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THE HINDU



Readers below 30 dish the tea on what they are reading at *The Hindu* Lit for Life **P3**

TRUPTI BHOIR SHEDS LIGHT ON *PARO* **P4**



Sanjana Ganesh
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If you have been in the know about Chennai's music scene in the years since the COVID-19 pandemic, it is likely that you might have noticed a rise in the number of venues featuring jazz acts. While clubs and consulates have off-hand performances, two venues – Vinyl and Brew and Hyatt Regency – have supported musicians both from India and abroad, to ensure that the city gets its fair share of the groove. AlterNation, a musical partnership and social

enterprise, founded by four friends-musicians-volunteers, has been an essential part of this exercise. Since their formation in September 2024, they have put on 11 shows, says Vivek Ayer, one of the members. On January 31, AlterNation will host its first jazz festival at Zol Gardens at Palomar in ECR. The show prides itself on platforming artistes from the city playing original music, including the band Jatayu and Many Things. For about three years now, Maarten Visser, a pioneer in the Chennai jazz scene, has been mentoring and training the Tuesday Jazzers, a collective of around 30



Jive talk (Far left) Many Things; and (left) Jatayu. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

musicians from the city, who have been trying to find their individual voices. This ensemble will open the festival performing three sets of well loved, classic American jazz music. "Musicians from the Tuesday Jazzers have gone on to form bands of their own and will soon be performing in festivals across the country," Vivek adds. One such is the Gautam Menon Quartet. "I began jamming with the Tuesday Jazzers in 2022 when I moved to Chennai but life got in the way. In 2025, I took a chance and went to the same venue only to find that there is a lot more people here now. After meeting three other musicians and penning down original music, the quartet emerged. We learn from each other and that is exciting. I am kicked to perform at the festival this year. We have also gotten enquiries to perform in Bengaluru soon," says Gautam Menon, an edupreneur and a jazz drummer.

CONTINUED ON
» PAGE 2

You dig?

The first edition of **AlterNation's** jazz festival is all set to make your head bob with artistes from the city taking the stage



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A SHOWCASE OF
THE MOST EXCLUSIVE DIAMOND
JEWELLERY BY GRT JEWELLERS.

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Teynampet, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, 600018
DATE: 24, 25th Jan 2026 Sat & Sun | **TIME:** 10.30 AM - 8.30 PM

Join us on a hunt to find 50-year-old paintings by Madras’ most famous artists that line the foyers of Chennai’s oldest apartment complexes

Hidden in plain sight

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On Crescent Road behind Ethiraj College for Women lies a 49-year-old sprightly-looking bougainvillea tree, bearing hot pink blooms. These arresting flowers however, distract passers-by from witnessing a small yet significant piece of the city’s history. A few steps in, you enter Cambrae East, one of the city’s oldest apartment complexes.

Often mistaken for a hotel when it was first built, the building recently held its 50-year celebration, where residents, young and old, put up cultural shows and reminisced the times when the building felt and certainly looked younger.

Shonali Muthalaly who lived in the apartment until five years ago, paid a visit that led to a discovery. “My parents bought Cambrae East from the builder [Southern Investments (SI)], and like all the other residents, just took the vivid art in the lobby for granted. When I heard the residents were celebrating the building turning 50, I went back to investigate the pieces I had walked past every day for decades, curious about their provenance. For the first time, I noticed how each one was unique, with subtle differences in colour and detail, though they all came together as a dramatic and

cohesive set. Noting “Tharini” worked into the enamel, I messaged the artist. To my surprise (and delight!), artist Thota Tharani recognised the work immediately, and over a call confirmed that he collaborated with the builder, “Abby” from SI, 50 years ago,” she says.

Lining the lobby are 11 guards with fierce moustaches in bright enamel red paint, scrutinising residents and guests who pass. No two paintings, laid out as panels on metal sheets, are alike. The details



on the coats, pants, and spheres, have micro variations.

“We’d often jokingly scare children in the building saying that if they misbehaved, the guards would imprison them,” says Lakshmi (or Chelli as she is known in the apartment). As the second-oldest resident of the apartment, Chelli says that none the residents knew that the work was done by such a significant artist.

