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THE HINDU



A showcase of Madras Art Movement’s most famous works, in small-format **P4**

FILMS IN 2025: HITS, MISSES AND HOPE **P4**

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The advent of 2026 brings with it axioms as old as time. Take for instance the latest: “New year, new me,” a Gen Z favourite. Team *MetroPlus* however, is intent on taking the pressure off resolutions, and instead focussing on ushering in the days with intention and energy. It is why we have turned to four musicians, grinding through Margazhi season, who have been focussed on their own journeys to keep their body fit, and their minds still. Although one does not associate musicians with strength training, yoga, meditation, and running, here are celebrities who tell us what has gotten them moving. Here’s to taking a page from their books. Also, new year greetings from us to you!



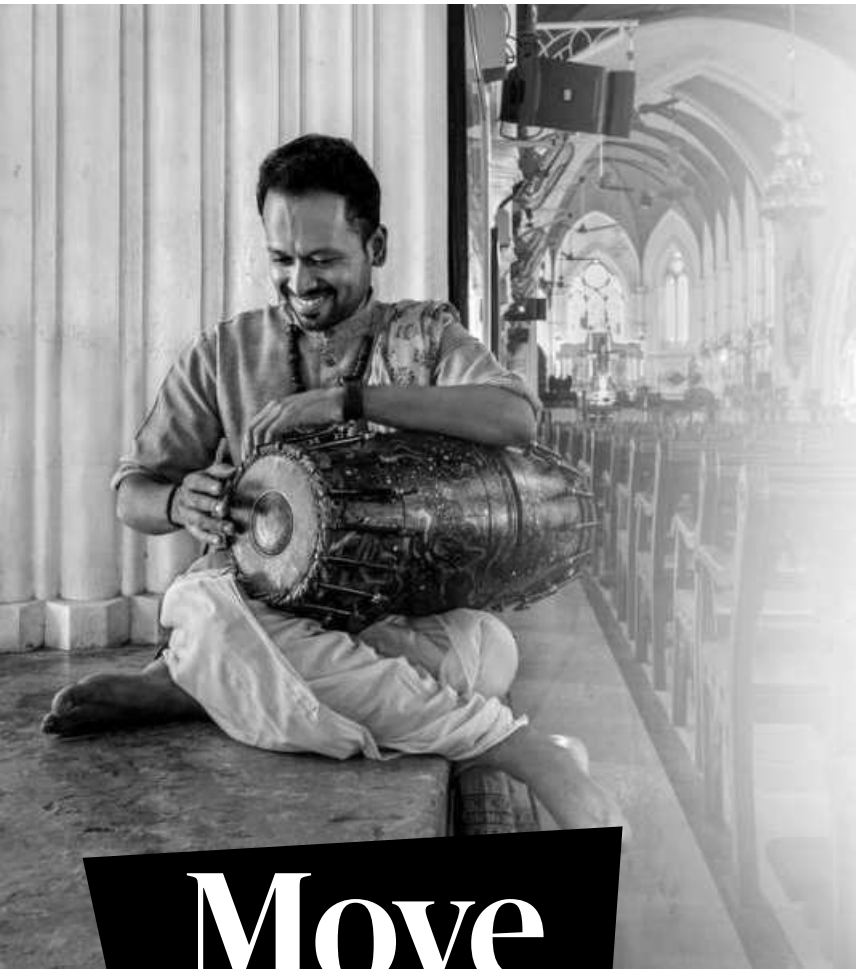
Vishnu R.
Instrumentalist focussing on the Navtar

Being a touring musician who travels nine out of 12 months in a year, the main challenge is routine. An activity that has worked for me effectively is yoga every morning. It could be as simple as doing many rounds of suryanamaskar. I also take my pranayama and meditation seriously. Besides this, I also tend to trek, hike, and run when I have the time.

Some of the more interesting recent challenges have been completing the Thorong La Pass, the highest point of Nepal’s Annapurna Circuit Trek, and the Grand Canyon hike that my wife and I did. They tend to push me out of my comfort zone, fitness-wise. But this was not always the case. There was a lull during COVID, where it was easier to sometimes sleep in after travelling and eat at odd hours. Much of that has changed since 2022.

As someone who lives to eat, I do not put serious restrictions on what I eat. However, I enjoy walking. When I travel, I tend to sometimes clock 30,000 steps on a single day. That tends to balance things. I also eat only two meals as I practise intermittent fasting. Eating the second meal early has helped me wake up fresher.

The thing about musicians and instrumentalists is that a lot of our job involves being stationary. It hence becomes important to ensure that the kind of workout we do does not hamper our performance. One bad move can put us out of the season. Our work also is demanding on the mind as we must both perform and be active in social situations. This can be fatiguing. For that, pranayama helps. I am excited to get rid of the mental clutter and focus even more on my fitness goals in 2026.



Move stretch breathe

It takes a lot more than practising ragas for musicians to be in top form each concert season. As we usher in 2026, artistes tell us the secret to taking charge and keeping fit, physically and mentally



Praveen Sparsh,
Mridangam artiste

People do not realise how much it takes for musicians and instrumentalists to perform well on stage. My passion for fitness, however, was similar to what it is like today. There was a time in college when I was overweight and unfit. I was not able to play to my full potential. Training regularly has shown me that there certainly is some form of impact. Especially for instrumentalists whose posture and breathwork tend to matter. This is why spending 45 minutes every day on my body has become non-negotiable nowadays. I do not like entering this advice mode with my students, but it is imperative to workout, stretch and breathe.

More than saying that I love fitness, it is perhaps a good idea to say that I love activities. I play badminton, love to trek, cycle and run too. I also enjoy going to the



beach and walking . My last big trek was the Everest Base Camp so that was an interesting feat. As someone who gets bored, I do not do the same thing every day and try to switch it up from the daily gym routine. I am no longer putting pressure and ticking protein, and fibre off a checklist every day. I eat in moderation, based on what I find where I am and have stopped obsessing over what my plate looks like.

When it comes to mental fitness, musicians are required to stay on an even keel because much of our conversation happens on stage. We respond to music. One cannot switch on and off after a job. There was a time when we were performing four kutchcheris a day, but that is not sustainable now so I have brought it down to two.

I also like to do some body-based work instead of watching something on the television to relax.

