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Who is Vaani Kapoor's jaan?



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India Rings In 2025 With Fireworks, Grand Celebrations Across Major Cities



(Staff Reporter) : The world welcomed the New Year 2025 with grand celebrations, cultural events, and hope on Tuesday night - after a year of global elections, political turmoil, and war. Hundreds and thousands of people gathered all around to witness spectacular fireworks and engaged in cultural events, live music performances, and themed decorations as the world marked another rotation around the sun. In India, the New Year celebrations began in many cities with large gatherings and parties.

Delhi's famous spots - India Gate, Hauz Khas, Connaught Place, and Lajpat Nagar - were filled with people. Ahead of New Year's Eve and a night of parties, the Delhi Police had put out a humorous social media post to warn drunk drivers, saying that they would hold a "cell block party" for hooligans. The post said this party's "opening performer" is a breathalyser that would identify drunk drivers, adding that they would provide "free transportation" to jail and a "VIP lounge" in the form of jail cells.

Mumbai's Juhu Beach, Chowpatty Beach, and Carter Road in Bandra were decorated and packed with people. People also gathered at Marine Drive to watch the fireworks. In

Punjab's Amritsar, people gathered at the Golden Temple to welcome the New Year. People in Madhya Pradesh's Bhopal



and Uttar Pradesh's Lucknow were seen dancing and celebrating on the streets as the clocks struck midnight.

In Srinagar, a crowd gathered at the clock tower Lal Chowk to celebrate the New Year. In Himachal Pradesh's Manali, a popular tourist destination, crowds danced and cheered in the streets. Percussion instruments were played in the streets of Tamil Nadu's Coimbatore, while Chennai witnessed a

huge crowd for the celebrations.

President, PM Modi extend New Year greetings

on the path of unity and excellence."

Prime Minister Narendra Modi also extended his wishes in a post on X. "May this year bring everyone new opportunities, success and endless joy. May everybody be blessed with wonderful health and prosperity," he wrote.

How the world celebrated

The world ushered in 2025, with huge crowds waving goodbye to the old year that brought Olympic glory, a dramatic Donald Trump return and turmoil in the Middle East and Ukraine.

New York's iconic Times Square witnessed its annual New Year's Eve ball drop. Nearly a million people gathered for the 115th edition of the celebration, which has been a tradition since 1907.

Japan witnessed the world's largest fireworks on New Year's Eve.

In Syria, which recently witnessed the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime, people celebrated the New Year with large crowds and fireworks. Vibrant fireworks exploded above the Great Pyramids in Egypt's Cairo. While thousands of people gathered on the streets of Taipei to celebrate the New Year, Sydney - the self-proclaimed 'New Year's capital of the world' - sprayed fireworks.

On New Year's Eve, President Droupadi Murmu extended her greetings to the nation. In her message, she said, "On the joyous occasion of the New Year, I extend my heartiest greetings and best wishes to all Indians, both in India and abroad. The coming of the New Year marks the beginning of new hopes, dreams, and aspirations in our lives. Let us welcome the New Year with joy and enthusiasm and take our society and nation further

Suchir Balaji, Indian-origin OpenAI whistleblower, autopsy reveals 'murder' not suicide: Parents

(Sai Bureau)-The parents of Indian-American techie Suchir Balaji, who was found dead in his San Francisco apartment on December 14, 2024, have rejected the official suicide ruling, alleging that their son was murdered.

Suchir, a former OpenAI employee, had made headlines for his whistleblowing revelations about the ethical concerns surrounding generative AI.

In an interview with NDTV, his parents claim that the second autopsy report indicates "signs of struggle," including a



head injury and trauma, which contradict the suicide verdict by the medical examiner's office. Suchir's mother, Poornima Ramarao, expressed disbelief at the suicide ruling, citing the absence of a suicide note and the findings of the second autopsy.

"We have facts with the second autopsy -- head trauma and signs of struggle. This is not a suicide; it's a murder," she stated. His father, Balaji Ramamurthi, recounted their last conversation on

December 22, when Suchir returned from a trip to Los Angeles in good spirits. "He seemed happy," he said.

When asked if Suchir picked up another job, his mother said, "No, he didn't. They (OpenAI) probably threatened him. They didn't allow him to work somewhere else. He also consulted a copyright attorney and figured out that he was not doing anything wrong and they were just suppressing him. That made him give the New York Times interview and resulted in his death."

"He was working in the core group of the ChatGPT; he was kind of an architect of the whole thing. He knows a lot of information about ChatGPT. There were some restrictions on him to not work in other AI companies," the father added.

His mother mentioned that Suchir was working on personal research which he wanted to get published, in which he explains that "modulated answer is not exactly as the information pegged to ChatGPT, giving an example of a black and white cat coming out as a coloured cat."

Karnal youth dies mysteriously in US, family seeks govt help to bring body back



(Sai Bureau)-The family of 27-year-old Manish from Kunjpura village in Karnal district is reeling in shock after he died under mysterious circumstances in the US. Manish had travelled to the US around 18 months ago to improve his family's financial situation. His family had taken a loan of Rs 38 lakh to fund his trip.

According to his family, Manish died of a heart attack. However, they received no prior indication of any health issues, as he had spoken to them just a day before his death.

"Manish seemed perfectly fine when he spoke to us yesterday. He didn't mention any health problems.

Everything seemed normal, but today we received the devastating news of his death," a family member said. Manish had travelled to the US through irregular channels ('donkey routes'). His family had pinned their hopes on him to alleviate their financial struggles, but now they are burdened with both grief and the weight of an unpaid loan.

The family has appealed to the Union Government to assist them in bringing Manish's body back to India for his final rites. "We are devastated. Our only request to the government is to help us repatriate his body so we can perform his last rites in our homeland," a grieving family member said.

ED probing role of Canadian colleges, Indian entities in human trafficking

(Sai Bureau)-The Enforcement Directorate is investigating the alleged involvement of some Canadian colleges and a few Indian entities in a money-laundering case linked to the trafficking of Indians into the US from the Canada border. The investigation is linked to the death of a four-member Indian family, hailing from Dingucha village in Gujarat. The four died of extreme cold while trying to cross the Canada-US border illegally on January 19, 2022.

The ED said it took cognisance of an Ahmedabad Police FIR against Bhavesh Ashokbhai Patel, who emerged as the main accused in the matter, and a few others, to file a complaint under the criminal sections of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). Patel and others are alleged to have "hatched a well-planned conspiracy to send people (Indians) to the US through Canada via illegal channels thereby committing the offence of human trafficking," it said.

The agency had earlier found that as part of the racket, the accused "arranged" admission for people, desirous to go to the US illegally, in



colleges and universities based in Canada. A Canadian student visa was applied for such people and once they reached that country, instead of joining the college, they "illegally" crossed the US-Canada border, the agency said in a statement on Tuesday.

"In view of this, the fee received by colleges based in Canada was remitted back to the individuals' account," the ED alleged.

Indians were "lured" into the racket

and charged between Rs 55 lakh and Rs 60 lakh per person, according to the ED.

The agency said it undertook fresh searches in this case on December 10 and December 19 at eight locations in Mumbai, Nagpur, Gandhinagar and Vadodara.

