular, balanced nutritious meals.

"While the awareness about eating healthier has grown significantly in Chennai, the market is slowly catching up," Jayashree says. TGLE now has balanced, multi-cuisine meals with carbs, proteins, vegetables and healthy fats under 500 calories; or lite meals which are low carb meals including soups, salads and stir-frys under 350 calories. Jayashree says they get macros on all the dishes on their menu evaluated by an independent nutritionist.

Having labels that are easy to understand is another aspect they focussed on, while working on their protein bars. "We are working on protein muesli, pancake and waffle mixes as well," she adds.

Subscriptions start from ₹1,650 onwards. Contact 7305204345 for more details.



Ciclo Life

While Ciclo Life, an online-only offering from Ciclo Cafe has been dabbling in salads and a host of other healthier options since 2019, the brand's latest offering comes in the form of warm and hearty one-bowl meals. "We have realised over the years that people in Chennai prefer their food to be hot and cooked, and a bowl meal is balanced and nutritious," says Ashish Thadani, founder, Ciclo Cafe. While they do not recommend what their customers should eat, they are more than happy to customise meals. As a part of their subscription services, people can order three meals a day on a monthly or a weekly basis.

Across delivery platforms, Ciclo Life specifies ingredients and macros, and this continues for their bowl meals. On the menu is a Korean bibimbap bowl, a cilantro jalapeno bowl, and a green Thai curry bowl, or if you're craving Indian food – a palak paneer bowl. "This market is niche, and is small despite being a growing one," Ashish says. "We strongly believe that everything can be customised, and have worked on everything from 100-calorie brownies to low-calorie ice creams. Our job here is to give people options," he adds.

The new bowl meals are priced from ₹400 onwards. Contact 9791048113 for more details.

Toss by Coffee? Since 1999

"We are solely focussed on taste, otherwise there is no point to this at all," says Nirav Shah, about Toss, a salad subscription service from Chennai cafes Coffee? Since 1999 and Bask. Having launched salad subscriptions two years ago, Nirav says that they strongly believed that healthy food does not need to be bland.

"Otherwise, it is not sustainable and not something people will enjoy everyday," he adds.

Their weekly menus have five salads, with a range of ingredients that includes soba noodles, bok choy, roasted sweet potatoes, ricotta cheese, pumpkin seeds and cherry tomatoes, as well as a different dressing everyday and an option to add meat. "Our customers range from people who want to switch to raw food or working professionals who want to have at least one meal a day which is balanced," Nirav says.

A nutritionist was on board to help design their menu initially. "All the salads are made an hour before they go out for delivery," Nirav adds.

Subscriptions start at ₹1,375 plus taxes per week. Contact 9176008808 for more details.



Amore Eats

For Amore Eats' California-based founders, the rapid evolution of the food scene in Chennai is something they could not help but notice. "Even for senior citizens, late night eating was becoming so common," says Lakshmi Narayanan, one of the co-founders based in Chennai. Amore Eats was soon launched as a delivery-only kitchen in OMR.

"We work with a dietitian who validates our recipes and macros, and currently have direct deliveries as well as through delivery platforms," Narayanan says. The meals include chia pudding, kung pao vegetable protein bowl, beetroot tikkis, soba noodles salad, rice bowls with barley and seared paneer. For smaller, quicker meals, there are wraps, omelettes, and sandwiches as well. "We have a range of options and are keen that these balanced meals should be for everyone across ages," Narayanan adds. They hope to also introduce a subscription model in the coming months.

Priced at ₹250 onwards. Contact 91507 06492 for more details.



Cholamandal at Pyeongchang

In a third-time collaboration of canvases, artists from Chennai and Pyeongchang, South Korea, join hands at an exhibition titled Reverberations currently on display at InKo Centre, Chennai. From sprawling landscapes, to bulls in motion, and abstract collages, the display is a peek into some familiar works and artists, and their Korean counterparts.

"The Korean artists are mainly those active in Gangwon-do and those who participated in the Korea India Art Camp in Pyeongchang and Cholamandal Artists' Village. The Korean artworks express landscapes seen in Korea, such as Korean pine trees, East Sea waves, bulls, and Korean calligraphy. They also express the colours that are embedded in the artists' minds," says curator Soonyoung Yang, director of Pyeongchang ARTcc.