I don’t want to stress about any resolutions. I am not that kind of person. I am just happy with what I am doing.



Vandana Srinivasan,
Hindustani Classical musician

I consider it very important to integrate fitness in my regular routine as a musician and aim at working out four or five times a week. Yoga has been a constant companion for more than 20 years and I find that to be very helpful. Voice rest is as important as practice and that is an area that I need to be more mindful of.

I don’t make any particular modifications to my life during season time but if my days are looking too packed, I reduce the intensity of my exercise routine. On a concert day, I might opt for a lighter set of exercises with increased focus on breath work, but I make sure there is some form of movement.

I’ve always been active, but my regimens have looked different over the

years. I found it particularly important when I joined the film industry and saw the lack of structure/routine around me. Incorporating a consistent fitness routine helped me overcome the toll of erratic schedules, travel and irregular work hours.

I do monitor what I eat, but I don’t believe in a very restrictive diet or associating guilt with food. I try to keep my meals balanced. What you eat makes a big difference to your stamina, especially on concert days.

Everything depends on the head office (pun intended), so I make sure I do whatever it takes to keep the spirits high and the mind centred. Reading, yoga, listening to music, going for a walk, making a cup of tea and savouring it in silence are some of my favourite ways to keep calm.

I wish to remain as consistent with my routine, read more, be regular with practice, and listen to a lot more music.

Sudha Raghunathan,
Carnatic musician

Whether we like it or not, accept it or not, fitness has to be integrated into one’s routine as a musician. I have realised that and attached importance to it, particularly after my pregnancy. I was conscious about the need for it to be a regular part of my life, but I started to put it into practice in my mid-30s. Overall physical fitness contributes to one’s stamina and energy levels. That in turn helps maintain vocal hygiene.

My training is varied, and I make a choice between meditation, yoga, strength training, using the treadmill and walking in Nature. I do not stick to a routine though. Especially when I travel, much of it goes for a toss.

However, in the run-up to Margazhi there is always more awareness of the need for exercise, and watching what I eat, when and how. Usually, I have a ‘no junk food, nor food that is highly citric or cold’ rule. Besides this, I find that it is essential to quieten the mind daily with meditation. Positive affirmations and listening to music help too. To remove my mind off music completely though, I watch films.

Resolutions are difficult to live up to with my kind of schedule. But I do know that I’m going to increase my focus on health. One must feel happy for all that is. Smile and laugh out!



Karuna Amarnath

Perhaps it was closer than I had imagined – like a truck looming suddenly in the rear-view mirror as I sped down the freeway. The big four-oh! (40) arrived faster than an email on a Monday morning.

The journey getting here had been exhilarating. Goals were ticked off with satisfying regularity, accolades stacked neatly on my desk. From journalist to PR professional, and eventually sales and marketing director, the corporate waves kept building. I rode them confidently, convinced the rush of the surf made everything worthwhile. Yet, between those seemingly idyllic crests, a quiet question began to gnaw: Is this really all?

A life once rich with balance

In my twenties, balance came easily. Work was only one strand of a richly textured life – part-time stage actor, outdoors enthusiast, sports lover. As I climbed the corporate ladder, though, that balance had somehow gotten skewed. Travel, once my greatest joy, became about work events. I was always on the clock and yet never had time for the things I loved – or the people who mattered most.

Standing on the red carpet at the premiere of HBO Original *The White Lotus* Season 3 at Four Seasons Resort Koh Samui, surrounded by flashbulbs and champagne flutes, the realisation landed hard: my world had been subtly subverted. The glamour of big-city life, high-octane meetings, and relentless jet-setting had glossed over the grind – 30-60-90-day action plans, sales targets, and calendars packed tighter than a carry-on suitcase.

They say life comes full circle. For me, that moment arrived in May last year. I learned that PERCH, a vibrant collective of artists and theatre practitioners, was reviving *Under The*



Life at 40 (Clockwise from far left) Hand-painted wooden ornaments; actor Maya S Krishnan and Karuna Amarnath; a performer in full kattai vesham. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Equally compelling is the relationship with the audience. People walk in and out, nap, or call out mistakes mid-performance. The audience knows the form intimately; they are participants, not passive observers. This constant dialogue makes Kattai-kuttu alive and ever-evolving.

Learning at Kattai-kuttu Sangam

On the outskirts of Kanchipuram, Rajagopal and Hanne de Bruin have built Kattai-kuttu Sangam – a sanctuary for preserving and nurturing the form. Learning here is fully immersive. Once practised exclusively by men, Rajagopal's inclusion of women in lead roles has transformed it. Rajagopal's discipline underpins everything: rehearsals exacting, repetition relentless, precision non-negotiable. Yet his students – now teachers – mirror his generosity, ensuring no one is left behind until every voice catches up.

The challenges are many – learning Tamil verses, mastering complex rhythms, executing *kirukis* (pirouettes) under elaborate costumes. Three months barely scratch the surface of an art form that demands a lifetime. Yet, this experience has given me space to reset and reassess what truly matters.

As 2026 dawns, I see the year behind me split in two: six months in Bangkok, sharp-heeled and fluorescent; six months barefoot on village soil, where time moves to an older rhythm. The rigour that once defined my corporate self hasn't vanished – it has been refined, now rooted in song, movement, and centuries of practice.

As the rear view fades, this feels less like arrival and more like departure – into a chapter guided by barefoot steps, F-sharp ragas, and the enduring cadence of tradition.



Kattai-kuttu Sangam offers certification courses ranging from three to 10 months, with the next intake in February 2026. More details at kattai-kuttu.org. Students from the inaugural batch will perform Pagadai Thugil (Draupadi Vastrabaranam) on January 3 and January 10 at 6pm at Kattai-kuttu Sangam. Entry is free.

Resetting the tempo

As she reflects on her journey from a corporate career to a life steeped in art, Karuna Amarnath embraces a sabbatical in Kanchipuram

Mangosteen Tree – a collage of stories by iconic Malayalam writer VM Basheer. Stepping off a moving wheel is unnerving, especially when you have stayed the course so long. Yet, the timing felt serendipitous. What better way to mark a milestone than returning to a story – and a version of myself – I had once loved?