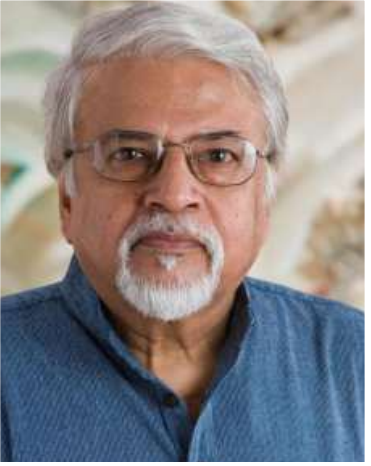
“We had no idea. Back in the day, the builders made the effort, I think,” she says.

Artist Thota Tharani, who painted the images 50 years ago and had them fired at the Madras Enamel Factory (earlier on Eldams Road), says that they were painted at a time when he was young and in search of a steady stream of jobs before his career as an art director in films.



“It’s interesting to work with enamel paints, and it’s rare to get a red as bright as this. I used a technique where I sprayed the paint using a stencil as base and scratched it off. The paint can’t be too dry or wet. Back in the day, the artists who created the stencils were from Calcutta and were exceptionally skilled and essential for the job. I’d wait until the paint baked every evening because I was impatient to see how the work turned out. I was paid ₹75 per square foot for these and ended up making other such paintings in different apartments

Etched (Clockwise from far left) Art works at Chesney Nilgiri; soldier at Cambrae East; artist SG Vasudev; art at Owner’s Court; a resident admiring the art work; and art director Thota Tharani.
R RAGU AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



too,” he says.
A search down this rabbit hole of paintings in everyday places led us to Chesney Nilgiri on Chesney Lane, where Indian abstracts by Thota Tharani were spotted. “I landed the

job because SG Vasudev had already done this work with the builders before. It was through him that I did such work in some other buildings where the motifs included flowers, plants, and even horses,” he says.

All in the neighbourhood
After walking down several lanes in Egmore, hunting for 50-year-old buildings with rare paintings by famous artists of the Madras Art Movement, we arrived at Owner’s Court on Monteith Lane, where we finally traced the panels painted by SG Vasudev, a famed artist from the city. “I was interested in doing ceramic work because I was commissioned to do small-size paintings by the builder, but they insisted on enamel and put me in touch with the people at the factory. They were making signs like the ones that say ‘danger’. Instead of sticking to one colour like the workers at the factory, I experimented with many. It came out well in the oven. Seeing this work, I was also called to make a 24ft by 84ft mural at Satyam Cinemas in Royapettah,” he says. Vasudev asks one not to question the meaning of his work. “Is it possible to understand Mahabalipuram? Or Picasso’s Guernica, or the sound of a bird? It is part of one’s education. It’s all for enjoyment, not for understanding,” he says.

Although most of the paintings remain intact, some have corroded over time. Gallerist Sharan Apparao says that this is because the paintings were likely to have been done on copper metal sheets which, when exposed in a coastal city like Chennai, tend to experience rusting. “These works of art are experimental and rare. Builders who commission public art; and painters who engage in creating the art, need to make decisions regarding the material they use so that the paintings are long-lasting,” she says. Sugumaran N, secretary, Chesney Nilgiri, says that now that they know its importance, they are committed to taking the work seriously. “We are looking forward to maintaining them,” he says. “Until now, it was just another painting on the wall.”



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At The Square Inch, a one-stop destination for needlecraft enthusiasts since 2014, co-founders of the Quilt India Foundation, Tina Katwal and Varsha Sundararajan, are gearing up for their annual thematic quilt exhibition. This year’s showcase at Alwarpet brings together 58 entries by participants aged between eight and 80. Located in Thiruvannmiyur, the centre is known for its bespoke quilts and its regular quilting workshops.

“This year, the entries were judged by Prabha Narasimhan, a

Patchwork perfection

A thematic art quilt exhibition showcases 58 works that explore reflection, presented by the Quilt India Foundation

Chennai-based textile designer, and the winners will be announced at the exhibition, which opens on January 23,” says Tina. Participants were given a bundle of eight differently coloured fabrics and 12

weeks to complete their work. “Each quilt had to measure 20 x 20 inches and use at least 50% of the fabric provided. Unified by the theme Reflect, the works explored the term ‘reflection’ in its many

Fabric and form Quilts that mirror thought and technique.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



forms: optical, emotional, psychological and social, offering viewers a visually rich and contemplative experience,” explains Varsha.