While the more familiar canvases capture everything from C Douglas's pensive greys, and M Senathipathi's enamel-esque brush strokes and sharp figures. These canvases provide a nostalgic view into the remnants of the Madras Art Movement.

The curated exhibitions were presented with the support of InKo Centre at The Gallery@InKo Centre in Chennai. This exhibition is the third in the series. On till November 17.



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Tamil pride in verse

Rapper and singer-songwriter Iyki Berry's new single is a nod to Thanjavur, her hometown



Fit for a queen The musician in 'Ithihasam'. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

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Iyki Berry's alter ego oscillates between two personalities: that of the "funky, vibe-y, cute-sy, effervescent Barbie", and the "stubborn, bold, raw and rooted queen". When one of these personalities takes over, the words write themselves. Her new single 'Ithihasam' taps into the latter.

The rapper and singer-songwriter – a familiar face and name, thanks to her debut in the reality television show *Big Boss 5* – hails from Thanjavur and discovered the world of hip hop only in 2015. Before that, pop icons like Michael Jackson and Lady Gaga and their distinct soundscapes reassured

little Iyka Kamaraj of the world of possibilities in music. Cut to 2024, and 'Ithihasam', released on November 1, celebrates Tamil pride, through crisp verses that honour the many greats of the Tamil literary world.

Iyki calls 'Ithihasam' a "magical work for the whole crew". It started with an impromptu beat that Dev Major – who has composed the music for the song – belted out on a random evening. Iyki was quick to jam to that beat with verse:

I believe in the sun / I do surya namaskaram.

You're doing pazhi pavam, you gotta do pariharam.

"We moved on to other work until we got a call from [AR] Rahman sir's office. They said they are going to launch an Unreal Engine music studio and asked if we would like to work on a music video," recalls Iyki. Unreal Engine is a software tool used to create interactive, 3D visual worlds using realistic lighting and special effects. Iyki continues, "We were very excited to experience this new technology. This meant, we didn't have to look for a location, whatever we needed was created virtually." The song was shot in ARR Film City in collaboration with the Ustream team who facilitated the

visualisation of the video. "We went back to the studio and finished the song in five to six hours! We shot it in nine hours and we could do so only because of this technology." A music video that typically takes three or four weeks for production was wrapped in four days' time.

Dev's music, especially the leading wild horn interlude, sets character to the song. "The beat hit me hard, and I wanted to touch my roots. I decided I wanted to show the world where I come from," says Iyki, adding, "Thanjavur is a majestic place and holds a lot of Tamil literary importance. I wanted to show everyone that this is me."

In the video, Iyki appears as a queen, the inspiration for which came from Velu Nachiyar, the queen from Sivaganga who waged war against the East India Company in the late 1700s and reclaimed her territory. In another frame, she is seen draped in black and red, surrounded by shades of red, in an ode to the Tamil epic *Silappathikaram*'s heroine, Kannagi. The verses also invoke Aditya Karikal, hailed as one of the greatest emperors of the Chola dynasty and Avvaiyar, one of Tamil's most notable women poets, as verses that hail women and their infinite possibilities make up the rap.

Iyki's lyrics lean towards the inspirational, for the sheer reason that a large part of her following comprises women, especially little girls. "Whenever they listen to my songs, I want them to feel empowered." The rapper is planning to release another single titled 'TYKKI', that will be a stark contrast to 'Ithihasam', in both its tone and appearance. It will delve into the dream of a girl, and will be futuristic. As of now, 'Ithihasam' is on the move – through live performances across different Indian cities. The first stop, naturally, is Chennai. The Ithihasam Tour, curated by Qurious, will also feature fellow musicians like J-Queen, Nixon, Kiran Surath and Arcus in performance alongside Iyki.

Ithihasam Tour will be at Dank, T Nagar from 7.30pm on November 8. Book tickets on skillbox.com.