It was found, the ED said, that two "entities", one based in Mumbai and the other in Nagpur, entered into an "agreement" for admission of Indians

in universities based in foreign countries on a commission basis.

The agency said the latest searches found that about 25,000 students are being referred by one entity and more than 10,000 students by the other to various colleges based outside India every year.

"Further, it is gathered that there are around 1,700 agents/partners based in Gujarat and around 3,500 agents/partners of other entities all over India out of which around 800 are active.

"It is further revealed that 112 colleges based in Canada have entered into an agreement with one entity and more than 150 with another entity. Their involvement in the instant case is under investigation," the ED said.

The agency suspects that out of the total 262 such colleges in Canada, a few, which are geographically located near the Canada-US border, are involved in the trafficking of Indian nationals.

The ED said it froze Rs 19 lakh in bank deposits, some "incriminating" documents and digital devices, and seized two vehicles in connection with its probe.

Indian-Origin Doctor, 26, Among 2 Killed In UAE Plane Crash: Report



(Sai Bureau)- An Indian-origin doctor was among two killed in a light aircraft crash off the coast of UAE's Ras Al Khaimah on Sunday. The crash claimed the lives of both the pilot and co-pilot, the General Civil Aviation Authority said in a statement. Sulaymaan Al Majid was co-piloting the aircraft with a 26-year-old Pakistani woman who also died in the accident. Born and raised in the UAE, 26-year-old Sulaymaan had hired the plane for a sightseeing experience with his family. His father, mother, and younger brother were at the aviation club to watch the flight, according to reports. Sulaymaan's younger brother was scheduled to take the next flight, as per the reports.

"We were looking forward to the New Year as a family, planning to celebrate together. Instead, our lives have been shattered. It feels like time has stopped for us. Sulaymaan was the light of our lives, and we don't know how to move forward without him," Sulaymaan's father was quoted as saying by the UAE-based newspaper Khaleej Times. The crash occurred shortly after takeoff near the Cove Rotana Hotel along the beach, said the aviation authority. "Initial reports suggest the glider lost radio contact and later attempted an emergency landing. Despite resuscitation efforts, both occupants succumbed to their injuries," the aviation authority added.

Indian-origin man jailed in Singapore for making racist remarks

(Sai Bureau)- A 27-year-old Indian-origin man has been sentenced to four weeks in jail and fined SGD 4,000 for hurling racial slurs and throwing a tip box at a cashier in a Project Acai cafe in Singapore's Holland Village. The incident occurred on October 31. The 27-year-old man, identified as Rishi

customers, including children, at around 12:20 pm when Rishi mistakenly believed he was in the queue to place an order.

He expressed his frustration with the country and refused to move to the back of the line, holding up the queue.

The cashier, distressed by his insults, stepped away and let her superior handle the situation. Rishi continued shouting and eventually picked up a tip box, throwing it at the cashier and hitting her lower back. He then returned to his seat, fumed for a few minutes, and came back to the counter to throw two serving trays, which missed the victim.



David Ramesh Nandwani, was informed by the cashier that he was at the wrong end of the queue and was asked to wait for his turn. Soon after, Rishi launched into a tirade, including racial slurs against Chinese people. Following his arrest, Rishi was produced in court and pleaded guilty to using insulting words and committing a rash act that endangered the victim's safety at the café. Two additional charges were considered during sentencing, according to Channel News Asia. The cafe was crowded with

He continued to shout vulgarities and slurs before leaving the cafe.

Rishi was arrested about an hour later after the victim called the police to report a "raging" customer. Videos of the incident, showing Rishi's tirade and the tip box being thrown, were played in court. Many customers in the queue watched in silence as the events unfolded. In sentencing, District Judge Janet Wang stated that Rishi's offences caused public disquiet and emphasised the need to protect service staff from abuse.

Trump backs H-1B visas, but reform looms for immigration system in US

(Sai Bureau)- Of all the rich and powerful people cosying up to US President-elect Donald Trump, few have rushed to Mar-a-Lago faster than the crowned heads of big tech, including Google and Meta, local media reported. "And few have a stronger motive to curry Trump's favour than Silicon Valley: the fate of the H-1B visa program that permits foreign-born computer scientists, engineers and other highly skilled workers to migrate to the United States hangs in the balance," noted the report on Tuesday.

Support for retaining H-1B from Elon Musk, the incoming president's new closest associate, has stirred rage through much of Trump's MAGA base, which is against immigration in almost any form. But keeping the pipeline open for tech and other skilled workers is seen by many business leaders as critical for the American economy, especially in California, reports Xinhua news agency, quoting the Los Angeles Times. The state is by far the biggest user of the H-1B. In fiscal 2024, more than 9,600 employers

in California sought clearance for at least one H-1B worker, and 78,860 visa applications for new and continuing employment were approved, according to data from US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

"They include all kinds of skilled work in



various industries, including nurses and science teachers. But the top 10 beneficiaries of H-1B visas in California -- accounting for almost one-third of all the approvals -- were dominated by tech giants, most of them in the Bay Area," it added. Earlier, Trump declared that he is a "believer in H-1B" visas, quashing the opposition to the programme for qualified professionals to work in the US that pitted the right-wing fringe against his advisers Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy.



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NCB busts international drug racket; Three Nigerians among four held

(News Agency)-The Narcotics Control Bureau, Ahmedabad has busted an international drug syndicate with the seizure of 2 kg ketamine and arrested four persons, including three Nigerian nationals, the NCB said on Sunday.

The accused conspired to traffic ketamine from India to foreign countries through courier parcels, the NCB said in a release, detailing the significant crackdown of the organised drug crime operating from Indian soil. The value of the seized contraband was not specified. Ketamine is a highly valued and sought after contraband in USA and also used as a "date rape" drug, the release said.

The NCB Ahmedabad received an initial input on December 3 that nearly 2 kg of ketamine concealed in spice packets of various brands was being shipped to the US through courier agencies, it said. Extensive technical surveillance coupled with human intel



led the drug law enforcement agency to zero in on a person, Adnan Furniturewala, who once resided in Pune but later moved to the US, it said. It further came to light that Furniturewala was deported to India

after being booked in three cases of drug trafficking in the US, the NCB said. While being in India, the accused was booked in another case under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act by the NCB Mumbai last year and was currently out on parole, it said.

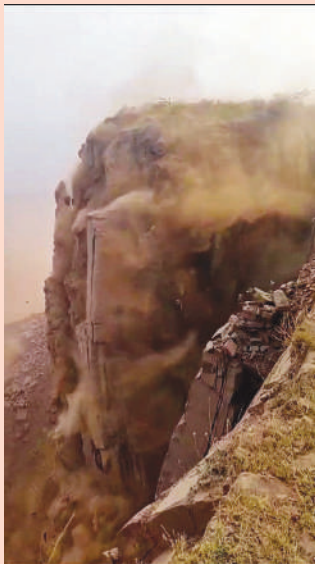
"In the present case, he was always a

step ahead of authorities and continuously kept on changing his hideout and employed numerous tactics so as to dodge the agency," the release said.

