

NC Srinivasaraghavan

Chennai is well-known for being a pioneer for many reasons, but not many are aware that it is home to one of India's oldest LGBTQIA+ resource groups. Orinam, a queer collective completed 20 years recently. Started by a small group of like-minded queer individuals, the first meeting happened at an ice cream parlour in Nungambakkam in 2003. At that time, there were many email groups and online forums where community members shared their thoughts and made friends. However, Orinam created history by offering offline spaces and support in the city through gatherings, building its network through volunteers of different age groups. From about 10 members in 2003, today, over 200 people attend events regularly. A core group of about 15 volunteers coordinate to act as peer counsellors and event organisers.

Across the years, several people have devoted their efforts and acted as core members of the collective which is funded entirely through donations. Felix S, who has been part of the journey as a chief volunteer from the first day says, "Orinam meet-ups were all about finding other people like yourself in the city and getting to know their journey as LGBTQIA+ individuals in society. Queer people have a hard time fitting in and face many hurdles due to lack of social acceptance of their identities. This space provides a breath of fresh air for several members of the community who are mostly closeted."

Over the years, the support space provided by Orinam has expanded and the collective now plays a key role in organising the Chennai International Queer Film Festival (Reel Desires) in association with the Goethe Institut every year in August, as well as literary and spoken-word events through



Creating a queer oasis

Orinam, one of Chennai's queer collectives, on shepherding the city's LGBTIA+ community for 20 years

QUILT (Queering Literature) meet-ups. L Sriram, another key member of the collective, says, "Even though our support group meetings have been happening for a long time, we realised how crucial it was to have them during the pandemic when many LGBTQIA+ people faced mental health issues due to lack of support at home."

Tight knit Sriram says that over the years, the conversations around queer identities involved folks younger than 18 who reached out for support. This necessitated the involvement of parents in the meetings. Pratibha and her husband Varadarajan, who reached out to Orinam to better understand their queer daughter shared their experience. "We could never figure out the issues our daughter was facing as we were not initially aware of queer identities. We randomly

walked into an Orinam support group meeting and gradually found ways to accept and embrace our daughter's sexual orientation making the journey easier for her as well as us," says Pratibha. Presently, the couple has stepped into a new role as supportive queer parents for many youngsters in the city, opening their home and hearts for folks who lack acceptance from their biological family.

Fred Rogers, who identifies as a man of trans experience,

shares how Orinam was pivotal in making sure his ex-spouse understood his gender identity. "There is very little awareness about transmasculine persons as this identity is marginalised



Conversion therapy "to cure queerness" is unethical and unscientific.

L SRIRAM
Member, Orinam



Love is love (Left) Members of the LGBTQIA+ community participating in a pride month event in Chennai; at the Chennai International Queer Film Festival. B JOTHI RAMALINGAM AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

even within the transgender spectrum. Peer support, access to shelters, medical transition and mental health services are much needed for us," says Fred.

Orinam has also played a critical role in providing mental health support to community members by mobilising queer affirmative mental health professionals and is also involved in the organising of the annual Chennai Rainbow Self-Respect Pride in the month of June, along with other organisations. Sriram also explains the need to compile lists of queer affirmative doctors.

"It is difficult to identify doctors who are educated on queer issues. Many parents think being gay or trans is a disease when it is not. Conversion therapy "to cure queerness" is unethical and unscientific. Various faulty methods like electroshock therapy, admitting queer individuals in psychiatric wards and prescribing anti-depressants as a 'cure' still prevail," says Sriram.

It is noteworthy that Justice Anand Venkatesh of the Madras High Court who delivered a landmark judgement on queer rights in Tamil Nadu reached out to volunteers of Orinam to learn about the issues faced by the queer community. In the recent years, even though queer issues are being given importance, there is a need for collectives like Orinam to continue providing support to queer people, young and old, grappling with their identity and the world around them.

Some names have been changed to protect identities. To get in touch with Orinam, reach out to L Sriram (8056221917).

Art that heals

Bindu Art School, for people with leprosy, by Chengalpattu-based Bindu Art Trust, now has a permanent gallery space in Mamallapuram



Lick of paint Work from artists of Bindu Art Trust. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Liz Thottan

Werner Dornik first visited India in 1977 during the hippie revolution. His purpose: live and love. But life had different plans for the 18-year-old Australian national. He happened to visit Varanasi and encountered people with leprosy for the first time. Ostracised by society, they were forced to beg on the streets.

A year later, he returned to India with a vision to help them. He wanted to capture the essence of Varanasi through photography and in turn sell the images in the West to fund medical treatments for people with leprosy. It was then that he met Padma Venkatraman, an activist rehabilitating those with the condition.

Padma and Werner came together to start the Bindu Art Trust and eventually set up an art school at the Leprosy Colony in Bharatapuram, near Chengalpattu, where he trained members in drawing and painting.

Artists from Bindu Art School, that has now completed 19 years, had their first exhibition at Apparao Gallery in the city in 2006, which was a huge success. Werner travelled with their work across the world and was also instrumental in taking a few of the artists to Europe to meet some of the buyers.