One month into my sabbatical, with 12 sold-out performances behind us, I found myself craving more. That craving led me somewhere unexpected and irresistible: an opportunity to study Kattai-kuttu, a traditional Tamil folk theatre form, under one of its living legends – Perungattur P Rajagopal. For the first time, he was opening his institution in Kanchipuram for a short-term immersive course.

Despite growing up in Chennai, Kattai-kuttu was unfamiliar terrain.

Performed on open village grounds, the language is imposing, the costumes overwhelming. Stitched together with high-pitched verse and relentless rhythm, performances unfold through adrenaline-fuelled all-night vigils. The ornamentation tells its own story – elaborate wooden pieces, handmade using traditional methods. Musicians – mridangam, mugaveenai, and harmonium – work in complete partnership with performers. Passed down orally through generations, the form is guided solely by a teacher's lived knowledge.

Washed ashore

In Kaanadha Karai forces like land, fire, and water interact to forge reality



In brush strokes
Unseen Faith by Kalaiselvan Kumar. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

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Villupuram-based artist Kalaiselvan Kumar's upcoming exhibition, titled *Kaanadha Karai*, which translates to *Unseen Shore*, is an exploration of abstraction, one which captures his visual language of portraying the universe. Starting from January 3, at the Lalit Kala Akademi, the artworks embody fluid movements of waterbodies, the shifting gradient of the sky, and the silent, swirling energy of distant galaxies.

The concept centres on shores, where foundational forces like land, fire, and water interact to forge reality. “The paintings operate on the belief that in painting, there is no limit to imagination and no boundary for the search; it is a medium through which we can uncover the past while remaining free from the constraints of predicting the future,” says Kumar.

Most of the artworks have a heavy use of oil and pastel on canvas, which Selvan says is “purely intuitive.” For instance, one of the artworks, *Unseen Faith*, is an abstract study of conviction – the absolute certainty of things hoped for, yet unseen. The canvas is dominated by a surge of pure light that includes yellows, whites, and

pale golds.

Another artwork, *Divine Descent*, speaks of the fulfilment of faith, where the vast unseen power makes itself visible. The entire centre of the canvas is a luminous yellow and white impasto. The thick texture makes the light feel like a physical, active force, emphasising that the ‘descent’ is a transformative exchange of energy between two realms.

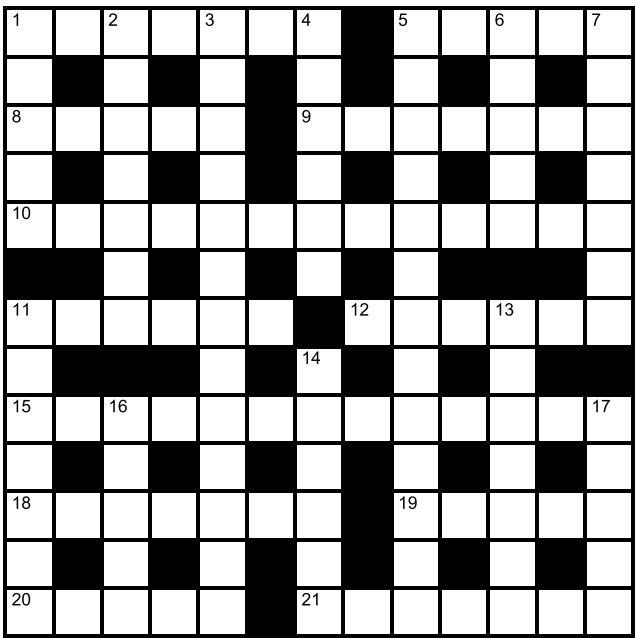
“I use mild and solid acrylic layers to define the initial structure. Once dry, the application of oil colours allows the two mediums to merge, creating new structures, colours, and a dramatic visual feeling,” says Kumar.

“Using heavy impasto and thick, radiant strokes allows the texture to become as communicative as the colour itself... these colours strengthen the theme and the canvas, providing depth that reflects the complexity of the themes,” he further adds.

Ultimately, Kumar points out that *Kaanadha Karai* is meant to be a celebration of the beauty found in overcoming adversity and the quiet strength of the phoenix rising from the fire.

Kaanadha Karai will be on from January 3 to 9 at the Lalit Kala Akademi, from 11.30am to 7pm. Entry is free

QUICK CROSSWORD #34 (Set by Doppelganger)



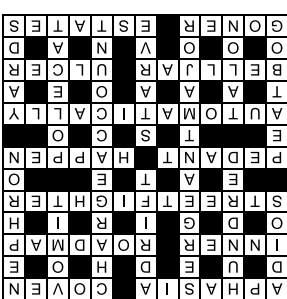
- Across**
- 1 Speaking or writing impairment (7)
 - 5 Gathering of witches (5)
 - 8 Closer to the centre (5)
 - 9 Route (4,3)
 - 10 One who has informally learnt boxing (6,7)
 - 11 Overly concerned with economic matters (6)
 - 12 Occur (6)
 - 15 In a reflex manner (13)
 - 18 Glass cover used in labs (4,3)
 - 19 Persistent open sore (5)
 - 20 Beyond hope of recovery (5)
 - 21 Tea or coffee plantations (7)
- Down**
- 1 Goodbye (5)
 - 2 Ton (7)
 - 3 Non-Commissioned officer (8,5)
 - 4 Without guidance (6)
 - 5 Credit arrangement (6,7)
 - 6 Emit out with force (5)
 - 7 Functional unit of vertebrate kidney (7)

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



- 11 Wet spongy ground of decomposing vegetation (4,3)
- 13 Mammal resembling a large weasel (7)
- 14 Deprive of something (6)
- 16 Claw (5)
- 17 Grounds (5)

Solution No. 34



Unveiling Keeladi

What began as fascination with an archaeological site near Madurai became a journey into history, identity, and the politics that shape how we see our past

Sowmiya Ashok

A decade ago, when news first broke about the Keeladi excavations, it stirred passionate responses among Tamil people. Keeladi, was seen as an urban township, revealing a large expanse of brick structures, ring wells, furnaces, and a variety of pottery. The artefacts found were diverse from glass beads to spindle whorls, to a unique carnelian stone carved in the shape of a boar.

The earth seemed to have offered up an origin story in tangible form. It was compelling enough for many to travel to Keeladi to see it themselves. They came to see where people, perhaps their ancestors, had once lived. Some even came to see what they felt was the origins of a unique Tamil civilisation.

