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On the track with Tamil Nadu's young cyclists at the Track Asia Cup 2026 P3

**BRIDAL MANTRA IS
RELAUNCHED P3**



**Here
for the
cheers**

FULL STORY ON
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Before cocktail menus and rooftop lounges, Chennai drank discreetly in quiet permit rooms. We visit four old-school bars at Maris, Ranjith, Ashoka and Palmgrove to meet the regulars — over rasam vada and a peg of history



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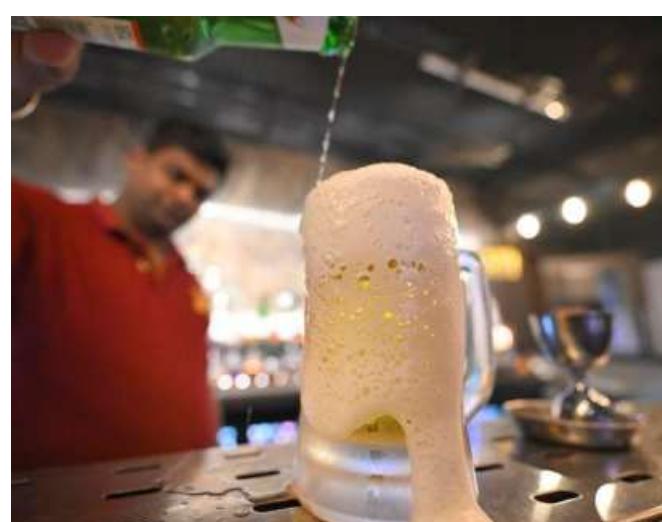
The Bar Madras Hotel Ashoka

Simply called The Bar, and marked only by a discreet glow sign above the hotel's main porch, the permit room at Madras Hotel Ashoka has been operating quietly yet steadily since 1982. The hotel came under the ownership of the Ballal Group of Mangalore after the previous promoters, LG Balakrishnan & Bros of Coimbatore, decided to exit the hospitality industry. Since then, the Ballal family has maintained the property with a sense of continuity and tradition. Set within sprawling grounds in the heart of Egmore, Madras Hotel Ashoka is a vegetarian establishment that draws a large and loyal clientele. Business travellers form a significant portion of its patrons, as do residents from the neighbourhood, many of whom are drawn to the hotel's tasty vegetarian fare and the sensibly priced offerings at The Bar. Today, the hotel operates under the collective leadership of K Jayavermaraj Ballal, with day-to-day operations overseen by director

Our favourites:
Jim Beam with a side of potato sticks and roasted groundnuts

Roshan Ballal. "As one of Chennai's oldest permit rooms, the charm of The Bar lies in its simplicity and continuity," Roshan explains. "Many guests have been coming here for decades. They appreciate the familiar snacks, the understated décor, the calming ambience, and even the greenery and ample parking. These evoke an era when hospitality was simpler and more personal, giving them a peaceful space in a busy city."

The Bar carries more than 50 varieties of liquor, and the snack menu is substantial, offering around 10 items. Among these, the rasam and sambar vadas remain particular favourites. The average guest is between 30 and 50 years old – mostly business travellers or professionals from the locality. Roshan adds that the hotel's open-air and banquet halls host events throughout the year, and attendees from these programmes often visit the bar before or after their functions. Two friends who meet here regularly chat about why they like visiting. "We always sit at our usual table at the far end," one of them said. "It gives us the privacy we want." Their preference is so well known that the bartender occasionally asks newcomers to shift seats so the regulars can occupy their familiar spot. "Most people oblige – they understand the comfort of a familiar table," says Harinarayanan, barman.



The Permit Room on Cathedral Road Hotel Maris

Sometimes the universe aligns with human effort, altering destinies. Such was the story of Mariapillai, a landlord-farmer from Manachanallur in Tiruchi. His life took an extraordinary turn when he moved from being a labour contractor to becoming the owner of a tea estate – a gesture of trust from the British planters who recognised his integrity. His success set the stage for the next generation. In 1975, his son Rengaswamy Pillai purchased a one-acre plot on Cathedral Road and built a hotel there, naming it Hotel Maris in honour of his father.