"However, in a precisely executed operation that spanned through states of Gujarat, Maharashtra and Karnataka, he was tracked and finally arrested on December 8 from an apartment in Bellahalli area of Bengaluru, Karnataka," it stated. The probe further indicated the seized ketamine was supplied to him by a Nigerian syndicate operating from Delhi and supplying contraband through courier agencies, the NCB said. "Concerted efforts by the agency led to the nabbing of Emmanuel Ifanyi Nwaobiora alias Mike along with his two associates Ekeleme Ahamefule Joseph and Emmanuel Osaja on December 18 from Mehrauli area of Delhi," it said. Further investigation was being carried out by the NCB's Ahmedabad zonal unit to find out the source of the contraband, the release said.

Haryana, Raj teams inspect blasted hill, but no FIR filed

(News Agency)-A day after the mining mafia brought down an entire Aravalli hillock on the Haryana-Rajasthan border in Rava village of Nuh, teams from the two states visited the site on Saturday, but no FIR was registered. While the Rajasthan team issued show-cause notices to a few licensed miners in their territory in Nangal, the Haryana counterparts, led by the Ferozepur Jhirka SDM and the SHO, "gathered information for further action". None of the states, however, proceeded



with basic procedure of filing an FIR, said a green activist. Speaking to The Tribune, a senior official of the Nuh police said, "We are awaiting a complaint from the local administration to file an FIR. The villagers are too scared to testify against the mining mafia. An administration team along with our SHO visited the spot, but we are yet to get any communication on further action." An official spokesperson of the Nuh administration said an FIR would be registered soon. "Those who have blasted the hill will not be spared. Following directions from the Deputy

Commissioner, our team visited the site and gathered information from the villagers," he said. The Tribune had reported in these columns a day ago

how the mining mafia, on the evening of December 19, blasted the hillock, which crumbled the following morning. The villagers shot videos of the collapsing hill and alerted the authorities. While the police maintained the hill fell within Haryana's jurisdiction, the mining officials claimed it was Rajasthan's territory.

In 2023, the mafia had blasted three hills in a similar manner, causing Rs 2,100 crore losses to the Haryana exchequer. An FIR was registered, but no arrest had been made to date, said an official. The residents claimed they had already apprised the police and the local administration about three suspects.

"The visit by the authorities is a mere eyewash. In fact, the mining mafia is being nurtured here. Roads are made for dumpers through forests, blasting of hills is done every weekend and no action is taken. They threaten to kill us, so we cannot challenge them," said a few villagers, expressing helplessness over the sorry state of affairs as the mafia continue to plunder the natural wealth.

4 dead in Haryana, 250 flights hit in Delhi, as dense fog shrouds north India

A dense fog amid a cold wave disrupted flights, trains, and road traffic across north India, delaying over 150 flights, cancelling 30 at Delhi Airport, and causing widespread inconvenience.



(News Agency)- Hundreds of flights and several trains were delayed across North India as a dense blanket of fog engulfed multiple states, including Delhi, reducing visibility amid a continuing cold wave in the region. The blinding fog affected road traffic as well and four people were killed in an accident in Haryana.

The flight operations were temporarily put on hold and some were diverted at the Delhi airport as the runway visibility on Saturday morning was zero. Over 250 flights were delayed, and around 40 were cancelled due to the prevailing conditions. Fifteen flights were diverted from the Delhi airport between 12.15 am and 1.30 am. "Due to dense fog, flight operations have been affected at the airport. Passengers are requested

to contact the airline concerned for updated flight information," the airport authorities said. Airlines, including IndiGo and Air India, issued advisories to travellers, stating that "poor visibility due to dense fog is impacting flight operations in Delhi and parts of Northern India". "With winter in full swing, many regions in Northern India are experiencing varying fog conditions. On some days, fog may be dense, while on others, lighter fog could still impact flight schedules," IndiGo also said in an advisory. At Kolkata Airport, 40 flight services were delayed and five have been cancelled, according to flight monitoring platform Flightradar. Similar conditions were reported at Chandigarh, Amritsar, Agra, and multiple other airports in North India.

Drug smuggler's love of films does him in; arrested during 'Pushpa 2' show

(News Agency)-Moviegoers watching a late-night show of 'Pushpa 2' at a multiplex in Maharashtra's Nagpur witnessed a real-life action scene as police stormed the cinema hall and arrested a man wanted in murder and drug cases.

The dramatic arrest of Vishal Meshram shortly after midnight on Thursday left the packed audience stunned, but police assured them that they could continue enjoying the movie as they nabbed the accused and took him away.

Meshram was on the run for 10 months and was eventually tracked down after police learnt about his interest in the recently-released film, an official from Pachpaoli police station said on Sunday.

The gangster had 27 cases against



him, including two of murder and drug trafficking, and was known for his violent tendencies, even attacking police in the past, he said.

Authorities had been pursuing him relentlessly, using cyber surveillance and tracking his movements in a new SUV, the official said.

After tracking him on Thursday, police deflated the vehicle's tyres outside the cinema hall, located in central part of the city, to prevent his escape, he said. When police personnel entered the hall during the movie's climax, Meshram was engrossed in the film. The police surrounded him and made the arrest swiftly, giving him no chance to resist, the official said. Meshram is currently lodged in the Nagpur Central Jail and would soon be transferred to a prison in Nashik, the police said.

'Name it after Manmohan Singh': Congress vs BJP on Savarkar college inauguration

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be laying the foundation of a college in Delhi named after Hindutva icon Veer Savarkar. The issue has sparked a war of words between the BJP and Congress ahead of the Delhi elections.

(News Agency)- Delhi University's decision to name one of its upcoming colleges after Hindutva icon Veer Savarkar, whose foundation stone would be laid by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday, has sparked a war of words between the BJP and Congress. While the Congress's student wing has demanded that the college be named after former PM Manmohan Singh, who died last week, the BJP has accused the party of "habitually disparaging iconic figures".

The National Students' Union of India (NSUI), in a letter to PM Modi, highlighted Manmohan Singh's

contributions to education and requested that his legacy be honoured by naming the college after him and not Savarkar.

"Singh established numerous institutions like IITs, IIMs, AIIMS and introduced the Central Universities Act. Naming institutions after him will inspire generations and honour his transformative vision," the NSUI said. It also sought the establishment of a central university named after Singh, whose groundbreaking reforms liberalised the economy in 1991. The Veer Savarkar College will be constructed in Najafgarh at an



estimated cost of Rs 140 crore. The decision was approved in 2021 by the Delhi University's executive council. Congress MPs Naseer Hussain and Sukhjinder Randhawa also took potshots at the BJP for glorifying "mercy petition writers" to the British. "The PM should think again. Savarkar had

apologised to the British. How can a college be named after him?" Randhawa said. Hussain, a Rajya Sabha MP, accused the BJP of disregarding the contribution of the freedom fighters. "The BJP is giving legitimacy to those people who have written mercy petitions to the British and taken pensions from them,"

Good job: Sanjay Raut's rare praise for Devendra Fadnavis as Naxals surrender

(News Agency)-In a rare moment of political bonhomie, Shiv Sena (UBT) MP Sanjay Raut on Friday praised Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis after 11 Naxals surrendered before the BJP leader in Gadchiroli. Raut, speaking to reporters, said he had previously worked with Fadnavis and his initiatives for Naxal-infested Gadchiroli should be

appreciated.