My fascination for Keeladi began sometime in 2015, when I first read about the excavations in the newspaper. There was something exciting about an archaeological dig so close to home, only an eight-hour drive from Chennai. But it was during one of my visits to the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology's office in Chennai, that I realised how much the Keeladi excavations had captured public imagination in Tamil Nadu. Once, I watched a visitor walk past the

The excavations were far more complex than they first appeared. They came to light at a time of significant political churn and sat uneasily amid attempts to homogenise Indian history

Traces of identity (Clockwise from left) Keeladi museum in Sivaganga district; excavation sites in Keeladi; and the findings unearthed. MOORTHY G, ASHOK R AND SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



small bookshop near the entrance which had on display a glossy ₹50 book on Keeladi. He walked past it, then paused, turned back, examined the book, and decided to buy it. He even gave it a little hug as he walked away.

Since its discovery, Keeladi has gone from a routine archaeological site to an emotion for the Tamil people and has sparked an archaeology frenzy across Tamil Nadu. It has slowly evolved into a cultural symbol and eventually into a political tool used to assert a distinct culture. It propelled history from a boring paragraph in a textbook to a visual treat. It also created a new cohort of enthusiasts, everyday Tamils, who became custodians of history, by regularly reporting finds from their hometowns. All this kept archaeologists on their feet, constantly searching for new clues about the past.

Yet the excavations were far more complex than they first appeared. They came to light at a time of political churn and sat uneasily amid broader attempts to homogenise Indian history.

In *The Dig* I write about the search and discovery of Keeladi and the political narratives that crowded around it. The journey took me across Tamil Nadu, where I met history enthusiasts, archaeologists, historians, labourers on excavation sites, and the general public. My research offered a deeper understanding of how layered and contested our origin stories are and how politics often obscures this complexity. It revealed the extraordinary diversity of our country across its past, and present. A diversity that must be celebrated rather than ignored.

To me, Keeladi is the starting point, to explain this journey across time, and understand how far back the question of – who we are and where we came from – goes to. It is a complex story of how we perceive history through a modern socio-political lens and how much that shapes our identities.

Sowmiya Ashok is a journalist and the author of *The Dig*.



Music and lyrics
Rhea Raj; during a
shoot in Chennai;
and Rhea and Lara.
MARINA OYA AND
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

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Rhea Raj’s day in Chennai begins at 5am. “I think I am still a bit jet-lagged,” she laughs. “I get to have a nice long morning. I sit with my grandfather, have two cups of chai back-to-back and pick up a book to read. I went to the beach yesterday, and it was so rejuvenating,” she says. The Indian-American pop artiste has had a packed year. After performances at the iHeartRadio festival and her stage debut at Lollapalooza Chicago alongside Aliyah’s Interlude with a performance of their hit song ‘Haute Couture’, Rhea released her second EP, *Commotion*. In December, she went on her first headline tour of the same name across five venues in the US.

It has been over a year-and-a-half since her last visit to Chennai and in the last few days, Rhea has been treating her fans to several updates; from walks at Besant Nagar beach, a visit to the

When in Chennai

Indian-American pop artiste Rhea Raj is rediscovering Chennai with her sister Lara from pop girl group KATSEYE, savouring *elai saapad* and reflecting on her Tamil roots

Ashtalakshmi temple, attending a Bharatanatyam class, shopping for fruits, and decoding the dishes in an elaborate *ela saapad* she thoroughly enjoyed. “I feel like I go back to the US after a trip to Chennai feeling so much more alive and refreshed,” she says, over a video call from her grandfather’s house, looking every bit as relaxed as she

describes her time here. Rhea and her sister Lara Raj, who is part of the pop girl group KATSEYE, have drawn attention not only for their artistry, but also for their Tamil roots; a rarity in mainstream pop music. Their South-Asian, and Tamil identity in particular, is something both sisters speak about, and flaunt with pride.



seen sporting bindis, maang tikkas, and chunky Indian jewellery. Earlier this year at the Billboard Women in Music Awards, Rhea walked the red carpet draped in a sari that once belonged to her grandmother. “This felt like a big moment, a cultural statement; but is also something that has been a part of our lives forever,” she says. Rhea recalls how growing up in the US, there was very little to no representation in the entertainment field for Indians, specifically South Indians. “I now feel really proud, and excited to explore new ways of bringing the culture forward, even if it means something as simple as showing people the food that I’m eating every day at home like my rasam, which I absolutely love,” she says,

I feel like I go back to the US after a trip to Chennai feeling so much more alive and refreshed

RHEA RAJ

smiling. “Our fashion, food, music, and everything else is so vibrant and cool. I hope young kids see this, and they feel empowered and proud,” Rhea adds. During the *Commotion* tour as well, Rhea performed a Bharatanatyam dance break in her song ‘Hunter’, choreographed by her mother.

As a composer, producer, and lyricist of her songs, Rhea also has songwriting credits on ‘Priceless’ by Maroon 5, featuring Lisa of Blackpink. Be it in her latest EP *Commotion* which featured songs like ‘Mumbai’, ‘Killer’ and ‘Now That Ur Gone’, or her debut EP *Hunter*, Rhea’s songs are backed by her strong vocals, and themes of femininity and empowerment. “It is also about being the fiercest version of myself; that’s what also makes me feel good when I am performing onstage,” she says.

Looking ahead
Something she is excited to explore more in her next era of music, Rhea says, is vulnerable storytelling that delves into her relationships, past experiences and even her connection with spirituality.

“The *Commotion* tour was so energising for me. So, we are very much right now in the works of planning more live shows in the US, but also outside the US and being able to take the tour globally. And of course, the next big thing is new music,” she says, of what fans can expect from her in 2026.

Looking back at 2025, we ask Rhea about a moment that truly stood out for her. “From my tour, it was my show in Los Angeles where I got to perform at The Roxy. Not only was I concluding the tour in my hometown, but to be able to perform at a legendary venue which has hosted greats like Guns N’ Roses felt surreal,” she says.

Rhea and her parents were recently joined in Chennai by her sister Lara, as well. What are her plans in Chennai over the next few days, we ask. “Shopping! I am buying a lot more bindis, tikkas, and jhumkas to take back, for music videos, red carpet appearances and everything else. There are temple visits being planned, and I also just love to eat good food, so I am eating all the amazing food here,” she says.