"My grandfather had the privilege of booking the first room," recalls Rengaswamy's son, Anand Rangaswamy, who now runs the establishment. "A few years later, in 1979, we opened our bar, then known as a permit room. My grandfather, a cognac connoisseur, inaugurated The Permit Room with the first drink, which was Honey Bee Brandy because, cognac was a rarity in bars like ours those days. We retained the name but added 'on Cathedral Road' for better identification." The hotel, true to its heritage, continues to operate as a vegetarian property.

The Permit Room is elegantly designed with an L-shaped layout that seats around 80 guests. Its straight-backed chairs and four-seater tables suit both hurried business meetings during the day and relaxed evening gatherings. Soft lighting and subdued instrumental music create a calm atmosphere, perfect for conversation – a quality appreciated by its regular clientele, many of whom are business travellers or neighbourhood patrons aged between 40 and 75.

The bar's snack menu is intentionally light, keeping the age group in mind: boiled groundnuts, sundal, murukku, cornflakes, and peanuts. The highlight, however, is the popular rasam vada, a favourite among guests. "We take pride in the range of liquor we stock and keep our pricing competitive," says Anand. While draught beer is not served due to inconsistent supply, the bar offers a generous variety of spirits. Cocktails are minimal, but a Bloody Mary is always an option.

A simple raise of the hand is all it takes for a waiter to refresh a drink – a small gesture that captures the warmth and understated charm of The Permit Room on Cathedral Road.

Our favourites:
Yamazaki Single Malt whisky with rasam vada and onion pakoda

Here for the cheers

Nikhil Raghavan

In the early 1970s, we drank at permit rooms. A Permit Room (as bars were known back in the day), was a licensed, designated area within or attached to a hotel or liquor shop, where patrons were permitted to consume liquor on-premises, legally carrying with them a 'permit', issued by the authorities concerned.

The only watering holes, these Government-regulated bars were

tucked inside a few hotels. And as the name suggests, patrons actually needed a Government-issued permit to order a drink.

Now, in a city sparkling with modern cocktail menus and trendy lounge bars, some of these bars remain unchanged, offering a quiet space for loyal regulars, with familiar menus and staff. Three of these are vegetarian, offering rasam vada and peanuts with your whiskies.

We visit four of the oldest hotels in Chennai to try their iconic bars.



Our favourites:
Vat 69 (old world whisky in an old-world bar) with masala vada /chutney and peanut masala

with his drink, shared his reasons for returning: "I come for the silence, the calm, and the quick service. Many of us are from traditional families where drinking at home is taboo, so this place becomes our quiet corner." Ajri adds, "Most of our guests – whether at the hotel or the bar – are from the business community or the local neighbourhood." Ramba Bar offers the popular whisky, brandy, vodka, and rum selections, along with a decent range of beer. The demand here is for practical IMFL favourites rather than exotic or high-end

labels, though a Scotch is occasionally poured. The snacks are simple too – chips, peanuts, mixture – with vada and chutney being the signature item.

Fridays and Saturdays see the highest footfall, while Sundays tend to be slow. With four competing bars in the vicinity serving non-vegetarian dishes, Ramba Bar faces stiff competition. Yet its familiarity, ample parking, well-known faces, and unhurried atmosphere continue to draw middle-aged and older patrons who appreciate its quiet, steady presence.

Ramba bar Hotel Palmgrove

Hotel Palmgrove, in fact, predates Hotel Maris by a few years. The original Palmgrove was established in 1971 by its earlier promoters, but after a difficult start and a period of decline, it was almost forced to shut down. Its fortunes changed in 1973 when the Ballal Group of Mangalore took over and restored the hotel to stability and respectability.

The hotel's permit room, the Ramba Bar, opened in 1981. "Keeping with tradition, we've always chosen mythological names – Urvashi for the conference hall, Menaka for the restaurant, Indrasabha for the mini hall, and Ramba for the bar," explains general manager B

Sukeerthi Raja Ajri, who has been associated with the hotel since 1973.

Over the decades, while Palmgrove's restaurant and banquet services have enjoyed steady patronage, the Ramba Bar has had a tougher run. It remains a modest 35-seater with limited décor and a bar stock that is far from extensive. Yet, it has a quiet charm that keeps regulars coming back. Bartender T Murugesan, who has been with the hotel for eight years, says, "We have many regular customers – some stay at the hotel, others live nearby."