A highlight of the exhibition is the display of Double Wedding Ring quilts and Rolling Waves quilts, shown in India for the first time. While the former draws on the symbolism of love and unity, the latter has an illusion of fluid

movement, created entirely from straight-edged fabric pieces. As visitors move through the exhibition, they will be met with many artistic perspectives, with each quilt distinguished by its own pattern, mood and interpretation.

“The vision behind this exhibition is to create awareness, inspire and educate the public about quilting as an art form. It is fascinating to see the consistency and individuality with which artists have approached the theme,” says Varsha. She adds that quilting is a meditative practice and an immensely peaceful and fulfilling experience for its practitioners.

Following the four-day exhibition, the quilts will travel to other art quilt shows across India and overseas. Visitors can also browse and purchase a variety of quilted products, including bags, laptop cases, tote bags, blankets and table runners.

@Sri Sankara Hall, Alwarpet. On January 23 between 4pm and 8pm; January 24 and 25 from 11am to 8pm; and January 26 from 11am to 6pm. Entry is free. For details, call 955118323.



Jive talk
Suman Sridhar and Black Mamba will be performing at the AlterNation Jazz Festival.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

You dig?

CONTINUED FROM
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An act to look forward to is Many Things comprising Maarten Visser, Aravind Murali and Manukrishnan, who rely on improvisation, combining jazz, rock, classical and funk. The trio usually take listeners down a trip of eclectic, mesmerising music. “Until recently, most shows at Vinyl and Brew have been listening sessions. This is because we want people to focus exclusively on the act unlike in venues where jazz is in the background,” Vivek says.

He adds that the popular band Jatayu, a genre-blurring four-piece band from Chennai, has performed in several locations other than their home city over the last few years. The festival will be a homecoming for the band, where they will perform ragas with contemporary sonic design, blending Carnatic music, jazz and rock. “Playing at the AlterNation Jazz Festival feels important to us because it’s happening at home, in Chennai. It’s refreshing to see a platform like this emerge in the city, and we want to support festivals that invest in jazz, original music and local voices. We’re excited to present songs from our new EP and to perform with a horn

section in Chennai for the first time,” says Sahib Singh, guitarist and band leader of Jatayu in a press release.

Suman Sridhar, a singer and award-winning artiste from Mumbai is the only invited act from another city. She will be playing with her band Black Mamba, fusing jazz, pop, Indian classical, opera, and spoken word in her performances.

Besides this, Vivek says that they are trying to incorporate jazz paintings, with live visual composition composed on the fly, by Chennai-based new media art duo, Television Dust.

“We want people to know that jazz is for everyone and not something that is performed at clubs. Music from Chennai has many similarities with this style of music. It is improvisational and based on pulse. Several people have been part of the pre-show jam sessions at spots like Brod Bakery and Kat and Kin on ECR. Our last pre-show performance is at Vinyl and Brew on January 25 which is free and open to all,” he says.

The first edition of the AlterNation Jazz Festival is on January 31 at Zol Garden, The Palomar, ECR starting 3pm. Tickets for the event are priced between ₹750 and ₹1,500 and are available on Skillboxes.com

QUICK CROSSWORD #37
Set by Doppelganger

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Across
1 Likely to collapse (7)
5 Sudden overpowering fear (5)
8 Structure supporting railway across a valley (7)
9 Look angry (5)
10 Carnivorous mammal (5)
11 Pleasantness of sound (7)
12 Dry watercourse (6)
14 Flag borne on lance of knight (6)
17 Whole number (7)
19 Show reluctance (5)
22 Seed before fertilization (5)
23 Close acquaintances (7)
24 A lout (5)
25 Illegal entry (5-2)
Down
1 Metal pin with head at one end (5)
2 Ringing sound (5)
3 Personal attendant of royal family member (7)
4 Non-stop jabber (6)
5 Benign growth (5)
6 City planned to relieve congestion