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Anna Nagar: D. K. Kalyana Mandapam, W-114, 3rd Avenue, Near Round Thana - 600040
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Beyond the star

How Indian films rewrote the pan-India playbook in 2025

Pan-India' is now a real term, with audiences from across the world lapping up good cinema, irrespective of where it comes from. What else explains the sweeping appeal of films like *Kantara: Chapter 1*, *Lokah* and *Coolie*? As expectations rise for stories that are rooted and yet have global sensibilities, actors are sharpening their craft. With technology and AI to assist them, filmmakers are creating ambitious spectacles. At the same time, small, rooted content still finds a loyal audience. Here's a look at how 2025 fared for Indian cinema:

Tamil

This year has been a mixed bag for both star vehicles and mid-budget films in Tamil. Titles like *Dragon*, *Coolie* and *Bison* made a lot of noise, and, as producer SR Prabhu says, weekend-film-viewing seems to have truly returned to its past glory. "The distinction between theatre films and streaming films has gotten clearer," he adds. Although the box office has undoubtedly seen a dip from last year, producer Dhananjayan

states that the hit-to-flop ratio isn't alarming: "This year, around 290-300 films were released in Tamil, of which 90-100 films got the media and audiences' attention. Of that, around 28 films have done well." That said, in contrast to 2024, we have witnessed 11 months of dull big-star cinema. None of the Big Four had a film that fired on all cylinders. "Two of the Pradeep Ranganathan-starrers did over ₹100 crores, but overall, the industry didn't get the benefit of the big-ticket film

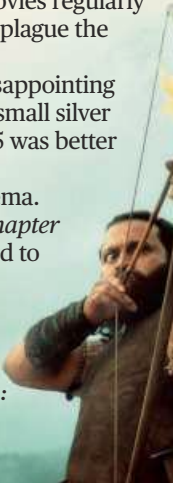
this year," says Dhananjayan. This year, many films – like *Kudumbasthan*, *3BHK*, *Madras Matinee*, *Tourist Family*, and *Paranthu Po* – took on the challenge of representing the middle-class struggle. The year also saw the likes of *Madharaasi*, *Maargan*, *Bison*, *Shakthi Thirumagan*, *Aghathiya* and *Mask* blend social themes in a genre template. With some much-anticipated titles set to release in 2026, maybe hope isn't a bad thing after all.



Kannada

While it's interesting that the Kannada film industry has produced one or two pan-Indian hits since 2022, the fact remains that Sandalwood suffers from its same old nemesis: inconsistency. Producing two giant hits year after year while suffering from a lack of quality movies regularly has continued to plague the industry. Amidst this disappointing state of affairs, a small silver lining is that 2025 was better than 2024 for Kannada cinema. With *Kantara: Chapter 1*, Rishab managed to pull off a worthy prequel to his blockbuster original. While *Kantara: Chapter 1* was expected to grab

eyeballs, the surprise came from *Su From So*. With Raj B Shetty being the only familiar name, the horror comedy proved the age-old adage: 'content is king.' *Su From So* was followed by romantic thriller *Elumale*, another gem. The genre-specific film, directed by Puneeth Rangaswamy, had the grammar of an edge-of-the-seat web series. "A majority of people have lost trust in Kannada films, and the only way to regain it is by being consistent," says filmmaker Tharun Sudhir, who bankrolled *Elumale*. The industry also witnessed encouraging efforts from debutants, as *Nimma Vasthugali* Neeve Javabddaararu, *Hebbuli* Cut and *Edagaiye* Apaghattake Karana drew praise from cinephiles.



Malayalam

Business-wise, the year has been huge for Malayalam cinema. The top grossers were *Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra*, which earned more than ₹300 crore worldwide, followed by *L2: Empuraan* at ₹268 crore and *Thudarum* at ₹237 crore. Especially revelatory was Dominic Arun and team, who set a new standard for superhero fantasy, not just in Malayalam but also in Indian cinema, with their *Lokah*. The success of these films was aided by new narratives, well-written stories and taut scripts backed by superlative acting. More than a year of big releases, 2025 has been a year when varied stories were told... *Dies Irae*,

Hridayapoorvam, *Rekhachitram*, *Narivetta*, and *Officer on Duty* were among the films headlined by the A-listers, with Pranav Mohanlal being the newest entrant to the club. Interestingly, it was also the year of smaller films, which left a big impact on the box office and audience – *Alappuzha Gymkhana*, *Vysanasamedham*, *Bandhumithrathikal*, *Padakkalam*, *Maranamass*, *Narayaneente*, *Moonaanmakkal*, and *Ponman*. None of these films had big names, excluding Naslen, who hit big time as Sunny in *Lokah*. Basil Joseph's outings in *Maranamass* and *Ponman* deserve special mention. "When the right time came, the choice roles-wise

got streamlined and the different types of parts started coming in. Ajesh in *Ponman* is very different and now *Maranamass*... even within



the comedy space, the characters are different," Basil said. Among the smaller films, Senna Hegde's *Aviitham* deserves special mention. "We did not make *Aviitham* thinking it will set the box office on fire. It is an attempt. The response has been really good, especially in North Malabar and the multiplexes, thanks to word-of-mouth publicity," says Senna. *Moonwalk* was another, unexpected gem of sorts. *ekō*, from the team of last year' hit, *Kishkindha Kaandam*, also had a strong run at the box office, thanks to a fresh narrative. "I knew it would do well, but didn't expect this level of success," says director Dinjith Ayyathan.

Telugu

In Telugu cinema, an undeniable fatigue of pan-India action dramas has set in. And, everyone has had enough of half-hearted narratives stretched into multi-part narratives. It was common to see star-led films crumble in a day or two. Among the 150-plus theatrical releases so far, only a handful have been box office hits. *They Call Him OG*, *HIT: The Third Case*, *Daaku Maharaj*, and *Thandel* are among the star-led action films that made some impact.

The success of *Sankranthiki Vasthunam* proved that the audience was yearning for a hearty laugh. This also worked in favour of *MAD Square*, *Subham*, *Single*, and *The Great Pre-Wedding Show*. Among the films led by female protagonists, the one that worked best was director Rahul Ravindran's *The Girlfriend*, led by Rashmika Mandanna. Producer Shobu Yarlagadda concurs, "This year has seen films become a hit or a miss. The ones that resonated with the audiences worked very well, like *Little Hearts*."

