



Back in the limelight with the release of *F.I.R.*, the actor opens up on battling depression, injuries and financial challenges along the way

Vishnu Vishal fights back

SRIVATSAN S

Vishnu Vishal had perhaps delivered the biggest blockbuster of his career in 2018's psycho-thriller *Raatchasan*, now being remade in Hindi starring Akshay Kumar. However, even as he was scaling new heights professionally, his personal life was falling apart.

In an attempt to cope with the separation from his wife in 2017 after 11 years of being married, and the resulting strained relationship with his then new born son, Vishnu took to alcohol.

He was dropped from eight films he signed on, despite *Raatchasan* being a success. His production house VV Studioz incurred losses. Then, he suffered an injury during the shoot of the Tamil-Telugu bilingual *Kaadana* (2021), in which he played a cameo. He put on 11 kilos and was in bed for two months.

In January 2020, Vishnu shared pictures of his newly chiselled body along with a note on social media, letting the world know that he had been suffering all along, and how he managed to soldier through.

Now, after being out of action for three-and-a-half years, he is back with a new film, *F.I.R.*, directed by debutant Manu Anand. "The journey I have gone through as an actor, human, father and son, has been devastating to say the least," he says.

F.I.R., says Vishnu, is his most personal film and also his biggest – both in terms of budget and business. He adds that he did not let the past affect his work. "You cannot hide before the camera so I switched off completely. Whenever I'm shooting, I am in a happy zone. But for this film, even though I had pressure as a producer, I didn't take anything to my head," he adds.

Set against a political backdrop, Vishnu plays Irfan Ahmed who is framed and accused of terrorism. "My best friend is Syed Mohammad and we have been friends for

25 years. We never had such differences as projected and highlighted in our society. It makes you think about the bigger politics at play," he says, adding that he does not play a larger-than-life character in the film.

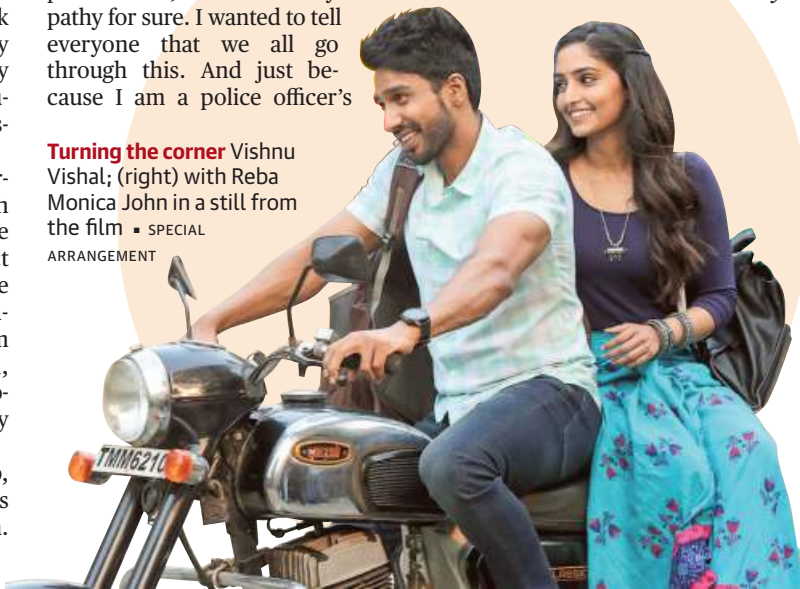
The comeback

For an actor who is constantly under public scrutiny, Vishnu took a brave step by sharing his journey dealing with depression and therapy. Was he at all worried about public perception? "My well-wishers advised me to think twice before posting it. They felt it would create a label that I'm a drunkard," he says, adding "I was never an addict; my intake increased at that point. People started to judge me because there is little awareness about mental health."

As it turns out, these well-wishers were right. When Vishnu shared a recent picture from meeting actor-politician Udhayanidhi Stalin, to announce the release date of *F.I.R.*, a user commented saying he looked drunk.

"I always knew this would happen but I was never worried about how people would view me. I still see the positive side; I didn't want sympathy for sure. I wanted to tell everyone that we all go through this. And just because I am a police officer's

Turning the corner Vishnu Vishal; (right) with Reba Monica John in a still from the film • SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



A surge of seafood restaurants on ECR

page 3



son, I didn't have it easy."

He took control of his life or as he puts it, "took the *Vaaranam Aayiram* route". The note also prompted big-wigs from within and outside the industry to reach out. Director Gautham Menon, whose *Vaaranam Aayiram* inspired Vishnu's transformational path, said he was proud of what the actor has achieved. More than anything, the journey was a reminder: "That even if you fall into the trap again, you will have to come back," says Vishnu.

B and C of cinema

For *F.I.R.*, Vishnu had to double up as producer when the person who agreed to produce backed out after green lighting the project. Until about last week, the final content was not ready as Vishnu and his team were still unsure about release plans.

The film now gets a breathing space of two weeks, before it gets eclipsed by the Ajith Kumar-starrer *Valimai*. But Vishnu says the two-week theatrical window is enough. "Why I wasn't prepared at all with the release was because we were expecting a superstar's release on February 18 and also because of the 50% occupancy and night curfews were still in place. The moment restrictions were lifted, we decided to go ahead. Big stars need big collections but I needed two weeks," he says.

As a producer, Vishnu says it is a win-win situation. "But as an actor, the real victory is when *F.I.R.* becomes a hit and those producers who dropped me from their films go, 'Maybe we shouldn't have'."

F.I.R. releases in theatres on February 11.



Be someone's lifeline

Donate blood this Valentine's Day to make a difference to someone's life. Be Well Hospital, in association with Chennai Blood Bank, hosts a blood donation drive as part of their #closethecaregap initiative for World Cancer Day. Donors are welcome to use the hashtag #BeWellValentine on their social media posts by uploading a photo of them donating blood.

On February 14, 10am onwards at 106, Jawaharlal Nehru Salai, Anna Nagar West. Call 7299050099

Sinful serenade

Friday night brings with it a chance to listen to Nadisha Thomas live in performance. The independent and playback singer, who has a number of hits to her name, will be taking the stage along with popular Chennai musicians Alok Merwin, Keba Jeremiah, Carl Fernandes and Vishnu Reddy. The troupe of talent is being hosted by city pub Sin And Tonic, as part of its Sin-up Fridays series and also to kick off Valentine's Day celebrations.

