



Runaway hit
(From left) Ajin Joy, Alan bin Siraj, Hashir H and Vinayak V in *Vaazha II*; (below) Savin Sa.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

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A directorial debut and that too the sequel of a hit movie. Not the easiest of situations for Savin Sa when he came on board to direct *Vaazha: Biopic of a Billion Bros*, the sequel of *Vaazha: Biopic of a Billion Bros*, both written and co-produced by filmmaker Vipin Das, whose filmography reads hits such as *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* and *Guruvayoor Ambalanadayil*. A week into its release, with the blockbuster film raking in money at the box office, Savin is relieved.

"Honestly, we did not expect this level of love and appreciation. Initially, when Vipin chettan asked me to come on board I felt some pressure. But my fears were allayed by him and his team of writers. Everyone has put in their best. We had each others' back and the film has worked because of the teamwork," says Savin, who has been Vipin's associate on *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* and the associate director for *Vaazha I*, directed by Anand Menen.

Like the first part, *Vaazha II*, too, narrates the coming-of-age story of a bunch of boys, who are losers in the eyes of others and therefore called *vaazha* (plantain tree), inspired by Malayalam saying that it is better to grow a *vaazha* than taking care of a good-for-nothing person.

The film peeps into the life of Hashir, Alan, Ajin and Vinayak – played by popular Malayalam content creators with the same names, their messed-up high school life, and how each of them move forward as they struggle to find their footing.

Savin says, "The writing is inspired by real-life experiences of

Blockbuster brotherhood

Savin Sa, director of *Vaazha: Biopic of a Billion Bros*, on what went into the making of a successful sequel

several members in the team and that's why the audience could relate with many scenes. Besides that Vipin chettan had the clarity about how to take the narrative forward and we followed that. When I had doubts I would get in touch with him or send what we had shot."

He cites the emotional scene where Bijukuttan's character falls when he attempts to light a cracker and runs away. "I thought it was meant to generate laughs and shot it like

that, with confidence. But I realised that I got the emotions wrong when Vipin chettan pointed it out," says Savin.

The sequel is heavy on action, and Savin says that the actors gave their all for the scenes, guided by stunt masters Kalai Kingson and Vicky Nandagopal.

Stunts were easy to shoot in comparison to some emotional and intense sequences, he adds.

"Especially the boys' tussle with their teacher [Vijay Babu] and the PTA meeting that follows.

They were difficult to execute because of the length, that too with so many things happening."

Music is a mainstay of *Vaazha II*, just like the first part. If *Vaazha I* had six songs composed by five musicians, *Vaazha II* has 10 songs by nine composers, in addition to a

couple of songs from the first part. "A lot of thought

has gone into designing the soundscape as the tracks had to blend with the narrative," Savin says. He mentions that while 'Makane' from the first part continues to be used in videos and reels on social media, *Vaazha II* has 'Koodeppirannor', a heart-warming melody on sibling bond, presented as a mash-up with 'Makane'. Both are written by BK Harinarayanan, composed by Parvatish Pradeep and sung by Sooraj Santhosh.

With the debutants

On working with newcomers who have a huge fan base for their social media content, Savin says that workshops were held for the four, along with a few other new faces, like Devaraj TR, another popular content creator. "Sessions were led by Rajesh Narayanan, who helped them understand the difference between the two medium."

Savin says that it was Vipin who suggested Alphonse Puthran as the police officer. Casting Bijukuttan, often seen in comic roles as a supporting character, as a single parent was a collective decision and that paid off, he says.

Savin adds that credit for the movie's success should also go to his cinematographer, Akhil Lailasuran, and editor, Kannan Mohan. He also speaks highly of his seven-member direction team. Having worked as an assistant for close to a decade, Savin says he could understand their predicament. The reason why he dedicated the movie, in the opening credits, to all the assistant directors in the world.

As we wind up, Savin makes note of a special person, his younger brother Navin, now working in Malta. "The bond I share with him is similar to the relationship among my four characters. I think that emotion has reflected in the movie."



Everyone has put in their best... the film has worked because of teamwork

SAVIN SA
Filmmaker



Strike a chord

Steve Thomas Kottoor on working with composer Shashwat Sachdev on the soundtrack and background score of *Dhurandhar*

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Steve Thomas Kottoor's musical journey began at the age of six, when he composed his first track. Since then, the Mumbai-based Malayali has built an eclectic body of work – whether as a keyboardist with Masala Coffee, a collaborator in singer Atif Aslam's collective, or as a music producer for the Netflix series *Ba**ds of Bollywood* (2025).

The latest addition to this list is the Ranveer Singh-starrer *Dhurandhar*, released in two parts. On the film directed by Adithya Dhar, he is as an additional composer with Shashwat Sachdev and has co-produced the background score with him.

"I met Shashwat when he was working on *Ba**ds...*" says Steve. "He was looking for a music producer at the time, and JK (Jayakrishnan Nalinakumar), sound engineer of Masala Coffee, suggested my name. During a meeting last June, he said he was looking for an additional composer for *Dhurandhar*."

Sound decisions

Steve recalls that Shashwat was intent on crafting a landmark soundscape for the spy drama. "It wasn't easy to compose the score. We had to be measured in our approach. It was about choosing the right moments – working with silences and understanding where the music truly needed to come in."

Hailing from Tripunithura, Steve is the son of musician Samson Kottoor, who co-composed music



High note Steve Thomas Kottoor.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

for Malayalam films such as *Traffic* and *Melvilasom*. "Appa is my first guru," says Steve, who has trained in piano and keyboard and holds a Grade 8 certification in piano from Trinity College London. He credits AR Rahman, Ilaiyaraaja and Yanni as early influences.