On the Saamna editorial praising Fadnavis, Raut said, "We have praised him as the government has done a good job. If the Naxalites surrendered and opted for the constitutional path, we welcome that... The earlier 'guardian minister' could have done that, but instead, he appointed his agents and collected money that increased

Naxalism. We have worked with Devendra Fadnavis, that relationship goes on."

#WATCH | Mumbai, Maharashtra | Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Sanjay Raut says, "We have praised Devendra Fadnavis as the govt has done a good job. Maharashtra is our state and a place like Gadchiroli which is affected by naxalism - if the Naxalites surrendered and opted

for the... pic.twitter.com/dyNsTOwFOZ — ANI (@ANI) January 3, 2025

Raut's effusive praise for Fadnavis comes amid speculation of a possible reconciliation between deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar and his uncle Sharad Pawar. The rumours gained further traction after Ajit Pawar's mother said on Wednesday that she prayed for the reunion of the Pawar family.

At best, 2025 will be a year of slow economic recovery. As for the worst? Brace yourselves

The 2020s have been a dismal decade. Five years ago, when the first reports emerged of a new virus that had its origins in the Chinese city of Wuhan, it was hard to imagine that Covid-19 would have such a devastating impact. Yet within months, the UK was in lockdown, the global economy was in a chokehold, trade flows had dried up and governments were spending freely to prevent deep recessions turning into something even more catastrophic.

A second Great Depression was avoided, but half a decade on, the long-term effects of the pandemic are still being felt. Predictions that the development of new vaccines to combat the virus would prove the catalyst for a new “roaring 20s” have proved wide of the mark. The second half of the decade should be an improvement on the first half – but that’s not saying much. The good news is that a few green shoots have started to emerge.

Businesses have money to invest should they choose to do so. Consumers have amassed rainy-day savings during the crisis years that they will gradually spend. But don’t expect 2025 to be a vintage year. At best, it will be a time of slow recovery. At worst, it will be a year of recession, global fracturing and increasingly angry voters.

None of this should come as a surprise given the scale of the disruption caused by the pandemic and its aftermath. There was a burst of activity as lockdown restrictions were lifted, but the shortages that followed led to supply bottlenecks and higher prices. Inflationary pressure, given an added twist by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, prompted central banks to push up interest rates. In the UK, the rising number of children not attending school and the increase in those not working due to mental health issues are clear evidence of the long-term scarring caused by Covid.

Higher prices and higher interest rates have made governments – especially in the rich west – unpopular, and 2024 was not a good year to be an incumbent party. In the US, Donald Trump exploited voter unhappiness about the cost of living. In France, voters turned to parties of both the left and the right. In the UK, they chose Keir Starmer’s centre-left approach. To say Labour has had a sticky start is something of an understatement. Expectations were not especially high when voters delivered Starmer a landslide majority with only 34% of the vote last July, but the prime minister has still underdelivered. The latest official growth figures suggest Labour has taken what looked like a half-decent recovery and snuffed it out, leaving the economy on the brink of recession. Relations with

business have soured after the tax increases in the budget – and the NHS remains in crisis.

Support for Labour has fallen sharply and you would need to go back to the 1970s to find a prime minister less popular than Starmer this soon after an election. A clearer example of buyer’s remorse would be hard to find. The government’s response to all this is that it is still early days and that over time the country will feel the benefit of the long-term decisions taken in the past six months. All governing parties suffer from bouts of unpopularity at some point: Labour’s has simply arrived earlier than is usually the case. By the time parties are again shopping around for votes, it will all be different. The public knows, deep down at least, that Britain’s problems are longstanding and are not going to be solved in six months.

Yet one of the features of today’s politics is that voters want quick results that don’t require any personal sacrifices. There is much talk about how politicians would be better off “levelling” with people and “telling it how it is”, but scant evidence that they are rewarded for doing so. Rishi Sunak tried to level with voters when he said the massive bill amassed during the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 had to be paid for with higher taxes, and a fat lot of good that did him.

Starmer used his new year message to say Labour would rebuild Britain in the same way it did after 1945, but voters are more fickle these days. His argument that change takes time is correct and, despite the blunders, there have been signs of a new approach. The new employment rights bill, which shifts the balance of power in favour of workers, is one such example. The move to a bigger state marked by the decision to raise both taxes and spending in the budget is another. But that doesn’t detract from the fact that the government could do with some good economic news arriving sharpish. There is not much chance of that happening.

The chancellor, Rachel Reeves, has attracted much criticism for her October budget, but a more important factor in the growth slowdown has been the excessively cautious approach to interest rates adopted by the Bank of England. Having been late to spot higher inflation coming in 2021, it now risks driving the economy into a recession that will make it more difficult for Reeves to make her budget arithmetic stack up – and leave her with the unpleasant choice of cutting spending, raising taxes or increasing borrowing. The Bank should eventually get round to cutting rates more aggressively, but it will take time for cheaper borrowing costs to have an impact.

By Larry Elliott

Russia and China: an old friendship poses new threats

It is almost three years since Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin declared a friendship with “no limits” – weeks before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Since then, they have retreated from such rhetorical enthusiasm. The “no limits” language was quickly dumped, probably at Beijing’s behest. When Mr Putin visited in May last year, he claimed that he and his counterpart were “as close as brothers”. Mr Xi more coolly called the Russian president “a good friend and a good neighbour”. China has conspicuously not reciprocated Mr Putin’s description of it as an ally.

Yet the partnership continues to broaden and deepen, to western alarm, across economic, political and military fronts. The US Council on Foreign Relations recently assessed it “the greatest threat to vital US national interests in sixty years”. The last 12 months saw unprecedented joint military activity by Chinese and Russian forces – though the aim was probably to signal their combined might rather than pursue the interoperability that is foundational to the US-European alliance. In September, the US suggested direct support for the Russian war machine in Ukraine, beyond the kind of dual-use equipment it has been shipping and the essential role it plays as an export market for Russian oil. A flurry of books on the “new cold war” appeared in 2024. The confrontation between the west and a Sino-Russian-led axis – this time with Moscow as the junior partner, and taking in Iran as well as North Korea – has alarming echoes of the past. Long-dormant fears of nuclear war have reignited. An island – then Cuba, now Taiwan – could be a flashpoint. As president, Joe Biden has sought to define

the confrontation as a global struggle between an alliance of democracies and the world’s autocracies – though Washington embraces Saudi Arabia, while India refuses to take sides over Ukraine and is accused of assassinating critics in Canada.

Interests and grievances

There is plenty of evidence that there are, in fact, limits on the Sino-Russian relationship, as the war in Ukraine has shown. Notwithstanding the recent US remarks on lethal aid, China has been evidently reluctant to supply arms and ammunition. Russian businesses have reported growing obstacles to business as Chinese banks have tightened compliance with sanctions because of western threats, though priority payments seem to be proceeding unimpeded. Analysing the two countries’ recent statements on security reveals that they seem to be as much about controlling expectations and each containing the other’s ambitions as they do about amplifying power together. Just as Chinese support for Russia’s war in Ukraine is limited, though obvious, so Russia has made it clear that it does not want to go to war on China’s behalf.