Nadisha plans to keep the cheesiness on the lower side, so the night might just turn out to be a great one for dancing.

The gig starts at 7pm on February 11 at Sin and Tonic, T Nagar. For details and reservations, call 8810955055.



Art beat

Ashvita presents its first NFT next week. The first set features the kingfisher. This heart-shaped NFT is part of the Heartbeats collection by National-award winning filmmaker Suresh Chandra Menon. The collection has a variety of beautiful birds and combines photography and digital art. You can get your hands on these by registering for the upcoming Heartbeats: A Valentine's NFT Auction at www.ashvitas.com.



It's a pupcake party

As the demand for preservative-free celebratory treats for pets rises, bakers are creating vet-approved dogserts, dognuts and lollypaws



ATHIRA M.

Bruno and Max celebrated their first birthday with a chicken liver-oats-cheese cake, mutton carrot cake and 'pupcakes' in different flavours. "I wanted them to enjoy the treats with their street pal Brownie," says Jessie Priya, who adopted both rescue dogs, adding that she chose "doggie face cakes instead of the regular bone-and paw-shaped ones".

Jessie is one of many loyal customers who order from Rukmeni Sarathkumar's Paws N Tails-The Pet Bakery in Chennai.

"Once a client asked for a Captain America pet cake. It was the theme for his son's birthday and he wanted a cake for their pet so they could cut the cakes together. I made a chicken-carrot cake with the colours of Captain America's shield," says Rukmeni, who started her pet patisserie a year ago.

Stating that she gets at least 15 orders for pet cakes every month, Rukmeni says so far the best-sellers are her chicken-carrot cake and chicken liver-oats-carrot cake.

"It started with making treats for my golden retriever, Simba. As friends began placing orders, I launched this enterprise, adding cakes, 'pupcakes', 'dognuts' and

'lollypaws' to the menu,' says Rukmeni.

The pandemic and lockdown saw many people adopting dogs and cats, thereby giving a boost to the pet care industry. Over the past couple of years especially, in response to a growing demand, there has been a surge of bakers making preservative-free, human-grade cakes.

Healthy alternatives

Instead of ingredients like sugar, salt and refined flour (maida), oats flour or wheat are used for pet cakes. Since chocolate is harmful for dogs, carob, a flavouring agent, is often used as a substitute.

Pets enjoy cakes with chicken, mutton, beef or even fish. Among their favourite veggies and fruits are carrots, sweet potatoes, potatoes, apples, beetroot, spinach and bananas. Peanut butter, which does not have xylitol or natural sweetener, is a common ingredient. Homemade colours, made from carrot, beetroot, spinach leaves and red cabbage, are used. While rates vary according to the ingredients, cakes usually starts from ₹500 for one kilogram.

"Grapes and onions are not good for dogs. Some dogs are allergic to wheat as well. In that case, I make cakes with oats and brown or white



Happy barkday (Clockwise from top) Pets are spoilt for choice with healthy treats; Monaz Mehta with her pet, Zoey • SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

rice," says Monaz Mehta of Snuggle Barkery in Thane, Maharashtra. Cities such as Thiruvananthapuram and Kochi too have a growing market for pet cakes. Bengaluru-based Shajini Sasidharan was pleasantly surprised with the cake she ordered for her



Siberian husky, Skye, when they were in Thiruvananthapuram on a vacation. The cake, chunky with minced chicken, carrots, beetroot, pumpkin and mashed potatoes, was from Varsha Prabhakaran's The Barkery. Inc.

Varsha had resigned from her job as a HR professional in 2020 to start the venture last October. "I thought I was taking a risk because I wasn't sure about getting clients in the city. But the response has been overwhelming even though I do business only via our Instagram handle," says Varsha.

In the Kerala capital there are home bakers who make both regular cakes and pet cakes. "Several pet shops have opened in the city and when I got enquiries for pet cakes through one of them, I started making them. Now I have a separate oven and utensils for pet cakes," says Bitty Manu of Elza's MagicBites. She launched her new venture PAW-CAKES, recently.

Kochi-based Jayalakshmi Deepak was running a baking venture, Sugar Craft, which she closed down to concentrate on the pets' only segment. Hooch and Bailey's Barkery, launched in 2019, is named after her two dogs, both boxers. "Bailey was the reason I started this. She is allergic to many foods. So I began making treats for her, starting with oats and wheat-based biscuits," says Jayalakshmi.

"In the beginning I used to get orders for two or three cakes a week," says Jayalakshmi, adding "Now I bake at least two cakes per day."

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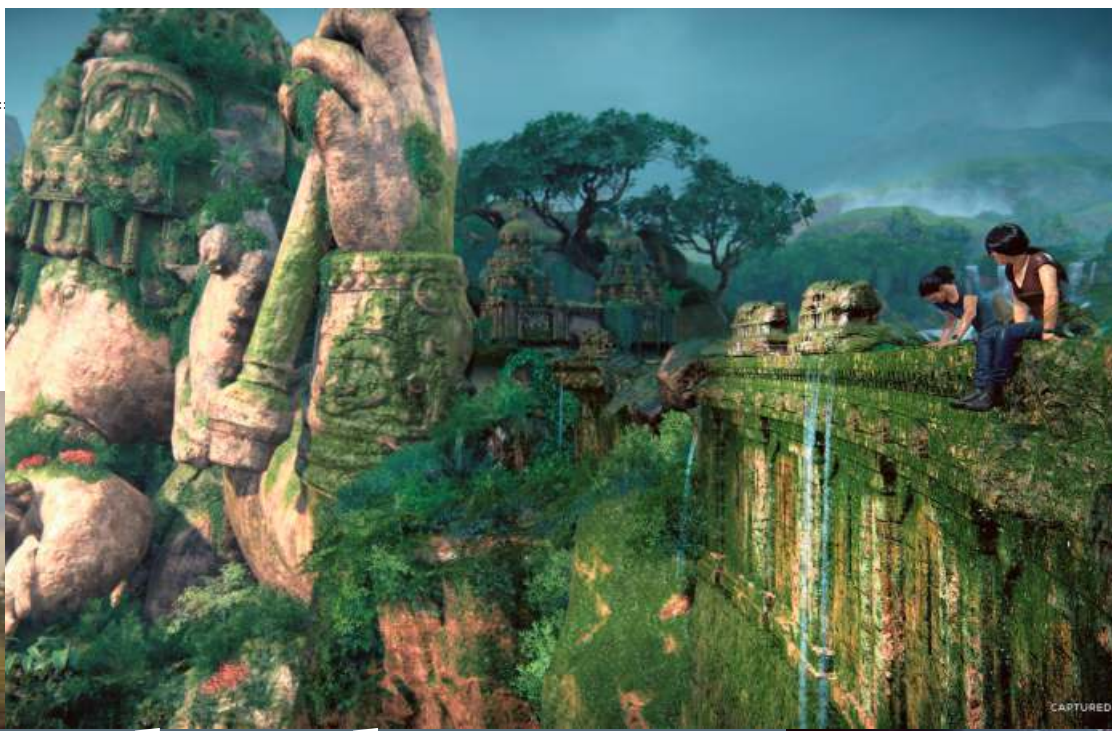
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Welcome to the great Indian gaming boom: Creativity and technical prowess merge with exciting homegrown video games that are grabbing global attention