One such regular, sitting alone

Crystal Bar Hotel Ranjith

In 1972, PV John from Kerala arrived in then-Madras city and entered the hospitality industry by establishing what came to be known as Hotel Ranjith. His son, PJ Eapen, the hotel's current managing director, had never planned on joining the business. But circumstances changed when he moved to Chennai to care for his ailing mother. With his father occupied with her treatment, Eapen gradually stepped in to manage the hotel and eventually became deeply involved in its operations.

As the hospitality landscape evolved and demand grew, the family expanded the business by opening a permit room – the now-iconic Crystal Bar.

Eapen's son, John Eapen, who is taking on a larger role in the family enterprise, recalls, "We come from a conservative community that traditionally frowned upon involvement in the liquor business."

Perhaps for this reason, when Crystal Bar was opened, it was housed in a standalone structure within the hotel premises. Over the years, it developed its own identity, becoming well known not only for its drinks but also for popular dishes such as Afghani chicken, crab cutlets, fish Malabar, and chicken rolls.

Established in 1986, Crystal remains one of the finest among Chennai's older hotel bars. Its club-like seating – plush chairs, L-shaped sofas, and

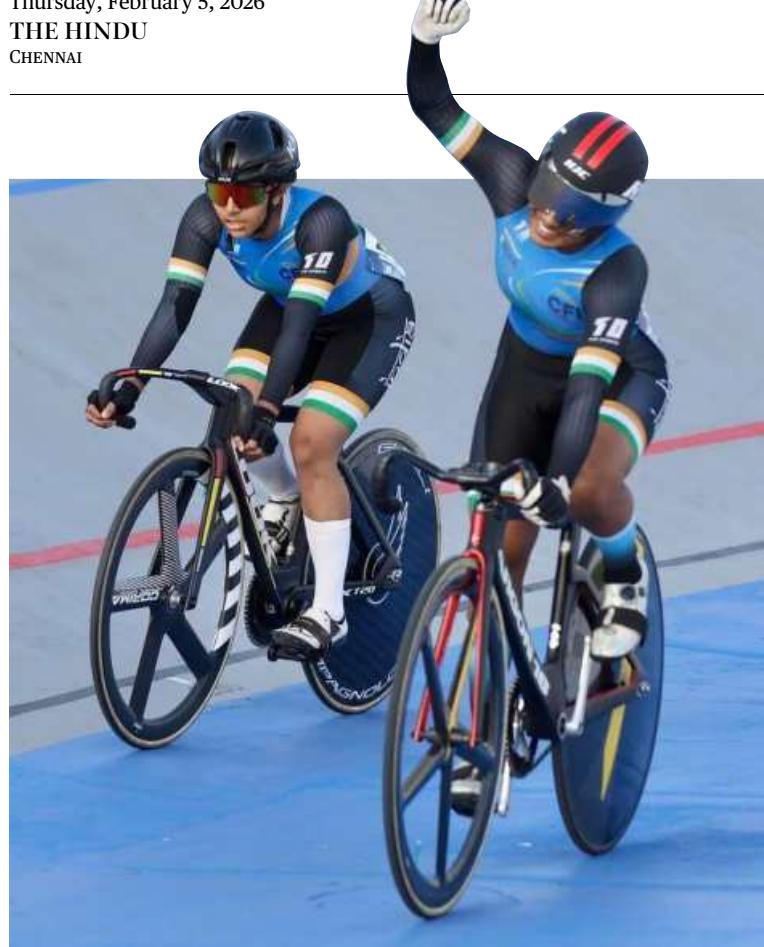
Our favourites:
Chilli idli, crab cutlets and Madras Masti (whisky, ginger, mint, plum and pomegranate)

granite-topped tables – creates an intimate, relaxed setting. The lighting is soft and the music deliberately low. "Sometimes, when the bar is full, we turn the music off completely because guests prefer to focus on their conversations," says John. Beloved for its old-world charm, Crystal has become a preferred gathering place for both older patrons and younger regulars seeking a nostalgic, unhurried ambience. "It's not just a bar. Its 40-year legacy is a testament to consistency and quality," adds Eapen John. This is probably why

Crystal Bar attracts the youth – senior college students and young professionals. Says one of the six in a group present, "We like to talk, exchange news, speak about music and enjoy the peaceful ambience of this old-world bar which allows us to do so, in contrast to some of the noisy pubs."