(Inputs from Bhuvanesh Chandar, Shilpa Nair Anand, Sangeetha Devi Dundoo and Vivek MV)

Say it in verse

In this edition, Poetry with Prakriti in association with *The Hindu* Lit for Life, brings art, music, poetry and personality to the fore



Moving with the times A file photo from a previous edition of Poetry with Prakriti. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

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About 10 editions ago, Prakriti Foundation's Poetry with Prakriti took the shape of an event featuring eminent and emerging poets, spreading their verses across Chennai's schools, colleges, parks, IT parks, pubs, and public transport systems. "It all started with the idea of our Margazhi season where so many performers showcased their art in different venues. I wondered what it would mean if we chose to replicate this idea in the form of poetry. After all, the verses of Carnatic composer Muthuswami Dikshitar and the likes of thumris and bhajans, take the form of poetry. What would it mean to delve into this space entirely in a city like Chennai?" recalls Ranvir Shah, founder-trustee, Prakriti Foundation. In 2017, its last from Chennai, an article from *The Hindu* suggests that the people of the city took to the event like a moth to a flame. Older women who did not enter pubs, found themselves listening to Tamil rap artist Sofia Ashraf, engaging with her politics, also in verse. Several books were released during this event, and suddenly, there was a space for writers, young and old, to try and open their minds, hearts, notepads, and Google docs, to the idea of a reader, an audience.

In its 11th edition between January 5 and 10 this year in association with *The Hindu* Lit for Life, the festival, held after a hiatus, grows in form. "During these events, we find that there is an openness to receiving poetry. Poets, usually private people, are also willing to share and receive feedback. It's a great space for engagement," Ranvir says. He adds that famous Tamil poets like Salma, whose association dates back to the first edition of the festival, will be present. "Post COVID, many of us lost touch. This year, we decided to call up Prakriti's old friends and bring them back to our stages," he says. This year's lineup involves other poets like Akhil Katyal, K Srilata, Shripad Sinnakaar, Kutty Revathi, Ramesh Karthik Nayak, Aleena, and several others, from distinct backgrounds, with a penchant for the political, through deep self exploration. Ranvir asks the audience to look out for a session where poets Geetha Ravichandran, Shikhandin, and Sivakami Velliangiri will read out their work from their latest book *Footnotes in G Sharp*, while an artist paints, and a musician sets their words to tunes. "We tried making poetry sexy," Ranvir says.

Venues for the event are yet to be announced. Follow @theprakritifoundation on Instagram for details.



When scale steps aside

A small-format exhibition by the Progressive Painters Association, *1 x 1 of a Kind – Edition II* is on view at Forum Art Gallery

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At Forum Art Gallery, a deliberate proposition unfolds: 1 x 1 of a Kind - Edition II brings together 23 artists from the Progressive Painters Association (PPA) in a small-format exhibition that resists spectacle in favour of intent.

Rooted in the legacy of the Madras Art Movement and the Cholamandal Artists' Village, the show revisits an idea first championed in the 1970s: that art, when scaled down, can travel further into homes, hands, and everyday lives. Paintings, sculptures, metal reliefs and drawings appear here at an intimate size, without diluting the seriousness of the practice behind them. The first edition of 1 x 1 of a

Closer look Works by (Clockwise from left) SG Vasudev; Saravanan Senathipathi and M Senathipathi. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Kind was held in 2018. Dedicated to the memory of late artist M Senathipathi, founder-member of Cholamandal and a long-serving pillar of the PPA, this edition of the exhibition is a memorial in art. It reflects a collective belief that art should remain accessible, sustained by community, and shaped by shared responsibility rather than market excess. "My father always believed that art should meet people where they are," says Saravanan Senathipathi, president, PPA. "Dedicating this exhibition to him felt natural, because the idea behind it comes from the same belief," he says. "Working in a small format changes the way you encounter the work," says Shalini Biswajit, founder, Forum Art Gallery and curator of the exhibition. "It becomes more intimate. You spend more time with it, instead of being overwhelmed by scale." That shift, she notes, also opens up the possibility of collecting,

particularly for those encountering senior artists whose larger works often remain out of reach. By bringing together established figures and younger practitioners within the same dimensions, the exhibition levels the field. Established artists such as Akkitham Narayanan, C Douglas, P Gopinath, SG Vasudev, V Viswanadhan, Anila Jacob, and Maria Antony Raj adapt long-established visual languages to a reduced scale, working across painting, sculpture, metal relief and mixed media. Alongside them are artists from later generations, including Hemalatha Senathipathi, Saravanan Senathipathi, Brindha S, Priya Gopal, Jacob Jebaraj, and Suchithra Gopinath, whose works reflect personal, material and conceptual explorations shaped by the same collective environment. Seen together, the exhibition offers a compact but layered view of practices linked by shared histories, yet marked by distinct artistic trajectories. Works by M Senathipathi anchor the exhibition's emotional centre, where mythological figures appear not as distant deities but as human presences. "Even when he worked with gods, he always saw the human element first," says Shalini. That sensibility carries into the works of his daughters, especially Hemalatha Senathipathi, whose small copper and brass sculptures echo her father's early practice while clearly standing apart from it. Elsewhere, Akkitham Narayanan strips his meditative geometry down to its essentials to create works that reward stillness. In contrast, C Douglas's works gain a sense of closeness at this scale, asking the viewer to slow down and stay with them. Taken together, 1 x 1 of a Kind - Edition II resists the urge to perform. Instead, it asks for attention that is measured. The exhibition affirms a position long held by the Progressive Painters Association: that scale need not dictate seriousness, and that art's value is not defined by spectacle or scarcity.

1 x 1 of a Kind - Edition II is on display at the Forum Art Gallery until January 22.

Ahn Bo-hyun and Lee Joo-been speak about starring in *Spring Fever*, shooting the series in picturesque Pohang, and meeting the expectations set by the original web novel



Season of love

Over the years, picturesque small towns, with their array of wholesome characters, have proven to be the perfect setting for K-drama romances. Think *Hometown Cha Cha Cha*, where a city slicker dentist heads to scenic coastal town Gongjin, and is charmed by the resident handyman. Or even in *Summer Strike*, where an office worker quits her job and decides to live in a sleepy town for a year, absolutely taken in by its lovely library (and later, its sweet and shy librarian).