MORE GAMECHANGERS

Perhaps a precursor to culturally-niche video games is an under-discussed 2017 creation of Wandermind Labs and UnderDOGS Gaming Studio: Mukti. A first-person story exploration game set in a museum in the Sunderbans, West Bengal. You play as Arya Roy who must clear her grandfather's name after his museum has been vandalised.

Similarly, Toronto-based developer Visai Studios' 2020 video game Venba, a 2D storied narrative game on the various cooking styles of South Indian food – from idlis to a simple aloo fry – sees the gamer play as an Indian mom, who migrates to Canada with her family in the 1980s. The game got a lot of love from gamers and fellow developers alike for its unexpected comfort factor.

•• DIVYA KALA BHAVANI

When game designer Shruti Ghosh sold her apartment to help fund the development of Raji: An Ancient Epic, many thought this was a reckless gamble on a frivolous project. But Shruti was making an investment in her future. And it paid off.

From the time Raji was released in August 2020, the game has enjoyed a number of 'firsts': being part of Nintendo Indie World showcase, being first indie studio from India to receive an Unreal development grant, being nominated for the Best Debut Indie Game for The Games Awards ('the Oscars for video games'), and, more recently, a BAFTA Breakthrough honoree recognition for Shruti.

The lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 urged us to consider gaming as a new outlet of self-entertainment and even socialising. And while we may very well be busy with Fortnite or Dota 2, a growing curiosity for India-made games is finally being fed by creative developers, who have struck while the industry iron is hot.

Pune-based Nodding Heads Games, the studio behind Raji: An Ancient Epic (2020), created one of the most remarkable landmark video games in Indian history. Along with Shruti, co-founders Avichal Singh and Ian Maude,

Push play on representation

brought a gamified dimension to a world inspired by Indian mythology and medieval architecture. Since its trailer reveal, the action-adventure hack-and-slash has won the hearts of gamers and game developers alike, all thrilled to see a PC and console experience from a studio that embraces its cultural essence.

Sporting a more brutal art style and gameplay than Raji, is Hyderabad-based Ogre Head Studios' upcoming Yodha which is still in development. Founder Zain Fahadh says the changing climate of PC game development in India has been a catalyst for Yodha's evolution while also bringing an international spotlight to Yodha, following the success of their 2017 game Asura Vengeance Edition.

Similarly, back in 2009, ninth-grader Nikhil Malankar was playing Grand Theft Auto Vice City as a

mafia gangster running various errands for various crime lords. Fascinated by the open-world concept as he explored a pixelated Miami, Nikhil started modding (using code to modify a game to create a new experience) to create a microcosmic Mumbai.

Years later in 2013, this experience would mark Nikhil creating GameEon Studios, Mumbai, and the eventual creation of role-play-

ing game (RPG) Mumbai Gullies which hopes to take the player through the duality of Mumbai and Bombay. Development hit some hurdles; given mobile games were 'of the zeitgeist' at the time, the investment well for Indian-made PC games was dry, but gamers were adamant about wanting to fill this void in PC gaming.

The money game

Funding is certainly a viable obstacle in game development, especially for indie studios like Nodding Heads and GameEon; and much of this is due to the immobile mindsets of investors who have long-perceived India-made games as low quality or with low-brow content. But we are seeing a slow evolution in this mindset. Avichal is candid about the tumultuous journey behind Ra-



Game on (Clockwise from top left) Screenshots from Mumbai Gullies, the next-gen remaster of Uncharted: The Lost Legacy, and Raji: An Ancient Epic •SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

intricate stonework, dangerous traps and engaging puzzles.

Gamers everywhere were thrilled that one of the biggest franchises – now being turned into a movie starring Tom Holland – put a cultural spotlight on India. And this year's remaster of the game propelled a renewed interest in India-based games.

"International games such as Uncharted: The Lost Legacy and Hi Rez Studios' Smite are great examples of utilising Indian lore and mythology. They shine a light on our culture and heritage; this, in turn, truly shows how vast and rich Indian heritage is," avers Avichal.

Avichal then recalls how he learned young adults told him that Raji was the first game their parents participated in. He adds, "So many parents from India and NRIs, and so many people from around the world played Raji and messaged us on how fulfilling the experience has been for them. People simply curious to know about the gods and goddesses, learnt about their backstory."

Gaming is, and should be, for everyone. That has not always been reflected in the characters we get to play as, be they created by developers or for ourselves. But now, game developers are empowered to bring India to global screens and share our stories in interactive ways.

The age well project

A growing number of retirement communities are springing up across South Indian towns and cities, from Chennai to Kochi. Why is Coimbatore, however, emerging as the hub?

•• K JESHI

Mohan L. Melarcode, 57, who has lived abroad for almost three decades – across the UAE, the Netherlands, and now at Gilbert in Arizona – already has his retirement planned. By this year end, he will move to the Nirmala Nilayam Retirement Community (NNRC) in Theethipalayam, 15 kilometres from Coimbatore city.



"It is surrounded by farmland. There is very little noise and air pollution... it's like a cul de sac that ends at the foothills of the Western Ghats," says Mohan, who currently works for Edupoint Educational Systems in the US as a senior data services architect. He says he considered Pune and Bengaluru too, then zeroed in on Coimbatore because of its green environs. "I hope to volunteer for a good cause, trek, cycle, read, walk, visit temples, and travel around Tamil Nadu and India," he states, adding, "If you live close to Nature, you will have a life that is well lived."