STEPOUT



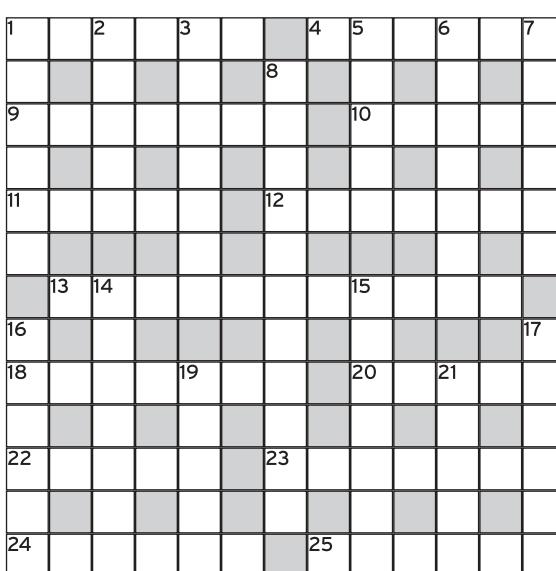
Melodies of the fall

The Madras Musical Association (MMA) presents Autumn Classics, a concert featuring the MMA symphony orchestra. Spend an evening listening to orchestral music, especially concertos. Jeremiah Christopher, will be playing a full-length piano concerto by Mozart.

The 80-strong choir with the 35-piece orchestra will provide an aural treat to the audiences.

@The Museum Theatre, Egmore on November 8, 7pm onwards. Tickets priced at ₹500 and ₹1,000 and are available on bookmyshow.com.

THE GUARDIAN QUICK CROSSWORD-13615



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- 7 Carry out an investigation (6)
- 8 Bin operator (anag) – one's working on a trial basis (11)
- 14 Altogether (7)
- 15 Kind of rose (7)
- 16 Universe (6)
- 17 Documentation (6)
- 19 Cathedral city of North Rhine-Westphalia, seat of the Krupp industrial dynasty (5)
- 21 Storage facility (5)

Solution will appear in MetroPlus dated November 14, 2024.
Solution No. 13614

- Across**
- 1 Stout (6)
 - 4 Rain cloud (6)
 - 9 Hopeless feeling (7)
 - 10 Tubular pasta (5)
 - 11 Sheer (5)
 - 12 Knife for the end of a rifle (7)
 - 13 No-frills (11)
 - 18 Busy (2,3,2)
 - 20 Means of mass
- Down**
- 1 Peppery root vegetable (6)
 - 2 Tack – abets (anag) (5)
 - 3 Knife used in dissection (7)
 - 5 Hint (5)
 - 6 Windfall (7)

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communication (5)
22 Hybrid beasts of burden (5)
23 Overshadow (7)
24 Adage (6)
25 Complimentary (6)

Down

- 1 Peppery root vegetable (6)
- 2 Tack – abets (anag) (5)
- 3 Knife used in dissection (7)
- 5 Hint (5)
- 6 Windfall (7)

Solution No. 13614

As we tuck in, we see that the Madurai mutton momos are



Road to a kinder city

Chennai celebrates kindness through a 20-feet-wide canvas decorated and painted over three days by more than 1,200 people



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Kindness is a virtue. World Kindness Day (November 13) serves as a gentle reminder of this.

Chennai-based Kindness Foundation celebrates it each year with a different

community project that brings people in the city together to help them express kindness. "We ran this programme even through the pandemic and have held spoken word and photography events," says Mahima Poddar, founder and managing trustee of the Kindness Foundation.

This year's theme is the expression of kindness through hands and gestures. A canvas with tracings of over 20 hand gestures, decorated and painted over three days by more than 1,200 people at the Anna Centenary Library, is the centrepiece of the event. Each gesture on the canvas has a theme, ranging from mental health and environmental preservation to women's rights and safety. This year's Kindness Week is sponsored by the Drop Dead Generous programme, part of the

20-feet-wide canvas. "This library is a space open to everyone and not membership-based, and we wanted a space accessible to all age groups and social strata without barriers," says Mahima.

Along with the canvas, another installation this year is about the five primary love languages. A cut out of a person is at the centre, surrounded by five poles, each representing a love language. Different

colours of thread are tied from each pole to the figure, symbolising how we express our love – through acts of service, gift-giving, quality time, physical touch, or words of affirmation. "People come and tie threads based on their love languages, and at the end of the day, we will have a heat map of the city's love language," says Mahima.