They now have a permanent gallery for their work at Mamallapuram. The initiative has transformed their lives, and turned them into artists who tell their stories through their work.

The 500 sq ft space, located at Othavadai Cross Street 5, has over 300 works of art on display. The paintings are priced between ₹2,000 and ₹9,000. The gallery is open from 5.30pm to 9pm, Monday to Friday, and 10am to 1pm and 5.30pm to 9pm on weekends. For details, call 7395686077.

Spotlight on health

The spotlight on holistic health and wellness has become brighter since the pandemic. This weekend, a carnival that celebrates the idea of wellness, will focus on why holistic health is the need of the hour. Organised by the Rotary Club of Madras Temple City, the event that boasts diverse programming, will put 'healthy lifestyle' at its centre. "The Rotary Club of Madras has been doing more than 30 years of work. This time, we wanted to do a fundraiser event that would benefit the general public," says Dr. Bhuvaneshwari Rajendran.

The day-long event will have sessions on laughing yoga, mindful munching, meditation, fitness for seniors, eye care and sleep hygiene and free health screenings.

The carnival is from 10am to 7pm at CP Art Centre and Seminar Hall, Alwarpet. Entry is free.



Lyrical soliloquy This multi-lingual chartered accountant experiments with versification in his book *Bas Yun Hi*. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

says, adding, "I also listen to podcasts. There is one called 'Urdu Nama', which I listen to on Spotify. Then I started buying books from Rekhta, a popular website for Urdu books. I read Majrooh Sultanpuri's works often."

However, caught up as he was with his work and family, the lines he wrote remained with him. "As a child, I used to recite or read out whatever I had written to my sister Usha Ramesh. As I grew older, the subjects became more serious but the habit of writing continued," he says.

Eventually, he settled in Chennai and married Carnatic musician Bombay Jayashri. But he continued to "scribble verse and left it at that".

The budding poet found his readers when Usha was living in Bahrain. She was part of the Bahrain Poetry Group, which chose a theme every month, encouraging members to come up with pieces in prose and verse, some published and some written by them. That is when the actual writing of the poems in *Bas Yun Hi* took place, some time around 2015-2020.

Says Usha: "Raju (as his family calls him) would send his verse as audio notes and the listeners, including Urdu-speaking Pakistanis, were bowled over by his verse, diction and use of phrase."

"Certain experiences have been deeply ingrained in me. I see my poetry-writing as an outlet," he says, adding "Every poem has been born in the crucible of my life but there is a universal truth in each that all readers can relate to."

"Amrit and Jayashri have been pillars of support. Jayashri told me to go ahead and publish them," he adds.

And how did the title come about? "Someone asked me, 'Why do you write poetry?' I replied, 'Bas, yun hi'."

Poetry meets form

Written in Devanagari script, the evocative poems open a window to Ramnath's childhood, life and experiences

Saraswathy Nagarajan
saraswathy.nagarajan@thehindu.co.in

Words rush into verse, tumble into rhyme and flow into poems. Ramnath could put pen to paper and come up with verse on any subject. After several years of wordplay and journalling, the Chennai-based chartered accountant, released a book of Urdu poems, *Bas Yun Hi* (Just Like That).

Going down memory lane, Ramnath says the book of poems is the fruition of his love affair with Urdu, which began in Kolkata, where he grew up. Eighteen poems on diverse themes, written in Devanagari script, showcase the poet's felicity for words and his ability to capture fleeting emotions in evocative verse.

The anthology was released in Chennai by Leela Samson, who also wrote an eloquent foreword. It features a cover designed by Ramnath's son, Amrit (a

composer and musician) and illustrations by Subhash Bhokre. Since Kolkata is a cultural hub, Ramnath and his siblings grew up on a steady diet of ghazals and poetry in chaste Urdu. Ramnath says he grew up speaking Bengali although he hails from Palakkad in Kerala. He recalls with a chuckle that Tamil was spoken only at home, that too with his mother.

A tryst with letters

"My first language was Hindi and I learned Hindi literature and poetry. My father brought a cassette of Ghulam Ali and that is how I began listening to ghazals. I felt Urdu was the language that best expresses in words the emotions and moods one experiences," he reminisces.

A music aficionado, Ramnath recalls listening to greats such as Ghulam Ali, Mehdi Hassan and Begum Akhtar, to name a few. "Unlike popular perception, ghazals are not confined to romance. They embrace every human emotion and deep

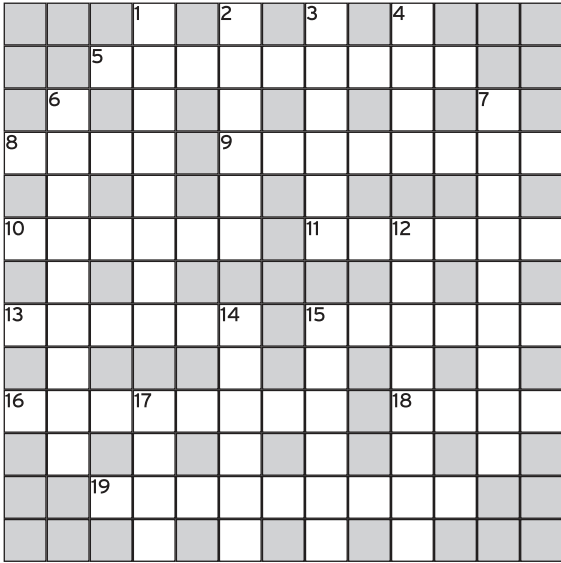
philosophy too," he adds.