According to recent reports by several leading real estate services companies, South Indian cities are increasingly popular for senior living projects with nearly 65% located within the region. Prominent senior living hubs in South India include Puducherry, Chennai, Benga-

luru, Kodaikanal, Mysuru, and Kochi, with Coimbatore being at the top with the maximum number of ongoing projects.

Thrust on healthcare

Says Dhinakar Perumal, owner of NNRC, "With as many as 13 projects at various stages of completion, the city is indeed a hub." The residences are designed with special attention to features such as wheelchair access, anti-skid tiles, and an emergency button at a reachable height.

"We modelled the villas as per the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards of the US. Then we increased the ceiling height to 11 feet to ensure that interiors are airy and incorporated traditional architectural designs such as sky-lit courtyards that let sunlight filter in."

Globally, senior communities are a sought-after service, especially in the US and Europe. The demand is expect-

ed to pick up in India due to factors such as an increase in life expectancy and the breakdown of the joint family system. "We have been getting enquiries from Maharashtra, Kerala, and Karnataka. They want a lifestyle where they can go for long walks in the sunshine, consume pesticide-free vegetables, and breathe pollution-free air," says Dhinakar.

"Over the last two years, the sale of apartments has increased by 20%," says Colonel A Sridharan (retired), founder of Covai Care. He has developed 18 projects in the segment across Coimbatore, Mysuru, Bengaluru, Chennai and Puducherry.

At Covai Care, retirement homes come with a price tag of ₹50 lakh upwards (for two BHK depending on the size and location). "The idea is to make the homes affordable," says Col Sridhar. "There is additional service and a care component that

works up to ₹40,000 including three meals a day, medical services, and house keeping, electricity, plumbing etc. At Puducherry, we are developing IBHK homes with a budget of ₹22 lakhs."

For new projects, for example Covai Care's upcoming one with 234 units in Chennai, the wait period is 30 months. "About 20%, especially those above 80 and without a partner prefer to rent homes," adds Sridhar. "Infrastructure, good connectivity by road, rail and air and a centralised location between Karnataka and Kerala is a big plus."

Col Sridharan says there is also added focus on assisted care, especially for those with Alzheimer's and dementia. "I like to call it senior care inclusive of living," he says adding one has to make a wise decision taking into consideration budget and investment, and other aspects like lease and rental modalities.

Eating local

Uma Maheswari, joint managing director of Ananya's Nana Nani Homes, which launched in 2010, says they are currently readying their sixth phase with 400 homes at Vadavalli, 10 kilometres from Coimbatore.

"The elderly want a secure place. We have a vegetable farm and a dairy farm, and all the kitchen supplies

come from here," she says.

All these homes make an effort to curate activities for residents: there are lessons in music and dance, as well as spaces for yoga and meditation. Through the week, there are movie screenings, *satsang*, tambola, cultural events and festivals to keep the occupants busy.

Sreedher Ramamurthy, 74, who moved to Tapovan Senior Citizen's Foundation in Madhampatty, started a podcast by and for senior citizens, on the audio streaming platform I-Radio. There are also interviews with mental healthcare counsellors and palliative care providers.

Retirement communities abroad pack in a lot of fun, says Dhinakar. "I frequented some in the suburbs of Malden, Massachusetts, during my stay in Boston. I have watched the community play pétanque, basketball, croquet and frisbee. That's the kind of retirement home, a place buzzing with energy, that I want to create here."

"All my research shows that Coimbatore is a balanced city in terms of weather and the people," says Sreekumar Nair, an investment consultant in Mumbai who scouted for properties in Dehradun, Bengaluru, Kochi. "I was googling for best places to live in; I chose Thailand, but my wife preferred a location in India, and so Coimbatore it is."

Actor-host Rannvijay Singha meets forest officers, rangers and tribes across India's national parks to tell the stories behind the safaris



Rannvijay's wild learning curve

•• SANGEETHA DEVI DUNDOO

"The idea was not to zipline down a rainforest and high-five a bear cub, but to respect the ecosystem and learn about the people involved in conservation," says host and actor Rannvijay Singha, about his new show *Safari India*. The eight episode series on Zee Zest attempts to unravel hidden stories in seven of India's national parks.

In the first episode, Rannvijay leads viewers into Arunachal Pradesh's Pakke Tiger Reserve, where rescued Asiatic bear cubs are rehabilitated at the Centre for Bear Rehabilitation and Conservation. Access to this zone is not easy and Rannvijay is mindful of the opportunity presented to him: "Having hosted shows that are high on adventure, the crews I work with usually take my word since they trust that I know what works. This time, I found myself learning something new in each national park."

Filming for *Safari India* after the intermittent lockdowns, he acknowledges, was liberating: "I was itching to get out. Now and then I was filming in safe bio bubbles (for web series and shows), but the freedom of being out and about was missing. Sometimes, it was liberating to just stop the vehicle and admire the dense jungles."

The series also features stories from Jim Corbett National Park (Uttarakhand), Kaziranga National Park (Assam), Ranthambore National Park (Rajasthan), Gir National Park (Gujarat), Netravali Wildlife Sanctuary (Goa) and Dubare Elephant Camp (Karnataka).

"We wanted to go beyond the regular sa-

faris and know about the lives of forest officers, rangers and the tribes," says Rannvijay. "For instance, Pakke also taught me how members of the Nyishi tribe who earlier hunted hornbills and used their beaks to make the tribe's traditional headgear, now make fibreglass headgear. They do not hunt hornbills any more. It is fascinating to know that a tribe has changed its traditional practice to protect the birds." There were unexpectedly rewarding moments too, like being hugged by a bear cub and witnessing dolphins in Goa.

In Gir, he recalls meeting women officers who patrol the jungle on their bikes and track lions. The lesser known story of Gir, he says, is about the hi-tech methods used to track and study birds and animals.

The learning, says Rannvijay, continued for him through the series. "Poaching has gone down in Kaziranga thanks to the proactive initiatives of the Government and forest officials. At the Dubare Elephant Camp, I witnessed how elephants are re-wilded or even cared for a lifetime by mahouts from the local tribes, and how the pristine waters of the Cauvery are conducive for mahseer fish."