Donald Trump’s re-election has also raised the spectre of a “reverse Nixon”, with the US embracing Moscow and cutting out Beijing, given his hawkishness on China and fondness for Mr Putin. Yet Nixon’s rapprochement with China was made possible by the extraordinarily bitter Sino-Soviet split, which followed the Sino-Soviet alliance. Both players have learned their lesson from that clash and will look beyond a single presidential term. More likely is that Russia would bank any inducements from Washington and continue to work with Beijing as it sees fit, though perhaps more discreetly.

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By Manoj K. Jha

I remember making an intervention in the Parliament in late 2018 on the issue of attack on federalism by the ruling party. After my speech, Dr Manmohan Singh walked up to me, held my hand and said: "You are a good addition to the house." That moment and the words of encouragement from a person of his stature meant the world to me. I never imagined someone of his calibre would extend such courtesy and grace to a new member from another party. It is this transparent and humble aspect of his personality that endeared him to his colleagues as well as fellow Indians. I am fortunate to have shared a professional tenure with Dr. Singh at two remarkable institutions: The University of Delhi and the Parliament of India.

Dr Singh, who served as India's Prime Minister from 2004 to 2014, is widely respected as the architect of the country's economic reforms. Many low- and middle-income families remember how the reforms opened new avenues of upward mobility for them. Though the trajectory and gains of liberalisation, globalisation, and privatisation for the country are contested, such policies saw the country making rapid and sustained economic growth. As is



Manmohan Singh: The Thinking Person's Politician

usually the case, this growth did not percolate down to the people at the end of the line. Instead of redistribution of the largesse that accrued to the emerging middle classes, it led to wealth accumulation for a few and widening inequality.

But Dr Singh could hardly be faulted for this. Our societies have historically favoured powerful groups to corner resources, preserve privileges, and limit social mobility. Not to forget the price that the advanced capitalist global north continues to extract from the countries of the global south as and

when they demand even the slightest of cooperation and assistance to make up for centuries of super-exploitation. However, Dr Singh did his best under the circumstances while at the helm of the country's affairs. He introduced many welfare schemes like guaranteed rural employment and the Right to Education. Millions of people were pulled out of poverty during his tenure. This must also be remembered while talking about his tenure.

Resilience Against Hardship
Dr Singh's life story is one of

resilience in the face of extreme personal and political challenges. A soft-spoken economist educated at Oxford and Cambridge, his early life was marked by crises, including the partition of India, which displaced his family. Yet, he reached the pinnacle of educational, professional, and political success through sheer grit and perseverance. One would be hard-pressed to find him mentioning, much less making political capital from his 'hardship stories' in his long public life. Dr Singh's policies and governance

often reflected his deep humanitarian concern for the well-being of the common people, which must have emanated from his struggle in his early life. Though some critics called him a "silent PM", his economic expertise and clean image earned him respect across party lines. Even today, he is remembered as one of India's most qualified Prime Ministers. His simple lifestyle and humble nature, quite different from other mainstream Indian politicians, endeared him to Indians across the spectrum.

A Murky Rivalry Is Brewing In India's Neighbourhood

By Tara Kartha

The Afghans are understandably furious. After more than two decades of unleashing terror on them from the mujahideen era through the Taliban times, Pakistan decided to bomb Afghan villages on Tuesday, killing some 46 people, including women and children. The villages allegedly sheltered the cadres of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

That's ironic. The TTP is hardly an Afghan product. It is, in effect, the final result of Pakistan's own disastrous policy of backing and sheltering a variety of terrorists. Remember Hillary Clinton's famous jibe in 2011 about the dangers of Pakistan keeping snakes in its backyard that would inevitably turn around and strike its benefactor? This seems to be it.

Why The Attack

Pakistan's diplomacy seems a little quixotic, though one can never tell with regard to Islamabad. Veteran diplomat Mohammad Sadiq, who has served six years as an ambassador and is now a reappointed special representative to Afghanistan, was in Kabul recently. By his own account, he received a gracious welcome, especially by the Foreign Ministry led by Amir Khan Muttaqi. The



latter has been a frequent guest of Pakistan, both in the past and in recent years, and was once seen strolling with Foreign Minister Bilawal. According to a formal statement, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan declared its determination to maintain good relations and encourage trade and transit.

All very encouraging. Hours later though, Pakistani fighter aircraft were bombing and strafing Barmal in Paktika, a province that is the hometown of Muttaqi. According to reports, some 46 people were killed in Barmal; the strikes also apparently hit a refugee camp. Pakistan claimed that it had targeted TTP leaders,

including Akhtar Muhammad, the head of the TTP's Umar Media.

An apparently furious Kabul summoned the Pakistani charge d'affaires and issued a strong protest, calling the strikes a "deliberate attempt by certain circles in Pakistan aimed at undermining trust and causing friction in the relations of the two nations" (meaning, with the Pakistan army) and declaring that "the Pakistani side has been clearly informed that protecting Afghanistan's national sovereignty is a red line for the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and such actions are viewed highly irresponsible and will inevitably bear repercussions". Quite a

statement. Afghanistan doesn't have an army in the conventional sense, but a threat from a country that has exhausted empires and superpowers needs to be taken seriously. True, a large part of the government has a 'Made in Pakistan' stamp, but Afghans have rarely ever taken attacks lying down.

The Homemade Threat

Meanwhile, the reason for the attacks are clear in one respect. The Pakistanis have endured a lot. According to available data, Pakistan faced as many as 785 attacks in just this year, with 55 security forces lost in the first weeks of November alone. Just a week ago, a most brutal attack in Makeen reportedly killed 35 soldiers. This was probably the immediate trigger for the air attacks even as Pakistani security forces launched a so-called 'IBO' (Intelligence based operation) in the areas opposite Paktia to flush out terrorists.

However, if anything, such operations have led to a more deleterious effect than success. Earlier, policemen would rebel against Pakistan army operations in Lakki Marwat, demanding that the military quit 'meddling' in the area, even as hundreds blocked the Indus Highway in protest.



Vivek Ramaswamy, Former MAGA Darling, Learns Something About Politics

By Nishtha Gautam

Vivek Ramaswamy may just be the saviour Indians with an American Dream have been waiting for. Or is he the enfant terrible who's going to ruin it for everyone?

President-elect Donald Trump's two blue-eyed boys, Ramaswamy and Elon Musk, are currently co-chairing the Department of Government Efficiency. They have openly batted for H-1B visas—visas for high-tech workers, a lot of whom come into the US from India. This has started a civil war among Trump supporters. Trump has been equivocating on the issue ever since he started his 2016 presidential campaign. His 'America First' capitalised on his potential vote base's anti-immigrant sentiment. A lot of his supporters, therefore, have seen his latest statement on how his companies, too, rely on foreign workers as some sort of betrayal.