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

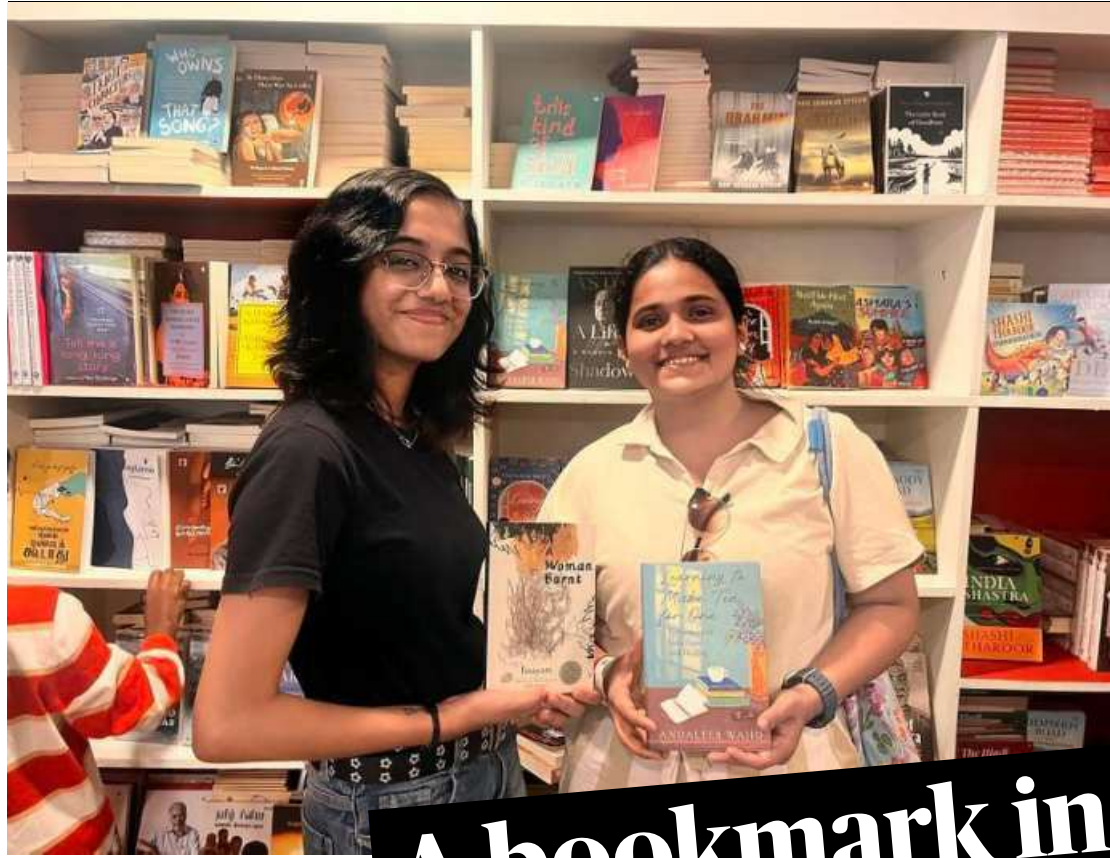
(3,4)
7 An excitement (5,2)
12 Divorce settlement (7)
13 Improve (7)
15 With the end forward (7)
16 Readymade structure (6)
18 Relating to Greece
20 Capital of Belarus (5)
21 Sap of plants (5)

Solution No. 37

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A bookmark in time

Srijani Mukhopadhyay

I am human – I scroll for six hours a day,” said Subbu Karuppayee Bhavani, 21, with a laugh. “But the satisfaction I get after reading a chapter or two is far more.”

At The *Hindu* Lit for Life this year, the tension between endless scrolling and the slow pull of books surfaced frequently in conversations with young readers. Across two days, attendees below the age of 30 spent their weekend rushing between sessions, bookstalls and long signing lines. Some were lit fest regulars, some were determined to make it through their checklists, and others arrived as reluctant recruits of enthusiastic friends or family, later spotted voluntarily queuing for panel discussions. Most were seen leaving with paperbacks, hardbacks and tote bags heavier, but spirits lighter, than when they arrived.