This learning curve, says the actor-host, is a key factor for him in taking up any project: "I don't measure my career growth in terms of finances; I need to enjoy my work. I also want to be a part of people's stories," he says. (*Safari India airs on Mondays, 8 pm, on Zee Zest SD and HD, along with ZeeZest.com*)

Something new Rannvijay Singha tries his hand at making the headgear of the Nyishi tribe •SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



In Nature's lap Work in progress at Nirmala Nilayam Retirement Community in Coimbatore; (Above) A snapshot from CovaiCare retirement home

•SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Kai - From The Sea

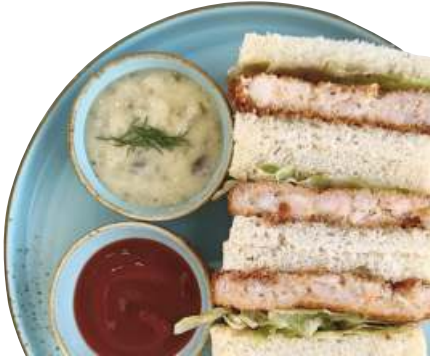
Right before the toll gate on East Coast Road that marks the beginning of everyone's weekend, there stands an unassuming white building with two glass entrances. One leads to a shop selling a range of fresh seafood – from snappers off the Chennai coast to prawns cultivated in Andhra – as well as regional sauces, marinades and rubs. The other door leads to the softly lit dining room of Kai - From The Sea: a mix of sturdy traditional dining tables and relaxed couches.

With a kitchen helmed by Chef Mrigank Singh, the restaurant manages to do justice to a variety of cuisines: Japanese, Vietnamese, Thai and a wide range of Indian. Mrigank gushes about the underappreciated local fish on his counter, like the silver biddy and varieties of whiting that hold pride of place next to prawns, squids and snappers. "Introducing different fish options and familiarising diners with them helps to reduce the population pressures faced by a few popular species," he explains, even as we eye the shelves that flaunt a range of pastes and marinades made as per the traditional recipes of Bengal, Guntur and other regions.

The first visible testament to their authenticity comes in a richly pink Sol kadhi. Made with dried kokum peel and coconut milk, it is sour, creamy, hydrating and refreshing all at once. The ceviche salad that follows is starkly different: an extremely mild, cured sea bass paired with a lively salsa and tortilla chips.

Curing and aging fish is an area of interest for the chef, but more on that later: for now, we are distracted by Chef Mrigank's Nellore chepala pulusu: a simmering, tangy gravy of mango and tamarind whose aroma hits us even before we lean in to our plates. Served with coconut dosa, this pulusu comes piled high with the vegetables cooked in it. Dessert is yet another surprise. Fruit – The spongy mango cake is served in a pool of coconut sauce dotted with dollops of mango delights; the flavours don't blend, but clash and dance.

Kai - From The Sea is at 2, East Coast Road, J Nagar. Call 7286882868.



SHORT EATS The ECR is bustling with day trippers again, and with a flurry of new restaurant openings, you can sample a new menu with every drive. We start with the sea food, of course

Calamari, with retail therapy

CHITRADEEPA ANANTHARAM AND MEGHNA MAJUMDAR



Kraft Retail Dining

With Kraft Retail Dining, city-based architect Anita Mohan aims to blend gastronomic experiences and creative arts. "Retail dining, the way I conceptualised it, is where one can shop for lifestyle products and also enjoy a meal alongside," says Anita, who recently unveiled home decor products under the brand name Sthalam.

For the food here, Anitha collaborated with Mohamed Ali, whose cloud kitchen, World Cuisine 52, has been focussing on global food for the travel-deprived. "Currently, our menu focusses on Korean, Chinese, Middle Eastern and Indian food and soon Mexican is to be added," says Mohamed.

Launched in October last year, the Kraft Cafe first got popular with cyclists and fitness enthusiasts for their fresh juices and smoothies, then began to be patronised by families living along the coastal highway.

In a bid to build a community, residents who stay between Thiruvanniyur and Kanathur get a 15% discount if they come as a group of four with proof of address.

Chef G Gokul, who has trained at the Culinary Institute of America in the US, offers Korean ramyeon and as well as dan dan noodles, served in a Sichuan-laced sauce with minced chicken.

We begin our lunch with a perfectly grilled fish tikka. Though the whole pomfret fry looks tempting, it turns out to be bland, so we shift our attention to deep fried mutton, crisp on the outside but tender within, with a savoury umami flavouring.

The Chinese style lamb kebabs, drizzled with soy sauce and a hint of cumin, are just as enjoyable.

Though there is a selection of naan, breads, noodles and rice, we pick the wedding style mutton biryani, which proves to be a good decision. Precision-cooked, with masala infused into the meat beautifully, the dish is served with brinjal, raita and the chef's special bread halwa.

Kraft Retail Dining is located in Kanathur, ECR, opposite Mayajal. Open from noon to 10.30 pm. Call 9884771007.



A sport in its prime

Tamil Nadu volleyballer Mohan Ukkrapandian talks about the Prime Volleyball League and how the game blossomed

PRAVEEN SUDEVAN

Mohan Ukkrapandian was in Class IX when his father, Mohan, advised him to take up the sport. Mohan was a cop and an athlete. He felt volleyball would suit his strong, tall son. It was also a sport that promised employment benefits. Ukkrapandian, who was more into cricket then, listened to his father with a bit of reluctance.

His progression from district level to state level, and then to national and international levels was swift. Ukkra, as he is fondly known, has represented India in three Asian Games. He has also captained the country in many matches.

Ukkrapandian, 35 now, remains one of the country's best volleyballers. He is skipping the Chennai Blitz side in the ongoing Prime Volleyball League (PVL), which began on February 5. "For someone who was not very interested in taking up the sport, I am surprised I have come this far," he says.

The drive to do well in volleyball was not intrinsic. It stemmed from a need for classroom popularity. "I was the tallest in my class. But none of the teachers knew my name because I was new. I joined the school in Class IX. So, I told myself, 'If you want them to remember your name, you have to play well'."

Ukkrapandian soon made a name for himself

in his class – and quickly beyond it as well. In 2006, he represented the Indian junior team for an invitational tournament in Italy.

The following year, he made his senior-level international debut against Pakistan. In 2010 came what Ukkrapandian considers one of his career's highest points. India was to play Pakistan in the gold medal match at the South Asian Games. Ukkrapandian's participation, due to a niggles, was doubtful. But a sudden injury to senior teammate meant that he had to lead the side. The occasion was momentous and challenging. The start was ominous, as Ukkrapandian and team lost the first set. But the team recovered splendidly and took the next three sets to clinch the gold medal. "That win gave me a great high," he recalls.