Bartender Venkatesh, who has served at Hotel Ranjith for 25 years, observes that guests aged 40 and above tend to favour brandy, rum, and vodka. "We're also one of the best-stocked bars in the city," he says. "Crystal offers a curated selection of premium imported spirits – single malts, bourbons, VSOPs, and even special liqueurs like absinthe. Occasionally, groups of college students stop by for a quick drink before heading to the restaurant," says Venkatesh. The snacks remain simple, with the ever-popular chilli idli topping the list.





Cycle of success (Clockwise from left) Thabitha S at a race; Thabitha S, Srimathi J and Jai Jyotshna; and Srimathi Jesudasan. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Building on laps

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When I was in school, the school celebrities who were usually the athletes, were defined by their absence. They came in to write exams, disappeared again, and returned months later with medals and accolades we heard about but never saw earned. We joked about how easy their lives must be to skip school and play games all day. What we never saw was how much of childhood they traded, and how lonely that kind of discipline can be.

At the recently concluded Track Asia Cup, a UCI Class-2 cycling competition in Chennai, we met four teenage girls who are living a version of the same trade-off. Niraimathi Jesudasan, Jai Jyotshna, Thabitha S and Srimathi Jesudasan move through days split between early-morning training, self-study done in fragments, and long hours spent with coaches, teammates and competition.

"We come from a very poor background, all our equipment, shoes, and cycles were given to us by Kanimozhi ma'am (Thoothukkudi MP, Kanimozhi Karunanidhi). The more medals we won, the more she helped us,

Four teenage cyclists offer a close look at the discipline that often goes unseen behind competitive sport

so we got the confidence to keep going," says Niraimathi Jesudasan who hails from Thoothukkudi. Niraimathi fared well under the Women Elite - Time Trial category finishing 1km at 1 minute 24 seconds in this tournament.

Her older sister, Srimathi Jesudasan also fared well in two categories; Women Elite - Keirin, and Women Elite - Sprint. "My father was a tailor and we went through a lot during the pandemic. I participated in the Thoothukkudi district championship for cycling and won a gold medal after only

training for a few months, and the more I trained, the more medals I won. I have around 20 medals in various championships now," she says.

"When I lived in Coimbatore, a mud track opened near my house, and I only had an MTB bike then. I participated in the club race and came in third without any practice. This motivated my parents to find a coach who helped me hone my skills, and I started training seriously. I then participated in road cycling, and eventually started track when we moved to Chennai," says 18-year-old Jai Jyotshna A, who came in fifth under the Women Junior - Sprint category at the Asai Cup. "I train from 9am to 11am, then after lunch I study for exams because I'm in Class XII now. I spend all my rest and recovery time studying, and then go back to training," she says.

The gold medal winner in Women Junior - Sprint category, Thabitha Shaffi, is an overall sports enthusiast. A kabbadi player, and athletics enthusiast, she participated in any sporting event she could get her hands on. "I participated in a local cycling race, and came in fourth

and the coach encouraged me to train more and focus on cycling. I was asked to quit kabbadi because of the high risk of injuries. I went to my first national camp in Hyderabad, then to Kerala," she says. Over the years, the 18-year-old has won several medals including a silver medal at the Khelo India Youth Games held in Bihar in 2025.

The outdoor cycling track, the SDAT Velodrome in the TNPESU campus, where the championship was hosted, was built with international championship standards in mind. "The access to sports has been made easy in the last few years. Since the TN Government has put effort into developing the infrastructure, young athletes feel

motivated to participate more," says M Sudhakar, president, Tamil Nadu Cycling Association (TNCA).

For all four of them, there is little sense of arrival. Training resumes the next morning, studies continue in the margins, and competitions come and go. "I started cycling at this very track, and to participate in an international event at the same track is a moment of pride for me. This is the beginning," says Thabitha.



25 years of Ruhaniyat
Banyan Tree's Ruhaniyat – Seeking the Divine, celebrates its 25th edition. It presents folk, Sufi, Baul, Qawwali, and other music traditions creating an immersive experience for audiences. @Madras Race Club, Guindy. February 7, 6.30pm onwards. For details, call 9324332260. Tickets at bookmyshow

Summer ready
The Summer House brings its long-standing classics and recent collections to the city through a pop-up

Sangita Rajan
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Last week, Shimla was blanketed in a fresh layer of snow, the IMD issued cold-wave alerts for Delhi, and parts of Rajasthan recorded near-zero temperatures. In Chennai, however, winter barely registered. The city is already preparing for summer. That makes the timing apt for The Summer House, the

Bengaluru-based conscious fashion label's pop-up in Chennai this week at Studio Samasta, a curated multi-designer boutique.