The centrality of stories and how they are told, kept coming up in conversations, even when reading choices were unplanned. Subbu's introduction to James Baldwin began when her roommate borrowed a library book in her name and forgot to return it. "It was just lying around," she said. "But I realised I hadn't read engaging prose in a while because I've been buried in academic reading." Baldwin's essays, she says, have made her want to read more literary

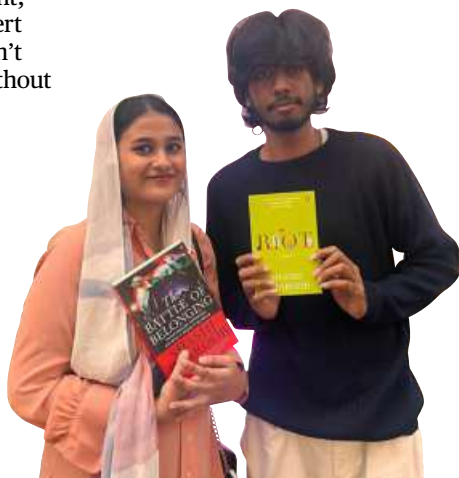
At *The Hindu Lit For Life*, readers below the age of 30 tell us about their favourite books, discovering new authors, and why they read

essays. For 21-year old Literature student Radha Ragamallika, reading has meant staying herself within the digital world, rather than escaping it. “We use social media as escapism,” she said, “but I also use books to escape. They exercise the mind in a different way.” She has been reading Audrey Lorde’s *Sister Outsider* slowly, often at night, while parallelly tackling Albert Camus’ *The Outsider*. “I didn’t want to graduate college without having read Camus,” she chuckled.

Organic process
Others agreed that books demand a different kind of attention. "When you're watching something, everything is already pre-made for you," said Dinesh, 21, who has been reading James Clavell's *Shōgun*. "With books, you imagine the entire scene

yourself. You cast your own actors, choose their faces and colours. It's more organic."

He was accompanied by friends Kiruthikesh and Varun V, all members of the Stanley Literary Society, a student-led collective for literature lovers in Stanley Medical College, Chennai. While Kiruthikesh



Gen Z reads (Clockwise from left) Pranuthy with a friend at *The Hindu* Lit For Life; Kiruthikesh, Dinesh and Varun V; Subbu Karuppayee Bhavani; Radha Ragamalika; Maryum and Hari. SRIJANI MUKHOPADHYAY



gravitates towards fantasy, Varun has been reading Osamu Dazai's *The Setting Sun* for its bleakness.

"I like tragedy," he said simply.

Pranuthy, 20, a Literature student, also felt that “a book is the actual art,” and “anything online or AI-generated cannot be equivalent to what you hold in your hand.” She had picked up Andaleeb Wajid’s *Learning to Make Tea for One* from the

festival, drawn by its title. "It feels like it will hit," she said, "and then heal."

For most of these readers, reading is a default part of their academic lives, and also a way of surviving it. Maryum Ameen and Hari Roopan, both 21-year-old Law students, spoke about balancing their dense legal curriculum with books that widened their perspectives. Maryum, an avid Shashi Tharoor reader, had picked up his book *The Battle of Belonging* after attending his session.

"It connects with what we study, how laws are built around ideas and debates of nationalism and patriotism," she said. Hari, meanwhile, chose to pick up a work of fiction, Tharoor's murder-mystery novel *Riot*. "Law teaches you procedure," he said. "But law is also about reading someone's story and telling it better. Fiction helps you understand how the world works beyond just the law."

The festival also prompted young readers to pick up writers closer home. Browsing the bookshop in the festival grounds, Subbu picked up Kalki's selected works, curious about his Tamil writing beyond the classic: *Ponniyin Selvan*. "I want to see what else he has written," she said. Radha chose Imayam's *A Woman Burnt*, translated by GJV Prasad, to look at Tamil literature in translation.

As the festival drew to a close, Radha admitted that she drifts to her phone all the time. “But coming to places like this, where people are constantly talking about books and ideas, reminds me why I read,” she said.