Ukkrapandian owes a big share of his successful career to his father. "When most parents asked their kids to get good marks, my father told me to play well. My performance on the field, he said, had to be 100%. And he made sure I didn't need to focus on anything apart from my game. Financial troubles, domestic issues – he handled everything for me." His

Across hurdles Mohan Ukkrapandian
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



passing away in 2012, hence, was a loss that took a long time to get over. "I was in Germany for the Olympic qualifiers," Ukkrapandian recalls, "I thought I would skip it. But he insisted that he'd be alright and that I should go."

A different game

In his 12-plus years of playing international volleyball, Ukkrapandian has witnessed a gradual change in the sport in India.

"When I started, for example, I didn't know what foods I must eat. Now, you have a dietician who tells you that. There's a trainer, a physiotherapist... you have all these specialists now," he says.

"The Prime Volleyball League, especially, has taken the game to the next level. If you are a talented youngster wanting to become big in the game, it provides the perfect platform. Because you get to play with the world's top volleyballers. You get to know from them what it takes to win an Olympic medal."

He also reckons more people are taking up the sport, especially in smaller cities. "I see this in my hometown (Pudupatti in Tamil Nadu), where kids are playing it. I see this on social media. I see this when leagues such as PVL get televised. The game, definitely, has changed since the time I started playing."

At 35, Ukkrapandian is in the twilight of his career. What next? "I don't want to think about that. I still want to play. That's all I want to think about right now."

For someone once reluctant to take up the sport, he is now more reluctant to leave it.

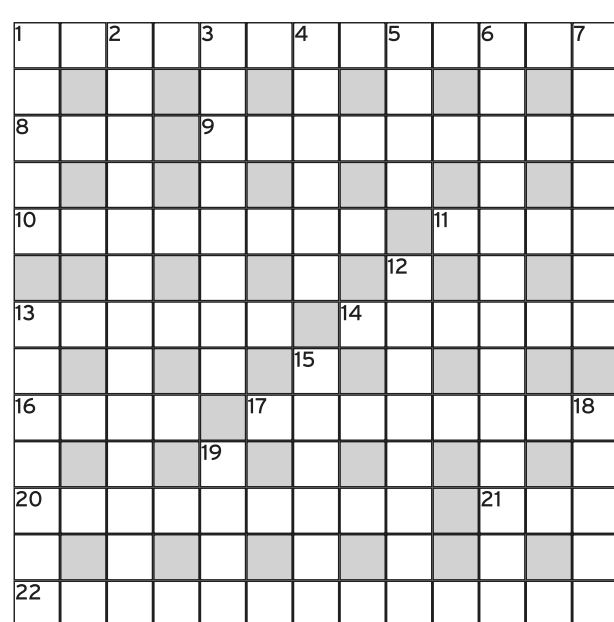
Watch Rupyay Prime Volleyball League 2022 live on SONY TEN 1 (English) and SONY TEN 4 (Tamil and Telugu)



For some live laughter

As live shows slowly crop back up again, this weekend, some of Chennai comedy circuit's young talents gather on stage. Comedy Killadees, a socially-distanced Tamil and English stand up comedy show featuring Comicstaan fame Syama Harini, Annamalai along Bharat Balaji, Sharat Subramanian, Sudarshan Ramamurthy aka Soda, kickstart the weekend. Tickets are on Book My Show. The show will be on February 12, between 4.30 and 7 pm at SOCO, The Saveria.

THE GUARDIAN QUICK CROSSWORD-13457



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Across

- 1 Sensational paperback novel (5,8)
- 8 Speck (3)
- 9 Spiny lobster without large claws (9)
- 10 Expulsion from a property (8)
- 11 Baltic capital city (4)
- 13 Enid is (anag) – within (6)
- 14 Protective covering (6)
- 16 Location (4)
- 17 Very slender fibre (8)
- 20 Disturbance – upheaval (9)
- 21 Trespass (3)
- 22 After much hesitation, decide to do something (4,3,6)

Down

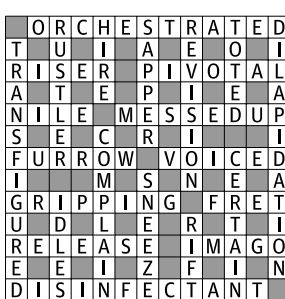
- 1 Army chaplain (5)
- 2 Never fail to take advantage of a situation (3,4,1,5)
- 3 Christmas (8)
- 4 Become depleted (3,3)
- 5 River joining Bath with Bristol (4)
- 6 Period from before Christmas until after New Year (7,6)
- 7 On the downwind side (7)
- 12 Pieces scattered by a bursting shell (8)
- 13 Moment in time (7)
- 15 Heavenly (6)
- 18 Nervous (5)
- 19 Shy – actors (4)



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

Solution will appear in MetroPlus dated February 17, 2022.

Solution No. 13456



Sagarika Ghose's book on Atal Bihari Vajpayee gives a glimpse into the lesser known aspects of his life

The poet politician

PRİYADARSHINI PAITANDY

Atal Bihari Vajpayee was said to be an incredibly funny man. The whisky-drinking, meat-eating, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh member and former Prime Minister of India was always armed with a quiver of witty one-liners: from Bollywood inspired lines such as *Mere Angne Main Tumhara Kya Kam Hai*, to verses he penned himself.

"He was almost bohemian in his personal life," says journalist, news anchor, and author Sagarika Ghose, who's latest biography *Atal Bihari Vajpayee - India's Most Loved Prime Minister* gives an in depth look into the life and times of the erudite statesman, along with some of his poems.

At an event organised by The Duchess Club in Chennai recently, Sagarika discussed excerpts from the book with Rupa Ramamurthy, a member of the Club.

It took the author three years to complete the biography. "The research was daunting," says Sagarika, who had to go through all the Parliament speeches from the 1950s to the 90s, Vajpayee's speeches, pronouncements made by his Government, party periodicals, the large number of bills he moved in Parliament... the list is exhaustive. This was followed by around 50 interviews with members of the RSS and the BJP, and his close aides.