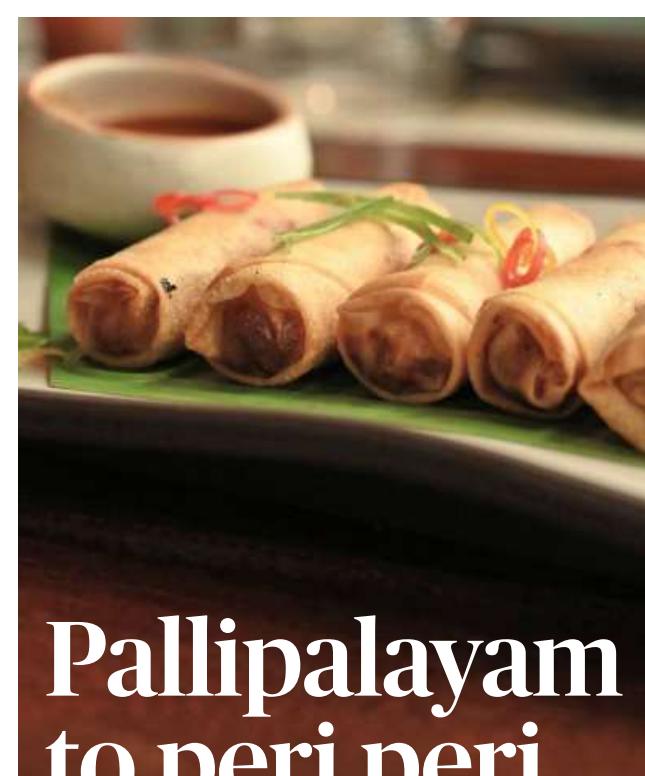
are also on the menu.

From the JK Select menu, the chicken rezala and ghee rice disappoints; the gravy is overly salty with undercooked meat.

Junior Kuppanna is spread across 20 other locations in Chennai, each with unique concepts. "As part of reinventing, we tried various ideas. Some succeeded, some didn't. For example, Junior Kuppanna Junior didn't work, but the 24-hour outlet in Urban Square is thriving. With many verticals, we have the scope to experiment; we can focus on biryani, meals, parotta and tiffin, or offer North Indian and Chinese dishes," Balachandar says.

With outlets in Colombo, Malaysia, Singapore, and Dubai, the brand is set to expand to the US and Australia in 2025. Balachandar says "We're building a JK-verse, where AI and automation are valuable assets. In today's world, both tradition and modernity are celebrated, and AI-driven marketing and training are useful. In the kitchen, we're exploring combi ovens and automated parotta-making machines, which will help maintain consistent quality and improve service speed."

JK Select is at No.12, LRS Towers, Pasumpon Muthuramalinga Thevar Road, Nandanam. A meal for two costs ₹1,200.



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Chennai is home to many legacy restaurants. Some preserve their old-world charm, while others strive to cater to today's fickle diners by reinventing themselves. With new eateries cropping up frequently, is nostalgia enough to attract customers? Junior Kuppanna, in the business for 64 years, has embraced change since the 2020 lockdown, attempting to reinvent itself. Its latest venture is JK Select on Chamiers Road.

"We intend to be like a Rajimakanth movie that appeals to every section of society. We want to retain diners within the brand by offering them the upscale food and experience they enjoy at other restaurants," says Balachandar R, the chain's executive director.

This vision comes alive with dishes like Madurai mutton momos and chicken chukka spring rolls. The dimly lit space features comfortable seating, simple wooden tables, and vibrant artwork. "We noticed that people usually come to dine and leave promptly. This outlet offers a relaxed dining experience. From service to plating, everything is different here," Balachandar adds.

As we tuck in, we see that the Madurai mutton momos are

served with a ginger-y salsa dip. The thin momo wrapper encases a filling of minced mutton, flavoured with garlic, red chilli and fennel. The chicken chukka spring roll is especially addictive when dipped in the sweet and spicy chilli-garlic sauce. Minced meat seasoned with dried chilli is wrapped in a pastry sheet and fried to perfection.