Rubbing MAGA The Wrong Way
Ramaswamy stirred the hornet's nest by critiquing the American culture of venerating "mediocrity over excellence for way too long", as a result of which immigrants are essential for maintaining the country's growth trajectory. If Ramaswamy were a White Anglo-Saxon Puritanical man, this

criticism would have been lumped as a justified, even if tasteless, expression of concern for America's greatness. But the 39-year-old former GOP presidential candidate is a 'tataiyya' (wasp), and he's stinging MAGA supporters the wrong way. For his love—even if somewhat qualified—of immigrants, Ramaswamy is inching towards the Democratic line.

Musk and Ramaswamy are both being accused of jeopardising the future of American workers and students. They are now in the enemy camp. But why is it of any concern to those of us in India, especially if we do not have any green card ambitions?

Who Is An American?

This internal strife of Republicans tells the oft-repeated but doomed-to-be-ignored story of the triumph of self-interest over every lofty-sounding principle. Musk and Ramaswamy represent a social class that sees politics as a necessary means to the end. It is the same principle at work when Trump threatens India with trade tariffs despite proclaiming, "I love Hindoo". Indian-origin supporters of the Republican Party, the smart ones at least, bank on this principle: the self-interest of tech and finance moguls may reign in the racist tendencies of those

who see immigrants as a threat.

The utilitarian principle in assessing who is worthy of being an American is on full display here. Tech bigwigs cannot continue to carry on their businesses without highly skilled foreign workers. Small businesses or agriculture entrepreneurs rely on unskilled foreign labourers, ideally illegal immigrants, so that they can be hired for less than minimum wages. Asylum-seekers suit nobody.

The nativists in Trump's broader support base are feeling let down by his big tech allies and vice versa. But what were these tech moguls thinking? That they would not be resented for their wealth and clout after designing and funding a political campaign that kept hammering on how average Americans have been defrauded of their rightful dues by the 'outsiders' and their domestic cheerleaders, i.e. Democrats?

Double Jeopardy

The working class, including immigrant groups such as Hispanics, Asians, and South Asians, rallied behind the Republicans because they felt left out by the broken 'system' that Trump promised to fix in their favour. His announced cabinet of millionaires is the first jolt to that promise. Many may be wondering how their concerns

around the prices of eggs and bacon can even be understood by those who never think twice before buying islands and social media platforms. And when the same billionaires seem to be threatening their prospects of getting jobs, it's a double jeopardy.

Indians in Silicon Valley and Seattle may be forgiven for being baffled at the moment. Are they insiders or outsiders? What will it take for them to be seen as the people who are building this country and not "third-world invaders" despite their green cards or even American passports?

Why is anyone surprised that Ramaswamy is facing racial slurs from his fellow MAGA supporters? The adage "nobody is free until everyone is" needs to be paid more heed to make sense of this mayhem. Exclusionary political campaigns have a terrible habit of altering their course to make the shooter the target. Prejudice boomerangs.

As Jermaine, a Jamaican Uber driver living in Florida, says, "They (Republicans) have everything now, the Congress, the White House, the Supreme Court...who are they going to blame for their failures? Us Jamaicans?"

No, Jermaine, they'll blame each other. Happy New Year.

Laapata Bollywood: How 2024 Became The Year Of Banality



By Ishita Sengupta

A good year in the movies can mean multiple things. Studios sufficiently bankrolling films, independent projects finding their way to the mainstream, underdogs triumphing over tentpole projects, new faces coming up and old faces rediscovering their voice. In that sense, 2024 fulfilled most of these possibilities. Filmmaker Sriram Raghavan, known for curating gore in his films, conjured a heartbreaking romance in Merry Christmas. Three female actors fronted the commercially viable Crew, a modest-budgeted Munjya won big, Payal Kapadia's independently-funded All We Imagine As Light got a theatrical release and ensembles like Madgaon Express, Stree 2, and Bhool Bhulaiyaa 3 were triumphs. On paper, we are steady ahead. But a little probing dismantles this neat narrative.

There can, and should, be different ways of looking at something. But no matter how one sees it, 2024 reveals to be uninspiring for Hindi films. Quantity is no longer the problem. Admittedly, there was a lull during the Covid-19 crisis, but some time has passed and as of now, a steady roster of theatrical and streaming releases is in place. Theatre owners and exhibitors also came up with a ploy to combat infrequent releases: re-releasing old Hindi films. Yet, the quality has been on a steady decline. The Era Of 'Genericness'

As of now, the landscape of Hindi films resembles a linear line drawn by a vanishing ink. The multi-crore

industry has come to be imbued by such genericness in plot and aesthetics that is hard to locate its identity. In other words, no matter how long the line is—and how expansive the industry is becoming—the growth feels incidental, for the ambition is stunted.

It could have been the post-pandemic uncertainty, the easy availability of other Indian language films through streaming sites during that period, or the gigantic successes of those ventures. In 2022, S.S. Rajamouli's RRR registered the highest opening by an Indian film; this year, another Telugu language film, Sukumar's Pushpa 2, became the highest-grossing Indian film in the first week. But evidently, the monopoly of Hindi films and its false equivalence with Indian cinema have considerably weakened. The diversity of the industry has been steamrolled into a prickly homogeneity where any two films look the same, the scale feels identical, the action looks uniformly designed and the style is fashioned in self-reflexive humour.

As is often the case, Shah Rukh Khan paved the way. His 2023 film Pathaan not just marked his return to the screen after a four-year hiatus but was one of the few outings that earned money at a time many others struggled to do so. Its success did three things: it reiterated the supremacy of Khan, legitimised action as a thriving genre, and recognised star cameos in films as the onset of multiverses.

Spectacle Over Everything Else

This year, most Hindi films can be

slotted in these distinct categories. Rohit Shetty's Singham Again was his version of a (cop) multiverse, and the production house Maddock Films furthered its horror-comedy universe with Stree 2 and Munjya. Sagar Ambre and Pushkar Ojha helmed the action-thriller Yodha, Siddharth Anand directed the aviation (action) thriller Fighter and Ali Abbas Zafar made the abysmal Bade Miyan Chote Miyan (BMCM). There are more examples: Nikkhil Advani leaned on action with Vedaa, Ravi Udyawar did the same with Yudhra and so did Aditya Datt in Crakk. Clubbing them together could be reductive, but it is difficult not to identify the sweeping attempt by the makers to treat plot as an accessory to action.

In the midst, meta references clog the screenplay. Khan's famous "Bete ko hath lagane se pehle, baap se baat kar" ("Before touching the son, deal with the father"), rooted to the personal turmoil of his son's arrest in 2021, spawned similar iterations post Jawan (2023). Tiger Shroff repeated his meme-famous "choti bachi ho kya?" ("are you a little girl") a decade later in BMCM after mouthing them for the first time in Heropanti (2014); Chitrangada Singh briefly appeared in Akshay Kumar's Khel Khel Mein (2024) and their scenes were scored to the music of Desi Boyz (2011), the last film they did together. The subtext here is actors winking directly at the audience and establishing a connection despite the fourth wall. But Hindi films have never seemed more distant.