"I gained access to NM Ghatate, Vajpayee's close friend for 60 years. He gave me two of his unpublished manuscripts on Vajpayee and that proved a very good source," says Sagarika adding that in a biography you cannot afford to go wrong.

Sagarika admits that initially she was reluctant about the book that was commissioned by Juggernaut Books. Given that she did not share the same beliefs as Vajpayee, she was wondering how she would get the empathy. Sagarika had interviewed him in the past. "He used to see me and say *khatra* (danger)," she laughs. In preparation for the biography as she started reading about him and what he wrote, she realised he was an iconoclast. He was irreverent about ideologies. She further states that he joined the RSS but shunned orthodoxy and zealotry. "He was being assailed by his own ideological family who thought he wasn't being rigid enough," she adds.

The author also says that Vajpayee was opposed to polarisation; today our lives are so polarised that dialogue is no more possible between the two camps. But he believed you could be true to an ideology and still have friends.

"He reflected a liberal principle which was that you can have friendship, love, comradeship and warmth even with people you don't agree with. He was great friends with Hirendranath Mukherjee of CPI. He was someone who believed in dialogue. Don't rage at people via Twitter or WhatsApp. He believed in coming out of the shell and reaching out to the other side," she says, adding that as a liberal she appreciated this about him.

Sagarika's latest book is part of a trilogy on Prime Ministers of India. The first one in the series was on Indira Gandhi. As for the third one, she says she would like to keep us guessing.

From the pages of history Sagarika Ghose at the book launch in the city
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



When Tommy met Pam

Sebastian Stan on bringing to life the relationship of drummer Tommy Lee and Pamela Anderson

BY GAUTAM SUNDER

One of Hollywood's most bankable names today, Sebastian Stan has had a great decade, after hitting the big time as Bucky Barnes/ Winter Soldier in Marvel's blockbuster *Avengers* and *Captain America* film franchises, as well as mini-series *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*.

Now, the American-Romanian star portrays legendary Motley Crüe drummer Tommy Lee and his tempestuous relationship with actor Pamela Anderson in a new series. A topic of tabloid obsession and virality in the early days of the Internet, *Pam & Tommy* focusses on the story of how a leaked sex tape was stolen from the couple's home by a disgruntled contractor (played by Seth Rogen).

Described as a "love story, crime caper and cautionary tale rolled into one," the show has attracted a lot of hype not only for the explosive real-life celebrities it is based on, but also the casting of Stan and Lily James, whose first photo-shoot for the project went viral. Excerpts from a virtual conversation with Stan:

Tommy had an interesting childhood. He found the drums as a way towards expressing himself

Tommy? The first look became a rage...

● We had a camera test initially, and it was the first time where our brilliant hair and makeup team came together, along with the costumes, and everybody saw what we looked like. It was the first time I got to see Lily as Pamela Anderson, and I was just blown away at the resemblance.

What were some of the things you learnt about Tommy Lee that you didn't know earlier?

● His background, for starters. I had no idea what his childhood was like, how he got to be a drummer, and how early he was able to hit success. In the Eighties, I believe Motley Crue was one of the most recognised bands on the planet, and among the first legendary heavy metal outfits, along with the likes of Guns N' Roses.

Tommy has a very interesting childhood. His father married his mom within four days of having met her... in a very similar fashion to how he would get married to Pamela many years later! He grew up in a household where English was not a first language; his parents would communicate with drawings, in order to understand each other better. He found the drums as a way towards expressing himself.

Tommy is a pretty controversial figure; was there anything to dislike about him while you were portraying the character?

● The intention here is not to portray anything differently that isn't widely known about Tommy. Here, we're focussing much more on his relationship with Pamela and their coming together in this whirlwind kind of passionate way. We're talking about invasion of privacy, the fallout from it, and how it impacted both of them.

Pam & Tommy is currently streaming on Disney+ Hotstar with weekly episodes

What was your feeling when you first saw Lily James and yourself, as Pam and



Right click A still from the show • SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Why actor Ram G is looking forward to the reboot of his hit Tamil TV comedy serial, *Ramany vs Ramany*



House of laughs

BY SRINIVASA RAMANUJAM

Nair, the elderly gentleman living in the outhouse, slowly slinks away with a vegetable basket in hand. But he is spotted by young Ramya, who immediately calls out to her parents, both named Ramany. They confront him and what ensues is a rib-tickling sequence, which is bound to get you laughing.

If you have grown up watching Tamil TV serials, chances are that you might

have watched the superhit comedy play, *Ramany vs Ramany*.

While Season 1, starring Prithiviraj and Vasuki, aired in Sun TV in 1998, the second part was telecast in 2001 in Raj TV. In 2019, the series came back to prominence when the production house, Kavithalayaa Productions, uploaded the content on YouTube.

Now, a third installment is in the works. Ram G, who played the lead role along

with Devadarshini in Season 2, makes a comeback yet again in the husband role.

"I am thrilled that I am back as Ramany," says Ram, who is currently shooting for the second schedule, "It is the fans' desire to see more of such content that has brought about this season." While Vasuki Anand plays his wife in the new season, Ponni Suresh will play their daughter and Param Guhanesh, the son.

Blast from the past

Directed by Nagaa, *Ramany vs Ramany* became a hit primarily due to its simplicity and how it could find humour in everyday situations.

This relatability, stresses Ram, is what has worked in its favour over the years: it has viewers who have

watched all episodes more than once. "The humour is organic, and most of the comments I have received is from people who see the serial as a reflection of what's happening in their life as well," he says.

This happened not only in the early 2000s, but also in recent times: the pandemic-induced lockdowns prompted many people to revisit its funny lines. "We had many people watching it again, and some people waking up to it for the first time. The response was overwhelming."

Ram credits director Nagaa for bringing out the best in actors, and writing sequences that audiences relate to.

"He has the unique ability to give a humorous touch to even mundane things, such as a person getting ready to

go to office or a father speaking with his daughter. Even while shooting, we almost feel that this is something that happens in our households. When you watch the content, you'll feel like life is easy if you take things lightly."

This season, the Ramany will remain the Tom-Jerry kind of couple that they always were, but the situations they encounter will involve all the latest developments that the world has seen.