Fashion flip

We decode Lit Fest style and ask attendees about their outfits



Accent elevation

Minimalism with pops of colour seems to be catching on this year, with a vibrant accent elevating neutral colours. Lawyer Manasi Chaudhari, founder, Pink Legal, who was a speaker at the fest, showed up in a monochromatic cream outfit. Wearing a peplum blouse and wide leg trousers from a boutique in Goa, she created a relaxed yet stylish look. She made a statement with a green metallic necklace bought from a flea market, also in Goa. She says, "This gemstone necklace really stood out to me. It's the kind of piece you just don't find in mainstream stores."



Desi maximalism

Janaki Sampath, an attendee at the fest, wore her grandmother's rani pink dupatta made of Chanderi to add a pop of colour to her all-black outfit. "When I was very sick, my grandmother wrapped a shawl around me to keep me warm. I remember being surprised that she chose something so beautiful for such a simple act of care. I can't help but wonder how many quiet treasures she has tucked away," said Janaki. Along with that, she wore traditional dance jewellery, golden and rani pink bangles from Narayana Pearls and a septum ring to match from Sukra Jewellery.



**Handcrafted
elegance**

Shreemathi Ramnath, a polyglot consultant and writer who moderated a session at the fest wore a traditional saree in beige, purple and blue, sourced from an exhibition by the Crafts Council of India nearly 10 years ago. Her jewellery is from local artisans. However the true star of her outfit was her blouse made by a tribe in Sapa, indigenous to northern Vietnam. "The print stood out to me. It was originally a jacket which I converted into a blouse," said Shreemathi.

– *Kamalika Chatterjee*



Dance as diplomacy

Russian Dance Festival 2026 will tour Tamil Nadu, celebrating the enduring cultural friendship between India and the Russian Federation through the language of dance. The festival is jointly organised by the Cultural Department of the Consulate General of the Russian Federation in Chennai and the Indo-Russian Council for Culture, Education and Trade. The festival will begin with a 17-member dance ensemble from Rostov-on-Don. Artists from three acclaimed dance groups, Orchid, Lazorki and Azhiotazh, will perform during the festival. *January 22, 6.30pm, Russian Centre of Science and Culture, Teynampet. Entry is free. The tour is from January 22 to February 9 across Tamil Nadu. Call 9840013321.*



Screening reality

A documentary film festival is being organised by the Mindscreen Film Institute in association with the Indo Cine Appreciation Foundation and Film South Asia. The festival will feature 10 curated documentaries, offering a glimpse into diverse stories and perspectives. The schedule for screening is as follows:

January 22: 10.30am: *In search of Ajantrik* (Hindi), directed by Meghnath. 11.45am: *Wagging Tale* (Nepali) directed by Sangra Shah; 2.30pm: *Cinema pe cinema: The theatres, the movies and us* (Hindi/Tamil) directed by Vani Subramanian. 5.15pm: *I found my yellow* (Burmese), directed by Shin Thandar. 6.05pm: *A flaming forest* (Kannada), directed by Salman, Vivek and Satya; 7.05pm: *Mic Drop* (Hindi), directed by Kallol Mukherjee.

January 23: 12.05pm: *Abundance: Living with a forest* (Lotha Naga), directed by Dolly Kokon; 12.35pm: *Hello Guzyzz* (Bengali/Hindi) directed by Samikha Mathur; 3.15pm *Zende the super cop* (Marati/English) directed by Akshay Shah; 6.05pm: 6A, *Akash Ganga* (Hindi) directed by Nirmal.

The screenings will take place at the Tagore Film Centre, NFDC, Music College Road, RA Puram, on January 22 and 23.

For more information, call 9840151956.

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Bhajans meet beats

The rise of bhajan clubbing: How young India is reimagining spirituality

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Rehmat Khubchandani's hands are up. She lets out a delighted 'oohoo' as she emerges from the crowd. The music is upbeat, with a club-style energy, but the song is a *bhajan*. Around her, some women dance, while the ones who stay seated clap, with eyes closed.

"I have never experienced something like this," gushes Rehmat, even as she catches her breath from the dancing. "It feels like a party, but with vibes that connect you with up there." She points upwards towards the heavens. She – along with many

members of the Good Deeds Club in Chennai, curated by Apsara Reddy – has just experienced the latest viral trend: bhajan clubbing.