In the upcoming K-Drama *Spring Fever*, Yoon Bom, a teacher from Seoul, heads to teach at a high school in the town of Sinsu. Reserved, quiet and keen on a new beginning, it is here that she meets Seon Jae-Kyu, a tall, tattooed, seemingly tough guy who is effusive, warm and an eager extrovert. The setting is ripe for sparks to fly.

For actors Ahn Bo-hyun and Lee Joo-bin, who play the leads, starring in *Spring Fever* meant travelling out of Seoul to Pohang, where a large part of the show was filmed, and getting to revel in everything that was scenic, wholesome and fun.

“Since I grew up in Busan, the ocean has always been a familiar part of my life. In Seoul, where I live now, it’s not easy to see the sea, so filming in Pohang, where the ocean was right there every day, made me genuinely happy,” says Bo-hyun. Joo-been, meanwhile, calls the whole experience a ‘happy little trip’: “We even shot at a sheep ranch, and at first, I was completely thrown off because every time I said my line, all the sheep would start bleating,” she recalls.

Adapted from Baek Min-a’s web novel of the same name, the show has sparked interest with its first-look posters, especially as Bo-hyun’s appearance as Jae-kyu closely resembles the character’s original depiction. “I always feel a certain pressure when it comes to meeting the expectations of fans of the original work. That is why I try to pay even more attention to expressing the character in detail, including the external aspects,” he says.

While Jae-kyu and Yoon Bom’s romance will take centrestage, the show’s teasers also indicate that

genre for the actor. “I still have many genres I haven’t had the chance to try, and going forward, I’d love to take on noir projects and even challenge myself with villain roles,” he says.

Earlier this year, Yoo-been starred as the lead in *The Divorce Insurance*, a workplace romantic-comedy that saw her paired opposite Lee Dong-wook. “I’m drawn to stories that carry a message and have something meaningful to say. Going forward, I hope to continue playing roles that are layered, emotionally rich, and driven by their own agency,” she says.

While expansive period dramas, slice-of-life stories and action thrillers dominated 2025, simple, contemporary romantic comedy K-Dramas were few and far between. With *Spring Fever* slated to release early in January, things are already looking up for the genre.

Spring Fever will stream on Prime Video from January 5 onwards.

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FARNAZ

Toxic reveal

The makers of Kannada star Yash's *Toxic - A Fairytale for Grown-ups*, have unveiled the first look of actor Nayanthara. The Geetu Mohandas-directorial stars Nayanthara as Ganga. This comes just days after the makers unveiled the first-look posters of actors Kiara Advani and Huma Qureshi. National Award winner Rajeev Ravi cranks the camera for *Toxic*, while the music is composed by Ravi Basrur. Bringing an international touch, Hollywood action director JJ Perry, celebrated for his work in *John Wick*, has crafted some of the film's action sequences. Written by Yash and Geetu, *Toxic* has been filmed simultaneously in English and Kannada, and will also be dubbed in other languages.

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A

A shot at glory

Filmmaker **Sriram Raghavan** talks about telling the story of the boy who dismantled Pakistan's pride in the Battle of Basantar, and the challenges of swimming against the tide

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Known for reinventing the thriller with his signature blend of suspense and dark humour, filmmaker Sriram Raghavan has always pushed boundaries. He draws inspiration from classic noir to craft narratives that keep audiences on the edge of their seats. However, this week, Sriram steps into bold new territory with *Ikkis*, a powerful war drama about the heroics of Second Lieutenant Arun Khetarpal, the youngest recipient of the Param Vir Chakra, who made the supreme sacrifice at 21 during the 1971 India-Pakistan war.

Edited excerpts:

Q: From noir to nationalist drama, how did this shift happen?
A: It happened by sheer chance. I was

in Dino's (producer Dinesh Vijan) office to discuss the script for *Badlapur 2*, which I was not happy with. There was too much serial killing, and it didn't connect with me. I was sitting there wondering what to do when I heard Binny Padda (known for designing film promos) telling Dino the story of Arun Khetarpal. I found it fascinating and asked, 'Who's doing this?' And they said, 'Nobody's attached. Do you want to do it?' I thought for five minutes (*laughs*), asking myself the same thing that you're asking me. Is it up my alley? I love all kinds of movies; it's just that I have no experience with extensive action, VFX, or shooting tanks. I didn't know how I was going to do it, but somehow I said that I'm interested.

Q: As a storyteller, what pulled you to the sacrifice of Arun Khetarpal and his father's journey?



A hero's saga (Above)
A stills from *Ikkis*;
(left) Sriram Raghavan.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

A: It's set in two timelines. One is 1971, when the battle was fought, and the other is 2001, when Arun's 80-year-old father, who also served the Indian Army during the British period, goes back in time to Pakistan as part of the cultural exchange that the then PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee started, to resolve the conflict after the Kargil War. During this twin-track diplomacy phase, getting visas became easier. When the senior Khetarpal, born in undivided India, received an invitation from his college in Sargodha, he returned to see if his house still stood. In that journey, he meets a certain Pakistani army person who gives him an insight into his son's courage and what happened on the battlefield on December 16, barely two months after he turned 21. Arun didn't even complete his training as a young officer. After one month of rigorous training, he was considered good enough to be in the thick of action. So his story and his father's story connect and make a lot of cinematic sense to me.

Q: Tell us about the research...
A: I met Mukesh Khetarpal, Arun's younger brother, and through him, I got a whole list of names, particularly two of Arun's tank crew members, Nathu Singh and Prayag Singh, who survived the December 16, 1971, battle (of Basantar). We spent two days with them. They would come in their full uniform. Brimming with pride, they told us about Arun and the times. Then I got to meet a number of his NDA batchmates, and a jigsaw was formed. I didn't want it to be an Amar Chitra Katha kind of story. I don't even like the word biopic. It's not like I'm covering his entire life. Arun continues to be a great inspiration for young soldiers.

Q: How did Agastya walk in?
A: As I developed the script, I gradually realised that age is integral to the story. In certain scenes, Arun is shown as 19. The script demanded a fresh face, and Agastya was 21 when he was cast. We needed an actor who was willing to commit two to three years to the project. Simply put, it's the story of a boy becoming a man.