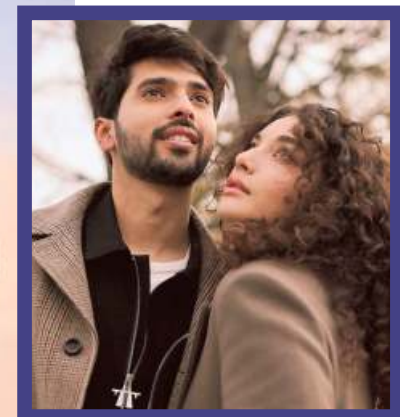
Playing the female lead is his friend Vasuki Anand, with whom Ram started his acting career many years ago. "Whenever I take up comedy, there's excitement. Crazy Mohan used to say, 'Comedy is serious business' and I completely agree with that."

Ram, well known on the small and big screen besides being a dance choreographer, is currently looking at the OTT space in a big way. *Ramany vs Ramany* will stream on one such platform (Aha Tamil).

"In the past, television presented a big opportunity for many actors who could not make it big in movies," he says. "Now, with the surge in content in OTT platforms, several new actors will find their space."

Armaan's new vistas

As his latest English song 'You' basks in a Parisian setting, Armaan Malik elaborates on how emerging artistes should navigate a buzzing streaming industry



Reaching out Armaan Malik and Emma Declercq in *You*

• SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

so keen on leveraging the right technology. "Whenever I'm in the studio, apart from my usual job of singing, I'm also part of the music-making which comprises the arrangement, during which we make enhancements such as reverbs and delays we incorporate during production," he explains.

He adds, "For 'You', Apple Music's Spatial Audio and Dolby Atmos translate these nuances so that fans can immerse themselves in a song."

The biz and the future

Now with more Indian musicians like Ritviz and Daler Mehndi moving into the meta-universe space with virtual concerts and NFTs, Armaan – who admits he is not well-

versed with these emerging technologies – shares he may have to learn how it all works simply because that is where the world is heading.

Alongside the complexities of tech, Armaan believes emerging and veteran musicians should know how to navigate the contentious music streaming industry. "Getting the art right is first," he states, "and the second is educating yourself with the business side of this industry. Having worked with both labels and independently, I would suggest all musicians own their music; even if you make a dollar or two, that is yours – and this is empowering. Many have not been able to do this because when you grow in your career, you need this support from labels and others in the industry... and now we are seeing more musicians break that rule, by creating something on their own from scratch."

He adds, "Many do not understand the revenue model of streaming sites and other ways to make money from their songs. There are so many ways to access this information. A few years ago, many Indian musicians could not reach international audiences without streaming services [like Gaana, Apple Music or Spotify]. While there are many explainers on YouTube and such on this topic, I do wish there were more portals in India, educating people about how to monetise their original music."

The world of Archana

Aishwarya Lekshmi returns to the big screen in the Malayalam film *Archana 31 Not Out*, releasing this Friday

BY SARASWATHY NAGARAJAN

Aishwarya Lekshmi is on her way to Kannur by road for the shoot of upcoming Malayalam film *Kumari*, when we manage to chat about her *Archana 31 Not Out* releasing on February 11.

"*Archana...* has been in the works for some time due to the pandemic and lockdowns. I heard the story in 2019, during the shooting of *Argentina Fans Kaattoorkadavu*. I enjoyed the narrative about a 28-year-old primary school teacher in Palakkad, a feisty, determined soul, who had to sit through 31 formal boy-meets-girl sessions," she says.

Through *Archana*, viewers get to meet the people in the village in Pa-

lakkad and hear their stories. "It is a film that will make you think about many social conventions that we often take for granted, even when they make us uneasy," she says.

Directed and co-written by debutant Akhil Anilkumar, *Archana...* is the first female-centric film that is headlined by Aishwarya. Indrans, Anju Joseph, Ramesh Pisharadi, Rajesh Madhavan, Sunil Sukhada and Mini KS are among those in the cast. It is also her first film in Malayalam to reach theatres after *Brother's Day* (2019).

In 2021, Aishwarya had two OTT releases - Dhanush-starrer *Jagame Thandhiram* in Tamil (Netflix) and *Kaanekkaane* in Malayalam (Sony-LIV).

She says, "Without many choices to follow her dreams, *Archana's* ambition is to get a Government job. She has to work hard for her living as her financial state is also not favourable."

Up next in Malayalam is *Kumari*, helmed by Nirmal Sadev of *Ranam* fame. Said to be a mythological with elements of

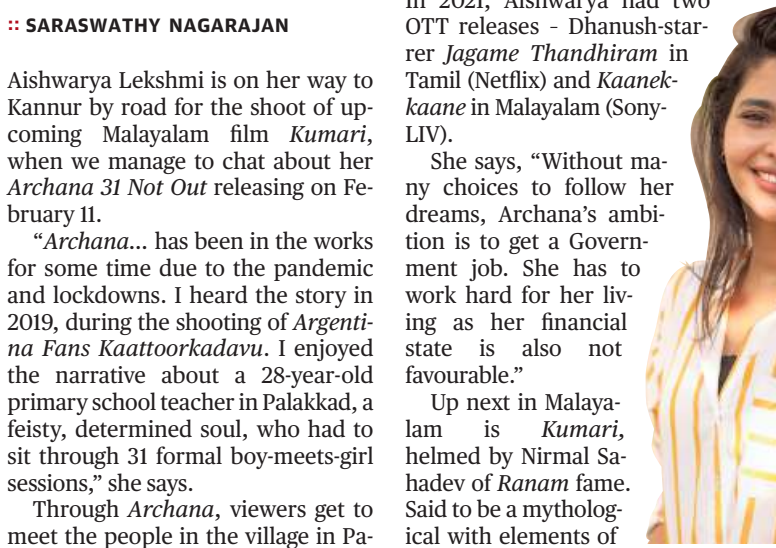
fantasy and horror, the film is being shot in Idukki, Piravam, Kannur and Kasaragod in Kerala. "If Nirmal's first film was shot in the US, this one is set in the heartland of Kerala," she says.

Aishwarya says that there has been a welcome change in the Malayalam film world with several female-centric movies being made. "I have become a little choosy and want to do films that entertain but those with a strong theme, roles of substance and a subtle message for viewers," she explains.

She adds with a laugh that *Kaanekkaane* came as a relief after a long break as there were people asking her if she was still in cinema. "I have films in Tamil and Telugu. And I am eagerly awaiting the release of Mani Ratnam's magnum opus, *Ponniyin Selvan I*, though I can't talk about it now."

A subtle message Aishwarya Lekshmi

• RAJEEVAN FRANCIS



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