Track record
Introducing a night club-like atmosphere, minus the alcohol, bhajan clubbing is catching on in many Indian cities, including in Delhi, Kolkata and Bengaluru, as well as the US. Participants skew towards Gen-Z, who enjoy the sense of community it brings, a world away from the lonely endless scroll of social media.

"It is like entering a world of trance," explains Mandira Bansal, "It might be a Gen-Z concept, but it's wonderful. Why else would we be swaying to *such* tracks?" Mandira has just shaken a leg to a

high-energy performance of 'Dama Dam Mast Qalandar', a Sufi *qawwali*. There are many other spiritual tracks – including some celebrating gods like Shiva, Rama and Muruga – but the mood is very different from when these are traditionally sung in places of worship.

While bands like Backstage Siblings and Keshavam are getting popular for this style of concerts, Chennai singers are not far behind.

Take Sai Vignesh, a classically-trained singer whose rendition of 'Varaha Roopam' (*Kantara*) is making an impact, for instance. Along with singer Saindhavi, Sai Vignesh's renditions of bhajans and Sufi chants has the crowd on its feet. "I have been singing bhajans for

years, but the word bhajan clubbing will take some time to get used to," he smiles, "You don't even need to know the full bhajan to enjoy this. The main motto is to make people come together."

Here, spirituality is about connection and celebration. This is a new language of devotion, and it is amplified thanks to social media reels and posts – everyone enjoys spreading the word about a good party.

"We grew up listening to bhajans, but the current generation might not be too exposed to these tracks," says Saindhavi, popular for both her hit film tracks and classical concerts, "Now, they are packaged within a different soundscape, but the divinity is still the same."



A new tune
Singers Sai Vignesh and Saindhavi enthralling audiences with bhajan and Sufi hits, during a recent bhajan clubbing event in Chennai.
THAMODHARAN B

Actor-producer
Trupti Bhoir speaks
about her latest film
***Paro*, which is on the**
Academy of Motion
Picture Arts and
Sciences' list of 201
feature films eligible
to compete at the
Oscars 2026

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Actor-producer and social activist Trupti Bhoir tears up as she recounts the gruelling experience of playing a paro (meaning a bride slave) in her Hindi film *Paro*. "But my tears don't matter in front of the horrors that the real victims go through," she says, recounting the long journey she has had with her NGO, Shelter Foundation, in shedding light on this 'cancer' at the heart of India.

Paro, directed by Gajendra Ahire, is an unflinching look into the lives of paros, an oppressed section of women who are sold or bartered like property by men, to become domestic slaves who have no rights. It is a custom prevalent in districts of Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. These women are expected to perform all duties a man must in a household, and in bed. They rear children, but have no claim over them, and can be sold whenever the master feels so. How is it different from sex work, one wonders. "Sex workers at least have the right to earn for themselves or are recognised by



Sold down the river

society," explains Trupti.

Produced by Trupti and Sandesh Sharda, Gajendra's 100-minute film follows the story of Chaand (Trupti), who is sold from one man to another, like cattle, and faces unspeakable tribulations. Trupti found the seed to make *Paro* in documentary films that international news media, *Al Jazeera* and *BBC*, had

made about bride slavery in India. "I was shocked. I understood it was real, but I had to see it with my own eyes." Trupti then decided to venture into Mewat district in Haryana, where more than 60,000 paros live.

But entering Mewat is no cakewalk. Someone even told Trupti that if a person committed 100

murders, he would end up in Mewat. "Because nobody can find you. Even if the cops had to enter Mewat, they would go in groups of 20 or 30." And so, Trupti sought the assistance of an NGO that wished to remain anonymous and visited 10 villages. "Only when I met the paros and heard the story did I realise the stark reality they were living in."

Through Shelter Foundation, Trupti and Sheetal Nikam have been collecting data on paros. "Data collection is important because numbers add pressure. We went to Mewat and spent 12 days collecting data from nearly 4,000 women." What was shocking to Trupti was how most of these women hailed from other states, like Assam, Orissa, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Gujarat. "Sometimes, a boyfriend would have duped and sold her off; sometimes, a poor father and mother would assume that they had married off their daughter well. Some would have been kidnapped," explains Trupti.