As his romance with ghazals deepened, he began delving into the works of the poets who wrote evocative verses. He feasted on the wealth of information on the web and began watching *mushairas* (poetic get-togethers) on YouTube. There, he discovered poets like Munawwar Rana and Rahat Indori.

"Indori was brilliant. He uses a lot of modern imagery that one can easily relate to. Gulzar and Javed Akhtar are two contemporary poets I follow," he



THE GUARDIAN QUICK CROSSWORD-13576

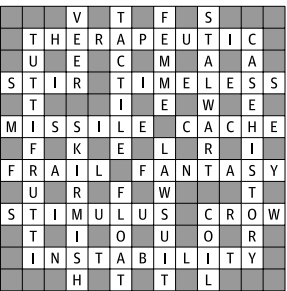


Across
5 Tactless — to admiral (anag) (9)
8 Accomplishment (4)
9 It gets discounted fares for train travellers (8)
10 Take out a loan (6)
11 Castrated male (6)
13 Tropical fruit (6)
15 Grand — time of the year (6)
16 Literary gathering (4,4)

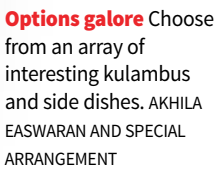
18 Slump (4)
19 Non-stop (9)
Down
1 Microbes (8)
2 Ancient burial mound (6)
3 Contusion (6)
4 Record (4)
6 It triggers a big bang (9)
7 On the dot (9)
12 Persistently irritating (8)
14 Dormant (6)
15 Leader of a religious community for women (6)
17 Generous — sort (4)

Solution will appear in MetroPlus dated March 21, 2024.

Solution No. 13575



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



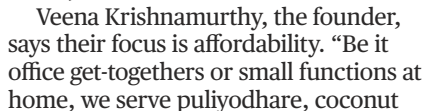
Open from 11am to 9pm. Contact 94444084150. Small party pre-orders are taken.

Chitradeepa Anantharam
chitradeepa.a@thehindu.co.in

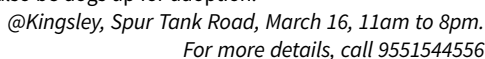
A collection of jars of honey, each wrapped in clear plastic and tied with a white ribbon, displayed on a blue tablecloth.

A man wearing an orange robe and glasses is cooking in a kitchen. He is standing at a counter with several large metal pots and is pouring something from a small container into one of the pots. The kitchen has a wooden structure and a tiled floor.

Contact 9344732640. Customers are encouraged to bring their own containers.



@MS Subbulakshmi Auditorium, ACJ Campus, Taramani. Exhibition is on till April 10, 10am to 6pm. Free, and open to all. For details, call 22542842



sanjana.g@thehindu.co.in

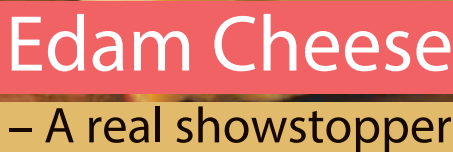
We begin by trying the pea soup, drumsticks, and a large mezeze platter before the fried food arrives. An incident in my youth involving smushed peas being equated to eyes has ruined the vegetable for me but the soup, which bears no resemblance to still eyes, is of great consistency (nudged between thick and thin) and taste. The peas shine through and a hint of cream is



As we speak, the crowd favourites arrive. The first is a plate

It is evident that Eko Lyfe's food works where it tries the least. Their smoothies, the mezze platters, the taco and the appetisers are the best parts of the meal. They are good old bowls of food that we would order without the glitter and glam of social media.

Eko Lyfe cafe is at 3, Ananda Road, Alwarpet. A meal for two costs ₹1,200.

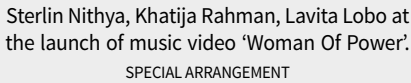


Straw coloured with a mild nut-like buttery flavour, the cheese has a unique taste profile and can be used

for making sandwiches and pizzas. It can also be served with hot beverages, salads and crackers. Dig in for deliciousness!



“CONSUMER CONNECT INITIATIVE”



Khatija Rahman's latest anthem, 'Woman of Power', highlights common women

Srinivasa Ramanujam

+91 91686 12435 | +91 73974 92144
Four Points by Sheraton Mahabalipuram Resort & Convention Center
Ecr-Omr Junction, East Coast Rd, Poonjeri, Mahabalipuram, Tamil Nadu 603104