Stuck On Repeat

If 2024 proved anything, it is that what

works really does, and when it does, it is repeated. The success of Stree 2 and Bhool Bhulaiyaa 3 furthered the accomplishment of sequels, and now, there are multiple in the works. The Ranbir Kapoor-starrer Animal (2023) ended with the announcement of Animal Park, which is supposed to go on floors in 2027. Varun Dhawan is part of No Entry 2, Border 2 and reportedly a sequel to Jugjugg Jeeyo too. Vikas Bahl's Shaitaan, which minted money this year, has a sequel in the making, and in October, actor Salman Khan and producer Sajid Nadiadwala confirmed working on Kick 2 with a cheeky Instagram post. Meanwhile, Shah Rukh Khan is rumoured to be featuring in Pathaan 2.

Every actor, it appears, is either working in a sequel or wants to be in one. It is a jarring trend that spells a creative crisis in Hindi cinema with a damning pronouncement. As of this moment, filmmakers are more involved in catering to the audience than creating for them. Budgets are being amped up, more investment is tailored for VFX and Hindi films are getting bigger. Yet, one would be hard-pressed to distinguish between the trailers of, say, Baby John and Animal. It is the same story everywhere: overgrown men fighting with an obscure vengeance to prove their manhood rather than seek justice.

Bankruptcy Of Imagination

Perhaps this crystallises the most terrifying symptom of Hindi cinema today where the bankruptcy of imagination has manifested in accentuating machismo. More and more films centre around men who need an excuse to draw out blood from the next person. The face does not matter, nor does the cause. While they thumped about the screens, smaller and more inventive projects, such as Sanjay Tripathy's warm Binny And Family, Karan Gour's whimsical Fairy Folk, Shoojit Sircar's affecting I Want to Talk battled for more screens and our attention. Even Kiran Rao's wonderful Laapataa Ladies and Varun Grover's perceptive All India Rank garnered appreciation once they landed on digital platforms. Once upon a time, they would have been referred to as multiplex films. Today, they are too ambitious for streaming and too atypical for theatres. They reside in a no man's land, and in their dislocation, they mirror the gradual distortion of Hindi cinema.

India Must Play To Its Strengths In 2025

By Harsh V. Shringla

The world in 2024 stood at a crossroads, with global fault lines deepening and crises multiplying. Wars in Europe and the Middle East upended the global order, disrupting energy markets and food security, while cascading challenges rippled through every region. The Indo-Pacific remained a theatre of contention, with China's aggressive manoeuvres destabilising the South China Sea and its borders with India. In Europe, the conflict in Ukraine continued to strain global energy supplies and exacerbated inflation. The Middle East witnessed escalating tensions with the Israel-Hamas conflict, which drew in international actors and deepened divides across the region. Meanwhile, Myanmar's internal strife and Bangladesh's political unrest threatened regional equilibrium, highlighting the fragility of South Asia's neighbourhood. These crises coupled with the persistent threat of climate change and rising inequality underscored the interconnectedness of global challenges and the urgent need for coordinated responses.

In this fraught environment, India's foreign policy demonstrated remarkable clarity and resilience. Balancing strategic autonomy with global engagement, India ensured its interests were safeguarded even as it contributed to stability beyond its borders. Its economic strategies, such as diversifying energy imports and fostering renewable energy partnerships, underscored a pragmatic approach to



Image tweeted by @MEAIndia

securing energy independence amidst global volatility.

Trump's Return

Major elections in 2024 added layers of geopolitical uncertainty. The return of Donald Trump as US President brought shifts in Washington's foreign policy priorities. A powerful Trump presidency represents both opportunities and challenges for India. While his stated focus is on ending the two major conflicts, countering China and deepening ties with like-minded democracies aligns with India's goals, potential shifts in trade policies and his transactional approach to alliances could require India to navigate complexities with caution and tact. Furthermore, Trump's stricter immigration policies, such as changes to H-1B visa regulations and family-based immigration

programmes, could significantly impact Indian professionals and the diaspora. Nonetheless, the bipartisan consensus on strengthening India-US relations remains intact and as the world's two largest democracies, the partnership continues to evolve as a cornerstone of stability in an increasingly polarised world. India's diplomatic agility will be essential in navigating these dynamics.

India's remarkable legacy in the G20 under its Presidency is being carried forward by the successive presidencies of Brazil and South Africa. The continuation of India's policies rooted in human-centric globalisation and working for the global common good have enhanced its foreign policy imprint on the global stage. The concept of Vishwa Mitra (Friend to the World) reflects India's commitment to

collaboration for global well-being and sustainable development. From its leadership in the G20 to its vaccine diplomacy, its advocacy for equitable access to digital public goods to its role as a first responder in times of need, India exemplifies the principles of inclusivity and shared progress.

Under PM Modi's leadership, India has positioned itself as a partner for addressing global challenges, fostering mutual respect and advancing a vision of a peaceful and equitable world order. His commitment to achieving peace through diplomacy and dialogue was borne out by his visits to Russia and Ukraine in this endeavour.

Enhancing Defence

At the same time, the global conflicts of 2024 underscored the urgent need for robust defence capabilities. With global military spending at unprecedented levels, India's defence budget of \$81 billion signals its commitment to national security. Amid rising tensions, India's focus on self-reliance, in critical sectors like defence manufacturing and emerging technologies, demonstrates its ability to innovate while meeting strategic needs. Regionally, India has had to deal with unprecedented challenges arising out of economic turmoil and great power rivalry in our immediate region. In Sri Lanka and the Maldives, it extended financial and technical support to stabilise economies, while calibrated diplomacy ensured continued engagement with Bangladesh.

Who stood between Ambedkar and Hindu Code Bill, forcing him to resign?

By Mohammad Sajjad

The only leader Dr BR Ambedkar found sincere about the Hindu Personal Law reforms was none but Jawaharlal Nehru. Ambedkar wrote so in his letter dated October 10, 1951 — otherwise critical of Nehru for being less firm than him in pushing the reforms. Ambedkar's exact words were: "I got the impression that the Prime Minister, although sincere, had not the earnestness and determination required to get the Hindu Code Bill through".

The politically polarised and highly motivated cacophony in December 2024 is drowning the crucial historical facts, misleading the common people. The only difference between Ambedkar and Nehru was that the former was rock solid for the reforms, whereas, Nehru was being politically pragmatic to defer, fragment, and dilute the Bill in the face of the stiff opposition not only from the Hindu Mahasabha but also from a large number of the Congress people, including Rajendra Prasad.

Hindu Mahasabha leaders Shyama P Mukherji and NC Chatterji (father of



Somnath Chatterji) were the most vocal opponents of the Hindu Code Bill. A careful study of the debates on the Hindu Code Bill will reveal that the Hindu right (within the Congress, and outside) was not at all for the Uniform Civil Code (Prime Minister Narendra Modi now prefers to call it the Secular Civil Code). Having employed all kinds of arguments against the Hindu Code Bill to outsmart Nehru and Ambedkar, the Hindu Mahasabha leader, NC Chatterji objected to why Muslim Personal Law was left out from the ambit of reforms. Everybody knows Nehru responded that minorities would reform themselves from

within. That reform from within hasn't come as yet, even though almost all other Islamic countries, including Turkey (and even Pakistan, as back as in 1961) have reformed.