Armed with the data she collected on the ground, Trupti approached Vijaya Kishore Rahatkar, Chairperson, National Commission for Women. "She allowed us to be a part of a meeting. I took two paros,

Hidden reality
Trupti Bhoir in *Paro*.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

and they spoke for their sisters. This was in attendance of all representatives of each State's National Commission for Women. We are hopeful that our efforts will pay off."

To reach the masses, Trupti made *Paro* with Gajendra. "We shot the film in less than 16 days, in parts of Lucknow, Jodhpur, Agra, Chamba, and Pune."

The makers were conscious to ensure that people don't mistake religion as having a role in this custom, especially since Mewat features a majority Muslim population. "Hindus are also doing this. So, it's not about religion; this is a custom that is being practised."

Shot beautifully by Krishna Soren and with an exceptional aural scape from composer Satish Chakravarthy,

Paro is now among the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' list of 201 feature films eligible to compete at the Oscars 2026. However, the film hasn't seen the light of day in India since the Central Board of Film Certification has yet to certify it.

"A Minister asked me, 'Why are you showing our country in a bad light?' I said, 'Sir, this is happening all over the world, in parts of China, Cambodia, Vietnam, Pakistan, North Korea, Mexico, Canada, the US and Russia. As per the National Human Trafficking Awareness Day's 2023 statistics, an estimated 2,25,000 people worldwide become victims of human trafficking a year. I want India to be the first country to have the courage to tell what we are doing wrong and to alleviate it."

Loud silence

Sobhita Dhulipala and producer Suresh Babu Daggubati discuss their new Telugu crime thriller *Cheekatilo*

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The spy thriller *Goodachari* and *Major*, the biopic of Major Sandeep Unnikrishnan, saw Sobhita Dhulipala enact brief yet pivotal parts. While she had become a household name with web series and straddled both indie and mainstream film space across languages, an author-backed character in a Telugu film was still a distance away. Understandably, Sobhita speaks with enthusiasm about *Cheekatilo* (in the darkness), her Telugu feature that has her playing a crime podcaster.

Directed by Sharan Kopishetty, who has co-written it with Chandra Pemmaraju, the Prime Video original film is also the first original feature in the digital space for leading Telugu film producer Suresh Babu Daggubati.

Cheekatilo follows the journey of Sandhya, who studies Criminology, becomes a journalist and later a podcaster.

Sobhita explains how a childhood incident shapes her personality: "When something happens to Sandhya, she speaks about it within the safe space of her family. But it does not get the attention it requires. It silences her. I believe there are no silent people, only silenced ones. I had to understand what makes Sandhya persistent in her choices and how her actions help find closure for herself and in the process, benefit others."

It is this childhood incident and how the family pushes things under the carpet, says Suresh Babu, that makes the story compelling. "I have been privy to how families hush up an issue; it could be a child's attention deficiency syndrome. In *Cheekatilo*, a young girl is molested and there is silence. I think it is important to convey that issues need to be discussed – to help the person find the strength to not be weighed down by it."

Since her debut in *Raman Raghav 2 to Monkey Man*, *Kalaakaandi* to *Ponniyin Selvan*, Sobhita says her process of getting into the headspace of characters has been to understand their inner worlds. "I try to emote from an understanding of how that character would express herself. It would be odd if all the characters I portray expressed anger, sadness or happiness the same way."

Asserting that she intends to take up more work in Telugu cinema, Sobhita says, "I look at *Cheekatilo* as a bridge to reconnect with the Telugu audience. I did not have a reference point on how I wanted to shape my filmography. I realised that I had to forge my own path and have the courage to try out new things. Even when a film had not worked commercially, it was gratifying when it paved the way for other good opportunities."



Crime chronicles
Sobhita Dhulipala. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Cheekatilo streams on Prime Video from January 23



Shot by Krishna Soren and with music by Satish Chakravarthy, *Paro* has already been screened in leading film festivals, including the Cannes Film Festival and Chicago South Asian Film Festival