Steve joined Masala Coffee while still in college. "It was JK and Varun Sunil (founder of the band) who suggested I move to Mumbai and pursue music full-time." Steve also teaches music production there at The Audio Guys Institute.

In 2022, he joined Atif's band after being spotted at a concert. "I was initially called to do the orchestral arrangement but when they saw me play the keyboard, I was asked to join the band," says Steve, who also serves as the ensemble's live music director.

Steve is currently working on two films in Telugu and Malayalam as an independent composer.

STEP OUT

Rooted visions

Earth Bound, an exhibition of works by Murali Sivaramakrishnan, is on at College of Fine Arts till April 15. Time: 10am to 7pm. Free entry.



Classical moves

Ritubhava, an Odissi production by Sharmila Mukherjee, on April 11 at Ganesham, Thycaud, as part of the Pravaha Dance Festival organised by the Sanjali Centre for Odissi Dance. Time: 6.30pm. Free entry.

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Artistic fusion

Akhilam Madhuram blends dance, music and storytelling

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A blend of dance, music and storytelling. That is what Akhilam Madhuram promises you. Presented by Alapadma Arts, a cultural initiative, it features Parvathi Akhilesh, Annapoorna Pradeep and Janaki Hari, showcasing Bharatanatyam, music and storytelling respectively.

"Not all may be able to connect with a traditional dance form like Bharatanatyam. We thought the easiest way to make it work would be to bring in storytelling, since we wanted children also to be part of this experience," says Malini Mahesh, founder of Alapadma who conceptualised Akhilam Madhuram. Since Vishu is a few days away, the production will feature significant episodes from

the life of Lord Krishna, who is worshipped on the festival day. "When we brought in storytelling to Bharatanatyam and music it took some time for us to figure out how to seamlessly blend the three," says Parvathi.

Janaki says that the production has elements from different tales on Krishna but will ultimately be presented as a single story. "We start with a story and it will move on to dance and this will continue. Since we have taken familiar stories about Krishna, it will be easy for the audience to interpret," she says.

Akhilam Madhuram at Bharat Bhavan on April 12 at 10.30am. For tickets, contact 8861099016



United minds (From left) Malini Mahesh, Janaki Hari, Parvathi Akhilesh and Annapoorna Pradeep. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

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Like many other banana farmers, Mohamed Poothalparambil also used to discard the trunk or pseudostem after harvesting the banana.

Not any more. The 65-year-old farmer from Vazhakkad panchayat in Malappuram, takes out the edible, tender-white or pale green stems or *vazhappindi* from inside these trunks and supplies it to a unit where juice is extracted from these stems, bottled and sold.

Mohamed is now a regular supplier of banana stems to the manufacturing unit of Banaza Enterprises, which is the agri-business partner of Greendom, an FPC (farmer producer company), with over 450 banana farmers as shareholders.

"I had no idea about the product till the people from the company got in touch with me," says Mohamed, whose family has been into banana farming for several decades.

Malappuram district leads in banana cultivation in Kerala with farming concentrated in Vazhakkad and Vazhayoor panchayats, where more than 1,100 farmers are cultivating the crop on over 200 hectares.

While banana fibre is used to make eco-friendly products and *vazhappindi* predominantly goes into the

Ripe for the picking

Banaza Enterprises in Malappuram manufactures value-added products from banana, the highlight being stem juice

preparation of different side dishes, Kerala is yet to warm up to the idea of extracting juice from the latter.

"Even though bananas are grown extensively in Malappuram, farmers do not get enough profit by selling just the fruit. That was when we thought of introducing value-added products, and one of them is the stem juice. Not many in Kerala have thought about extracting juice from it, despite its many health benefits," says Basheer PP, vice chairman of Greendom, and an office-bearer of Banaza, which has a five-member director board.

Technical know-how and training was provided by ICAR-NRCB (National



Research Centre for Banana) at Trichy, Basheer says, adding that the company has the support of Startup India and Kerala StartUp Mission.

Before the official launch, Banaza sold 1,000 bottles to a cross section of people to gather their opinion. What gives taste to the drink is the flavours added to it. There are four types - ginger, fennel, *nannari* (Indian Sarsaparilla) and mint.

It has sugar and sugar-free versions, with stevia used in the latter. There is a plan to introduce a blueberry-flavoured drink as well.

Basheer explains that once the harvest is done, the stem must be used in three days. The trunk should be cut one or two feet from the ground and two feet from top. The stem taken out is then put in water for one or one-and-a-half hours before it goes into the machine. They have a customised machine at their unit at Kottupadam in the district.

Basheer mentions that the farmers who provide the stem are given ₹5 per

Value addition A few products from Banaza Enterprises; (below) bottled stem juice.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

kilogram. If they supply in huge quantities the amount will go up.

Besides stem juice, the unit manufactures products such as banana fig chocolate, banana biscuits, flavoured banana chips (peri peri and Spanish tomato), banana jam, banana health drink mix, and banana powder.

Basheer adds, "We have another plan as well. The residue after extracting the stem juice will be dried and powdered to be used in cookies."

Except robusta, all other banana varieties are used to make the products. Robusta is not preferred due to its texture and taste.

"States such as Karnataka and Tamil Nadu are exporting stem juice, mainly to Australia and Malaysia," he says. The drink comes in 250ml (₹60 for the one with sugar and ₹70 for the sugar-free drink) and 500 ml bottles.

The daily production capacity of the unit is 1,000 litres. Although it is currently sold only in Malappuram district, especially to hospitals, sports centres, post-pregnancy care institutions etc, Basheer says that enquiries are coming in from other districts as well.

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