Q: How did Dharmendra come into the picture?
A: Ever since we worked together in *Johnny Gaddar*, we have been in touch. At times, he would call me to suggest a story I should take up. I promised to find a story for him. When we found one, Dino and I had a long discussion about whether to cast someone in his 80s for the role. In the past, we have seen Sanjeev Kumar and Anupam Kher playing characters much older than their age. I felt we can't do it anymore. With Dharamji, there was no acting. He connected deeply with the story. The pain of leaving his home in Punjab had settled in his body over the years. The idea of revisiting home became a very personal experience – he was totally into the character.

Q: The film is coming at a time when jingoistic patriotism is gaining currency at the box office. Are you concerned?
A: Not really. When I began in 2019, all I had was the story. Now, in six years, so many things have changed. Of course, I'm conscious of the kinds of movies being made, but there is no wrong time to tell a good story. We also need these kinds of stories. It is a reminder that a soldier's family is braver than the soldier.

Ikkis releases in theatres today.

The stage is set

Musician Darbuka Siva returns to the stage with a special live concert titled *Maruvaarthai Pesaathey*, to be held in the city tomorrow

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Darbuka Siva is no stranger to the stage. A part of independent music bands before plunging into films full-time, Siva has seen several Chennai stages as a percussionist and musician; his last appearance was in 2012. More than a decade later, Siva – now armed with multiple film album hits as a composer, besides his acting and directorial ventures – returns to the stage. This Friday, he is presenting an "intimate live concert experience" that will be built around the emotion and nostalgia of his familiar songs, along with his larger musical world beyond film tracks. Presented by The Madras Collective, the concert has been aptly titled *Maruvaarthai Pesaathey*, after one of his biggest hits. "It's exciting and nerve-wracking at the same time," he says, "I feel free when I'm on stage, and when

I see an audience in front of me, it helps me to push myself more."

While Siva will perform his hit tracks like 'Mudhal Nee Mudivum Nee', 'Visiri' and 'Hey Nijame', he also hopes to share details about the varied world musical influences that made him explore the arts. "It is going to be an intimate setting aimed at making it an immersive experience, rather than a large-stage concert style show."

The evening will also feature Grammy winner Tanvi Shah and Siva's other frequent collaborators like Gautham Vasudev Menon, Kishen Das and Meetha Raghunath. "He (Gautham) has been following my work since my independent music days, which led to me working with him on film projects as well," reveals Siva.

With some surprise performances and an evening packed with musical arrangements and storytelling, this concert comes at a time when Chennai is already basking in a lot of music, thanks to the ongoing Margazhi season. "This city's audiences have always been receptive to new music styles; I hope they will discover something new during this show too," says Siva, who is busy with the music score of director Dayal Padmanabhan's *Lakshminathan Kolai Vazhaku*, director Umopathy Ramaiah's satire, and a couple of other projects.

Maruvaarthai Pesaathey is on January 2, 3.30pm and 7pm, at Museum Theatre, Egmore. For tickets, log on to district.in



How a harikatha exponent is blending music, dance and storytelling during Margazhi to draw younger listeners

Traditional touch
Dushyanth Sridhar.
JOHAN SATHYADAS

SACRED STORIES

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Collaborations – or collabs, if you would like to call them that – are the in thing now. This is the case not just on Instagram, but also during the Margazhi month in Chennai. Popular *harikatha* exponent and cultural commentator Dushyanth Sridhar vouches for that. A few weeks ago, Dushyanth walked the ramp with mridangam legend Umayalpuram K Sivaraman for Marvellous Margazhi, an event that celebrated the who's who of the cultural scene. During the first week of January, he will be on stage performing with renowned Carnatic vocalist Sudha Ragunathan, who will embellish and sing songs pertaining to a few spiritual stories that he will narrate. There are more such collabs in the pipeline. "I take up a story or subject and rope in a competent musically-trained artiste to sing a song pertaining to that," he explains. Singers like Palghat Ramprasad, Sunil Gargyan, Amrita Murali, Anahita and Apoorva, Archana and Aarthi have been part of these *sangita upanyasams*, as he refers to them. "It combines the best

of music and discourse. Apart from this, I also do 'katha nrityam', where I speak and a dancer elaborates on it visually with her art form," he says.

Audience engagement
During the inauguration of the 99th annual festival at the Music Academy recently, Oscar winner AR Rahman had commented on the "need to attract younger audiences to classical music concerts". Do *harikatha* discourses too suffer from the lack of youngsters among its audiences? Dushyanth avers, "In all humility, I'd say that the number of people coming for such discourses is atleast five times that of audiences to music and dance. There is a lot of scope for this art form. Among audiences, there is an urge to understand "why". If a singer delivers a number like 'Angaraka' (written by Muthuswami Dikshitar), you get to listen and relish its raga (Surutti), but you don't know *why*... which is where we come in."

From the Bay Area in the US to interior Tamil Nadu towns, Dushyanth's lectures have drawn audiences from several

age groups – primarily because of the cultural examples he gives to explain stories from ancient scriptures. "More than 60% of my audience today falls in the 15-45 age group. On a weekday at Dallas or Chicago, my lectures have 1,300 people, mostly working professionals, coming in. Many of them walk in with laptops, work a bit and then close them to listen to the stories," he says.

Lectures galore
Based in Bengaluru but busy travelling the world with his discourses, 39-year-old Dushyanth has emerged as an important cultural voice in recent times. Apart from his solo *harikathas* and collaboration with the musical fraternity - he has completed 50 shows of a devotional dance production (*Agre Pashyami*) with veteran danseuse Anita Guha and team – Dushyanth also regularly takes groups of people to various culturally-significant places. This year, he has Kerala, Cambodia and Egypt on the list. "We discuss many aspects of the significance of these places, which we experience first hand," he says, "Anybody can join us. There is travel, recitation and bonding with people. It is the commonality between cultures and countries that we wish to embrace through these tours."

Dushyanth Sridhar's talk will take place today at 10am (Sathyanarayana Temple, West Mambalam) and 5pm (Ananthapadmanabhaswamy Temple, Adyar), and at 6.30pm on January 2 at Narada Gana Sabha.



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