Fusion is always a culinary gamble, and here it is an exciting one. The pizza rotti, a parotta-based pizza, is an indulgent dish topped with chicken chukka, vegetables and a generous layer of mozzarella. Greasy and filling, it is balanced by unlimited glasses of piping hot garlic rasam.

"We still have traditional dishes like Pallipalayam chicken and Madurai mutton; these are our core offerings. We're just

experimenting with flavours. Even the peri peri chicken or paneer we serve on coin parottas has a 'Kongu-ised' touch. We've created these combinations based on feedback from our customers," Balachandar explains. To sample some Junior Kuppanna classics, we try this very Kongu-style mutton biryani made with jeera samba rice, served with a large piece of nalli resting on the steaming rice. The light and refreshing nandu puttu, with tender shredded crab and a well-spiced vanjaram fish fry

Pallipalayam to peri peri

As Junior Kuppanna opens JK Select, its 21st outlet in Chennai, executive director Balachandar R weighs in on how the chain is reinventing itself to stay relevant





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Divya M sat nervously on a chair, as she watched discussions on cooperative entrepreneurship, a term she could hardly pronounce.

At IIM-Kozhikode recently for a competition, Divya, part of a five-member team from Chennai, was clueless at first. "I sat an entire day without understanding what was happening," recalls Divya, an autorickshaw driver.

"Everyone spoke English. Some people were keying something in their laptops. Everything sounded important, but all we did was stare."

In the next couple of days, the Chennai team – women who spoke Tamil and were hardly fluent in English – warmed up to the occasion. When it was time for their presentation, they spoke from the heart, about the problems that plague auto drivers in Chennai.

"We spoke about our lives and what steps we are taking to raise our standard of living," she says.

Divya, part of a team of women auto drivers that calls themselves Veera Pengal

The ride begins

Meet these women auto drivers from Chennai, who won Coop 2024, a competition held at IIM



Munnetra Sangam (VPMS), won the first prize in Coop 2024, a competition aimed at promoting cooperative

entrepreneurship. Apart from a cash prize of ₹50,000, they will also have a year-long mentorship programme to

help develop their cooperative enterprise.

Veera Pengal Munnetra Sangam, registered in April 2024 and currently comprising about 400 women auto drivers, is trying to ensure better working conditions and monetary benefits for its members. Mohana Sundari, one of its key members, says, "We are operating it like a business model, because that helps us get transport contracts from private and Government departments. For emergencies, it is easier to lend our members money, which is rather cumbersome if we try through other sources. When we operate as a group, it gives us recognition and a voice."

Mohana Sundari is referring to a model where the Sangam will operate similar to a transport company or mobile app that employs drivers. "This also ensures that women drivers get access to benefits like Provident Fund (PF) and Employee State Insurance (ESI). It also helps us get loans."

Seventy percent of women auto drivers in Chennai are

Veera Pengal Munnetra Sangam, registered in April, has about 400 members currently

Life's a journey (From left) Leela Rani, K Sangeetha, Mohana Sundari and Divya M, autodrivers in Chennai. S SHIVA RAJ

single parents, she adds. "They drop and pick up their own children from school in the auto – ensuring the kids' safety – and also ply the vehicle in between these hours and earn money. This also means lesser dependence on relatives and friends," she says, "Though some of the drivers are educated and can go for other jobs, they prefer to drive autos because it helps them manage home and children better."

Stand and deliver

While this ensures some peace of mind, it also comes with challenges. "The 'auto stand' culture in Chennai is a big challenge, where men wait with their vehicles and don't allow women. The male ego is still at play here," says Mohana, adding "Also, autorickshaws are denied parking at most hospitals, hotels and malls, which pains us a lot."

VPMS is supported by a non-profit organisation called Empowering Communities through Education, represented by Vijaya Gnanaprasad, an IT employee who also backs

community-based initiatives. "We are trying to highlight the issues of women auto drivers to the society. Registering members as a cooperative immediately opens up better opportunities, like taking up contracts and working like a B2B model. We are also exploring options to tie up with rail or bus line authorities," he says, adding, "Very few people in Chennai know this group exists – whenever someone spots them, the first question is: 'Oh, so women drive autos in Chennai?' We are trying to be more visible and highlight their lives and aspirations."