"We will be bringing all our classic styles that have worked for The Summer House for over 10 years now, along with our recent collections. These are styles that can work anywhere from a vacation to a holiday, a date, an intimate dinner, or even a party," says brand manager Puranasi Ganesan.

Comfort wear A piece from the new collection.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The Summer House works with hand processes, relying on artisan-led techniques. "We use traditional techniques, but we create contemporary garments. When people think of block prints, they usually imagine florals, we try to make

them abstract and modern," says Puranasi.

"Chennai works really well for us because of the weather and the kind of clothes we make. We don't follow trends, we design pieces that last, and that's something the city



responds to," says Puranasi. The emphasis on breathable fabrics and silhouettes that prioritise ease aligns closely with how the city dresses through most of the year.

At the pop-up, visitors will be able to browse across collections, place made-to-order requests, and explore colour and size customisations. "Rekha (Rekha Datla, co-founder) and I will be there on all three days, styling customers, helping them find what works best for them, and taking orders, including customisations," says Puranasi.

The Summer House will host its pop-up at Studio Samasta, Alwarpet, till February 7, 11am to 7pm

Dog's day out



The Madras Canine Club concluded its two-day All Breeds Championship Dog Show at St. Bede's School Cricket Ground, Mylapore, marking its Golden Jubilee year. The event featured obedience trials and three specialty shows — the Indian Breed National Specialty, the Dobermann National Specialty, and the 19th Great Dane Specialty Show. There was also a junior handlers show with handlers aged 12 to 16. Over 40 dog breeds from across India participated, including indigenous breeds and rarer entries such as the Rhodesian Ridgeback and Basenji. The championships were officiated by an international panel of judges from Indonesia, Romania, Macedonia, Australia and the Netherlands. JOHAN SATHYADAS



Craft and couture
Coimbatore-based Vaaruni Jewels, led by Madhu Varun will present its new line, Viaara Fine Jewels. Complementing the jewellery showcase is Anand Kabra's Ombré 2026 collection, which explores dip-dyed ombré techniques. Together, the two brands offer a conversation between form, craft,

and permanence, blending fine jewellery with thoughtfully designed fashion. @Collage, Nungambakkam, February 6 and 7, from 11am to 7.30pm For details, call 9500082600



Celebrating SPB, ARR
Candlelight® by Live Your City presents a special concert celebrating SP Balasubramanian and AR Rahman – two legends who shaped the soundscape of Indian music. The performances will reflect the range and influence of their extraordinary musical journeys. @ Museum Theatre, Egmore. February 8 – SPB tribute at 6pm and ARR tribute at 8pm Tickets at livelyourcity.com

THE GUARDIAN QUICK CROSSWORD-39

Across

- 7 Strong (6)
- 8 Higher in rank (6)
- 9 Horn structure at the end of digits (4)
- 10 Diffuse through (8)
- 11 Make wider (7)
- 13 Persistent open sore (5)
- 15 Evade work (5)
- 16 A little spot (7)
- 18 Seen at bottom of fingernail (4-4)
- 19 Work hard (4)
- 21 The spirit or soul (6)
- 22 Being haughty (6)
- Down**
- 1 Performed alone (4)
- 2 Forgo one's needs (4-9)
- 3 A bung (7)
- 4 Take possession by force (5)
- 5 Provisional decree (13)
- 6 Use of gentle persuasion (4,4)

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12 Practice (8)

14 Rod for twisting thread (7)

17 Entrance hall (5)

20 Lazily (4)

Solution No. 39

Comfort cinema

It's the season of romance. Here's what to expect from latest Tamil film, *With Love*, starring Abishan Jeevith and Anaswara Rajan and produced by Soundarya Rajinikanth



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When was the last time you went to watch a Tamil rom-com that left you feeling warm and fuzzy? The dearth of good rom-coms in Tamil is real. The reception for 2024's Malayalam hit *Premalu* in Tamil Nadu clearly underscored the need for good old-school, simple meet-cutes, and as of now, only *Aaramaley* has come close to fulfilling that urge. Following in those footsteps is this Valentine's month release, *With Love*, which promises to be a simple, sweet rom-com.