Gilded heritage

This traditional Kashmiri ornament is finding new life with modern brides

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India has always been fascinated with gold. We have worn, invested and treasured this metal over centuries. In its chinks, lies the sentimental value of being passed down generations in the form of bangles, chains, earrings, and coins.

"The dejhors designed by Ratika makes it possible for modern brides to hold their traditions close while keeping up with the evolving aesthetics of their lifestyles. "This was one of the first pieces of jewellery I worked with, because I saw a lot of potential and room for experimentation," says Ratika Kaul.

This Kashmiree who has lived in Chennai for 28 years, recently launched iterations of a traditional gold ornament from the northernmost part of the country called the dejhori, to her collection.

The dejhori is a talisman of heritage that is worn by the Kashmiree Pandit bride before the wedding processions. It has three parts – a chain, the

main hexagon shaped ornament and the charm that hangs at the end. The chain goes over the ear and hangs as low as the chest.

"The dejhori is worn in a religious ceremony on the red thread before the wedding and mantras are chanted into it. It works as a charm or an amulet for protection and prosperity," says Ratika.

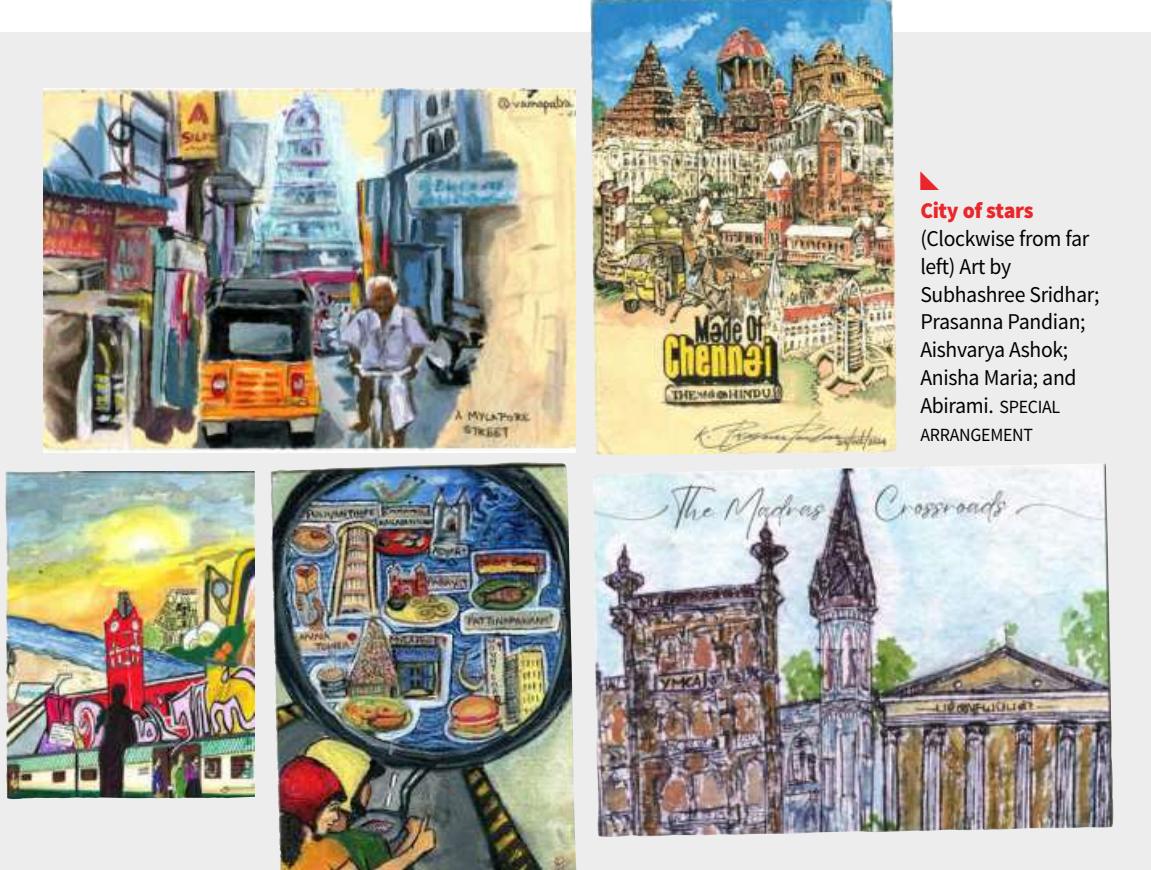
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Golden revival Ratika Kaul wearing the dejhori. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Chennai, yours truly