"Lately we haven't had as many rom-coms in Tamil like we used to. Many who have wished me for *With Love* said that they have been missing this genre in Tamil," says Abishan Jeevith, the director of last year's blockbuster *Tourist Family*, who is making his debut as a lead actor in *With Love*. Joining him in the cast as the heroine is Anaswara Rajan, the budding star of Malayalam cinema who is making her Tamil debut as a lead.



Lately we haven't had as many rom-coms in Tamil like we used to. Many who have wished me for With Love said that they have been missing this genre in Tamil

ABISHAN JEEVINTH
ACTOR

The *Rekhachithram*-star believes that 'love' as a concept never goes out of fashion in cinema. "Maybe how we tell love stories might get saturated, but not love as a subject. In fact, one can speak so much through love stories, be it a person's life, their emotions, or how their childhoods shape who they become."

In *With Love*, directed by Madhan, Anaswara plays Monisha, a modern, opinionated girl, who, Anaswara says, "is someone who stays grounded to reality". Abishan plays Sathya. "He is an innocent boy, and what I like about him the most is how he would apologise instantly when he makes a mistake and take responsibility upon himself." From the teaser and trailer, both Sathya and Monisha appear as youngsters who carry their heart on their sleeve. Is there a secret to making a character feel vulnerable while ensuring the nuances remain relatable to larger audiences? Abishan says he is still figuring it out and urges the relatively more experienced

Anaswara to answer. "In some films, you would have to dig into the many layers of the characters and see how to perform; in certain films, you just have to perform what's required without thinking much, and that would be enough," says the actor.

Both Anaswara and Abishan are stepping into a new year after tasting career-defining success in 2025. While *Tourist Family* continues to turn heads, Anaswara delivered stellar performances in *Vyasasanametham*, *Bandhumithradhikal* and *Rekhachithram*. Abishan believes in enjoying success to the fullest, but only up to a mark. "I enjoyed everything that happened with *Tourist Family* to the fullest; I read all the feedback I got, and I visited many theatres and saw the reactions of the people. At the same time, once it got over, I didn't think about it again. As of now, I am only waiting for the release of *With Love*." For Anaswara, the moments of uncertainty that life in cinema is bound to throw at you balance it out. "I enjoy my success. I do live in the moment, but there would be this tiny moment at which you would worry about the future, about what will happen next. Those tiny moments would definitely take you out of that zone," she says.

Interestingly, it is the uncertainty of what lies ahead that also seems to thrill the actor in Anaswara. She says that it is something that she is both in love with and afraid of. "The idea that nothing in cinema is permanent, be it the characters, the sets, or the people; you are constantly going from set to set and from character to character." She adds that she likes that movement. "There's this last moment where you look into the mirror, and you are like, 'Okay, I will no longer play this character.' Then I would detach from that character and move on. I am used to it, and so I think life has been moving quite smoothly."

As both Abishan and Anaswara suggest, nothing in cinema is permanent. While actors move on, what remains on screen is what was created with love.

With Love
releases in
theatres on
February 6



Comeback mode

Srinivasa Ramanujam

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Soundarya Rajinikanth's office room is filled with all things cinema. Among posters of *The Pursuit of Happiness*, *Iruvar* and *101 Dalmations* is a poster of *Kochadaiyaan*, her 2014 animation film starring her father and Tamil superstar, Rajinikanth.

A poster of *With Love* will soon be added to this collection. Starring Abishan Jeevith and Anaswara Rajan, the Tamil release marks Soundarya's comeback as a producer to Tamil cinema.

"Yes, it is a comeback," says Soundarya, in a tone that reminds one of her father's punchline 'Na Thirumbi Vanthuten Nu Sollu' from *Kabali*, "My break from films was not intentional; my personal life and children were my priority, and there was the pandemic phase. Now, I have come back with a lot of new learnings. There is a lot of young blood in the industry."

With Love, which features much of that young blood that she is referring to, caught her attention in many ways. The fact that the film is a rom-com helped... for, Tamil cinema has chosen guns over roses in the last few years. "I binge-watch *Friends* even today, and have loved watching *Shameless* and *Modern Family* over the years. Someone recently used the term 'comfort cinema', which I really liked. *With Love* is comfort cinema."

Stars in their eyes
Soundarya, the younger daughter of Rajinikanth and Latha, grew up in Chennai, at a time when her father was a public figure. "We always knew he was a star and would attract attention when he went out," she recalls, "We missed him a lot as he led a hectic lifestyle."