The entries received for the 'Dear Chennai, with love' initiative captured the city in all its glory

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In a blue patterned scroll, P Mary writes what Chennai means to her. "A city of dreams, come what may," reads a line from her poem. On a yellow postcard, K Prasanna Pandian sketches a number of famous landmarks – the Central Railway Station, Anna Nagar Tower Park and Ripon Buildings. "Chennai, a city of endless energy," says R Sethubai, in his letter to the city.

These were among the 500-plus entries received as part of Dear Chennai, With Love, an initiative by The Hindu Made of Chennai to commemorate World Post Day, celebrated in October.

The formats were varied; sketches, poems, scrapbooks, essays, and even collages, but the love for the city tied it all

Made Of Chennai
THE HINDU

together.

For many, it was a chance to soak in some nostalgia as well. Priscilla Yazhini's sketch of an old gate at the Madras Christian College was captioned, 'The new gate has no trace of the past, but I have memories that will last'.

For RK Kumari, Chennai was a 'vibrant charmer' when she first visited in the summer of 1978 from Tirunelveli on a vacation. In her letter, she fondly recalled being awestruck by the hustle and bustle of Mount Road.

For the city's younger

residents, there is a lot about Chennai that they are falling in love with. Eleven-year-old K J Jishnu sent in a finger painting of the Marina beach lighthouse, and said he was inspired by the architecture.

Among the correspondence from people from other cities expressing their love for the city was Babitha Babu's inland letter in beautiful calligraphy, all the way from Kollam, in which she referred to the city as a 'beautiful neighbour'.

Poetry, musings about the language, the sea, the architecture, heritage and more featured on a number of postcards from the students of the University of Madras. In all the entries and odes to the city which made up the entries, one thing was evident – the city's many myriad facets capture one's imagination like no other.



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Meet Pani actors Sagar Surya and Junaiz VP, Malayalam cinema's newest villains

Shilpa Nair Anand
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Weet Don Sebastian and Siju KT in actor-turned-director Joju George's debut film *Pani*, a revenge drama, as they execute their first contract killing; they seem to be killing for hire. As the movie progresses, the emotions these two characters evoke range from utter dislike to revulsion. While Don is fidgety, Siju is silent, conveying menace with his eyes.

Meeting actors Sagar Surya (Don) and Junaiz VP (Siju) is a revelation of the amount of work they have put in to 'get into character'. The two Joju George discoveries are savouring their moment in the sun.

"This film is a golden opportunity for me," says Sagar, who has so far done small roles in films such as *Upacharapoorvam Gunda Jayan*, and *Jana Gana Mana*. He was also part of a Malayalam television series, *Thatteem Mutteam*.



Bromance in the air

The makers of Malayalam film, *Bromance*, starring Arjun Ashokan, Mathew Thomas and Mahima Nambiar, have announced a release date: February 14, 2025.

Helmed by Arun D Jose of *Jo and Jo* and *Journey of Love* fame, the film has been written by Arun along with Raveesh Nath and Thomas P Sebastian. It also stars Kalabhavan Shajohn, Binu Pappu, Shyam Mohan and Sangeeth Prathap.

Akhil George is the cinematographer while Chaman Chakko is the editor. Govind Vasantha handles music.

Earlier this year, *Bromance* was in the news after a car, reportedly driven by the stunt choreographer, with Arjun, Mathew Thomas and Sangeeth Pratap, met with an accident while shooting a car chase sequence.



Spin king

Cricketer Harbhajan Singh is now set to shine on the big screen. After *Friendship* (2021), his first Tamil film, the offspinner is now starring in yet another Tamil film, titled *Savior*.