While her childhood featured multiple trips to shooting spots and dubbing suites, Soundarya's biggest source of joy arrived in the form of *Kochadaiyaan*. Armed with expertise in animation, Soundarya attempted – back in 2014 – India's first photorealistic motion capture film. "Animation is my first love. I grew up reading Amar Chitra Katha comics, and *Kochadaiyaan* is, after all, my first baby."

However, the film drew criticism, with audiences dubbing it as a 'bomma padam' starring Rajinikanth.

Was it judged

too quickly? "I kept thinking: 'Why would people not support and welcome such a new attempt?' I was too young then and too passionate about the project at that time, so I did not know how to deal with such negative criticism."

In this day and age of re-releases – the re-release of Rajinikanth's *Padayappa* was among the highlights of Tamil cinema in 2025 – does she envision a re-release for *Kochadaiyaan*, made advanced with technology and AI? "Talks are on," she smiles, "If I made the film today, it would be so different... right from pre-production, character design and storyboarding."

Soundarya looks at the theatrical success of the 2024 animated devotional film *Mahavat Narsimha* as a positive sign. "Producers have to back animation content. I hope Indian entertainment accepts animation in the mainstream medium."

Playing Cupid
Anaswara Rajan and Abishan Jeevith in a still from *With Love*; (below) Soundarya Rajinikanth.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT AND SHIVA RAJ S

What is your favourite romance film?

Abishan: *Kadhalum Kadanthu Pogum*. I love how the male lead wouldn't change himself for her, and yet, would wish how good it would be if he could. The film travelled in that zone quite beautifully. Even the chemistry between the two leads was quite nice...it's a comfort watch.

Anaswara: *One Day* is my favourite rom-com. They are friends first, and there's an emotional arc to their equation. I usually don't cry much while watching films, but this film made me weep.

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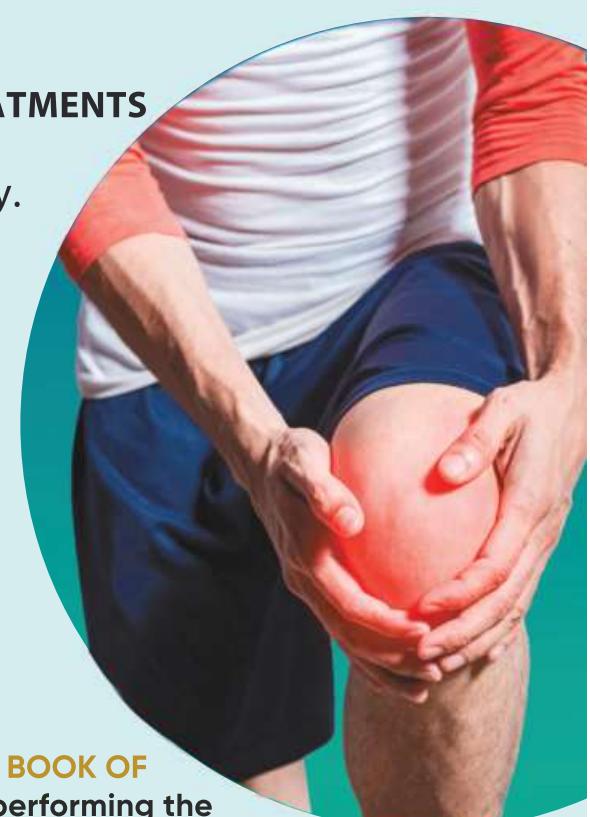
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Mammootty, Dhanush team up for Rajkumar

The casting choices for Dhanush's next film (D55) is making heads turn. Malayalam superstar Mammootty has joined the cast of this upcoming film to be directed by Amaran filmmaker Rajkumar Periasamy. Mammootty, whose recent on-screen appearance was in Malayalam flick *Kalamkaval*, was last seen in Tamil cinema in director Ram's *Peranbu* in 2019. Wunderbar Films, Dhanush's production banner, announced this exciting update recently. Notably, this announcement comes just days after the makers announced that Sai Pallavi is part of the cast; D55, marks a reunion between Dhanush and Sai Pallavi after *Maari 2*, which featured them in the hit song 'Rowdy Baby'. Sreeleela, recently seen in Sivakarthikeyan's *Parasakthi*, is also part of the project that has music scored by Sai Abhyankar.