Directed by John Paul Raj, *Savior* has Harbhajan Singh playing the role of Dr James Malhotra. Oviya, GP Muthu and VTV Ganesh are part of the starcast as well.

Backed by Seantoo Studio, *Savior* is a thriller-drama set in a hospital. While music is composed by DM Udayakumar (DK), cinematography is handled by Manick.

Apart from representing the country, Harbhajan has also played for Mumbai Indians and Chennai Super Kings in the IPL.

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A big break
Junaiz VP and Sagar Surya.
THULASI KAKKAT

Pani has been extremely satisfying and rewarding, especially in terms of the feedback coming their way, he says. The two actors hold their ground in the presence of seasoned actors. "I have worked very hard on this film. Movies are hard, getting a good break is difficult. Somehow I have been lucky. It must be the blessings of my late mother," says Sagar, who has a Master's in Engineering.

This is Junaiz's first acting job. He has been a content creator on Instagram since 2016. "I have always wanted to act but I didn't actively pursue it, nor did I tell anyone about it. Joju (George) chettan would have seen something in me for him to offer me the role. The content I create is comedy-based, while the role in the film is very different," he says.

Joju first saw the two together as participants in a popular TV reality show. They had become friends on the show, and Joju noticed their camaraderie. Their admiration for Joju is evident as they talk about him. "We met him after the show, and he suggested that we needed to 'strengthen' our bond. To do that, we lived together in a house in Thrissur for four-odd months. It was a sort of quarantine; we did not interact much with others. It was just the two of us," Junaiz adds.

Getting philosophical, he says, "The film has changed me in many ways. It helped me conquer some of my fears – of heights and speed. The first scene atop the building, for instance, was terrifying. Similarly the high-speed chases... shot using the Russian Arm camera [U Crane] which moves at a high speed."

Praise for *Pani* has been pouring in, from actor Kamal Haasan, and directors Anurag Kashyap and Karthik Subbaraj among others.

They say, "It is a combination of luck and hard work. Joju chettan came into our lives at the right time!"

A ticket to fame

All about Dinesh Shenoy's Kannada short film *Madhyantara*, which won top honours at the National Film Awards this year



Reel talk
Ajay Neenasaam and Veeresh in *Madhyantara*. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Vivek MV

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At 54, Dinesh Shenoy found his purpose. Two years later, he proved how one is never too old to start again. The 56-year-old's filmmaking dreams are at an all-time high after his Kannada short film *Madhyantara* clinched two National Awards this year. Dinesh won the Best Debut Director honour, while veteran Suresh Urs bagged the Best Editor award.

Madhyantara is about two passionate film buffs (played by Ajay Neenasaam and Veeresh) who do odd jobs before getting their big break in the film industry. "Producer RF Manikchand, in an interview, spoke about his love for films. Living in Chikmagaluru, he couldn't afford the ticket price of 50 paisa. He had 25 paisa, and his friend could afford 25 paisa. So one of them watched the first half, while the other watched the second. Later, they would share details."

The anecdote gave birth to *Madhyantara*, an ode to the Kannada cinema of the Eighties. Collaborating with Shashidhar Adapa, the well-known art director, gave Shenoy

confidence. "He was excited to do a period film. Adapa had the sense of that era. We used many props, including clapboards."

Editor Suresh Urs, once a regular collaborator with Mani Ratnam (*Thalapathi*, *Roja*, *Bombay*, *Iruvar*, and *Dil Se*) was another important addition to the film. "He was so valuable for the project. He travelled with me on this journey and gave inputs at every juncture of the production."

He adds, "As we shot the entire movie on celluloid, Urs was thrilled to edit the footage as the project took him back to his early days of his profession. He would always say that in digital filmmaking, directors take a lot of shots, and the actors are visibly tired because of that. In celluloid, the making is precise."

After being screened at the International Film Festival of India (IFFI) in Goa, the film competed at the National Film Awards. To make *Madhyantara* a proof-of-concept short film was a wise decision, feels Shenoy. "Instead of narrating a script to a producer, I felt it was better to show my team's capability through a short film. With that, the producer can understand what kind of imagery I can produce on screen."

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