Anyway, Ambedkar was surprised as to why, overnight, Hindu reactionaries turned into proponents of UCC. The point is obvious and too important to be lost sight of now: they weren't for the UCC. But in order to stall/delay the Hindu Code Bill, they employed the demand of UCC. In the given political atmosphere, telling the truth uncomfortable to the dispensation isn't an easy task. Hence, leaving it at that, there are a few more

things which my students (I do share such things in my classroom, on the theme included in my postgraduate courses on post-independence India) and other interested people must know. On this count, Reba Som's essay (Modern Asian Studies, 1994) is of greater help.

However, most important of all, not for the first time, a Muslim leader of the Muslim League/Krishak Praja Party was so strongly with the Hindu Mahasabha and with all other gender regressives, that one shouldn't lose sight of this. After all, the Muslim League/KPP had formed a coalition ministry in Bengal in 1941-43. SP Mukherji was the finance minister as well as the deputy "chief minister" of Bengal.

Who was the Muslim League/KPP leader opposing the Hindu Code Bill along with the Hindu Mahasabha? He was Naziruddin Ahmad. A member of the Constituent Assembly of India, he was born in Kulia, Burdwan district, West Bengal; he had been critical of the Drafting Committee and draft constitution of India.



One Nation, One Election, Many Suspicions

There could be competing views on the need for ONOE and its impact on polity in a federal democracy like India. But in the absence of sagacity and pragmatism, hyperbole, rhetoric and polemics have ended up destroying both the discourse and the process of legislation for an amendment for simultaneous elections that the NDA regime proposed during the “washed out” winter session of the Parliament. As expected, the Bill has been referred to a select committee. It is anybody's guess whether the NDA regime will manage to cobble together a two-thirds majority of “present” members to be able to pass the Bill. However, what about the idea of ONOE? On the face of it, there is some merit to the argument in favour of simultaneous elections. There can be no dispute that the political landscape in India is littered with elections the way the Indian calendar is littered with festivals. Look at what has happened over the last year. There were elections to state assemblies in Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. Soon after that came the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. When political parties, voters and analysts had barely even begun to digest the import

of the verdict, assembly elections became due in Haryana and Jammu & Kashmir (after a gap of 10 years). Even before one could delve deeper into the surprise verdicts, elections in Maharashtra and Jharkhand were announced. Just as India starts the new year in 2025, elections to the Delhi assembly will be announced. For Indian voters, pollsters, pundits and assorted debaters alike, the year 2025 will be a relatively dull year as only Bihar will go for elections towards the end of the year. But 2026 will see a flurry, with Kerala, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Assam being the major states that will elect new governments. That will be followed in 2027 by shenanigans in Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Goa and some others. There will be another series of assembly elections soon after, and then the 2029 Lok Sabha elections will be due before you can pause to take a breath. This is clearly not a healthy situation. National-level parties are perpetually in campaign mode because of this never-ending stream of assembly elections. Purely regional parties don't suffer as much as their footprint normally doesn't extend beyond one state. For instance, Tamil

Nadu chief minister and DMK chief M. K. Stalin and his son-cum-inheritor Udaynidhi Stalin couldn't care much about elections to West Bengal and Assam, which will be held along with Tamil Nadu in 2026. Perhaps even neighbouring Kerala won't be too important for them.

A Case For ONOE

Yet, there is an impact on governance because elections mean the Model Code of Conduct, a period when policy decisions are paralysed. In a rapidly changing and evolving geopolitical scenario, this doesn't augur well. Since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leads the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) at the centre, it cannot announce significant policy decisions in 2026 as they could impact voter behaviour in states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Assam. Any window for serious governance and policymaking would be brief because soon it would be time for elections in Uttar Pradesh et al. Besides, there is the issue of costs, the diversion of human and other resources for the conduct of elections, and the question of organising paramilitary forces every few months. These factors do

suggest that there is a case for simultaneous elections. On the other hand, what could be the reasons that present a case against it? There are some who argue that a single burst of elections to Parliament and all the state assemblies would give an unfair advantage to resource-rich national parties like the BJP, which would outgun and steamroll opponents who can't match its resources, particularly at the regional level. That's simply not true. The year 1967 was the last time India saw simultaneous polls. Even then, while Indira Gandhi led the Congress to a victory in the Lok Sabha, she lost about 10 states to various opposition groups and alliances. Even in contemporary times, the Narendra Modi-led BJP has won massive victories in Delhi in the Lok Sabha elections, to be followed soon by massive victories for the Arvind Kejriwal-led AAP in assembly elections. The Indian voter is astute and knows how to distinguish between national and local issues. In any case, many regional parties have publicly announced their support for ONOE.

Give And Take

The problem is not the idea but the deeply divisive and

polarised nature of Indian politics. The Janata Dal (United) (JD-U), an NDA ally, is in favour of simultaneous polls. On the other hand, its rival, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), which is also largely confined to Bihar, is fiercely opposed to it. Both support and opposition don't seem to stem from merits but from political divide and a deep mistrust. The manner in which the recent winter session of the Parliament was conducted reveals how bitter and deep this gulf is. In such a situation, it would take an extraordinary level of pragmatic give-and-take politics to make ONOE a reality.

It is possible, the contentious GST Bill was passed in 2017 despite deep divisions. But for the sake of pragmatism, the authors would suggest two solutions. First, start with One Nation, Two Elections, wherein assembly elections are divided into two separate bunches. Second, and more important, the government should seriously consider a law that would enable referendums in India, as held in other major democracies. Why not have a national vote where citizens deliver a verdict on ONOE and other major issues?

Why Nitish Kumar Has Gone 'Silent' Again

The Bihar unit of BJP has been in a damage control mode to circumvent any misunderstandings over leadership issues with coalition partner JDU (Janata Dal United) before the all-important assembly elections in 2025. On December 22, state BJP leader and deputy Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary categorically stated that the forthcoming Bihar polls will be fought with Chief Minister and JD(U) chief Nitish Kumar as the NDA's face. Rejecting speculation, Choudhary said, "The NDA is working under the leadership of Nitish Kumar and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Bihar and we will continue to contest elections under the leadership of both leaders." He went on, "In 2020, we contested after announcing (Kumar as the NDA's chief ministerial face) and, to date, we have considered Chief Minister Nitish Kumar only (as the NDA leader in Bihar). In future also, we will contest elections under the leadership of Nitish Kumar and Narendra Modi." The clarification was significant and necessary, given the confusion in political circles - and doubts for its ally JD(U) - that BJP could pull a Maharashtra in Bihar.

Nitish Kumar In A Sulk?

The rumour mill went into overdrive after Union Home Minister Amit Shah's recent interview to a news channel. Replying to a question about whether the NDA would go into the Bihar polls without naming a chief ministerial candidate (a strategy that paid off in Maharashtra), Shah had replied, after a pause, "We will sit together and decide. We will let you know after we have made a decision." His reply set tongues wagging about Nitish Kumar's future. Adopting an "all is well" posturing, JDU officially interpreted Shah's statement as a form of tacit approval for Nitish Kumar's continued leadership. One of its spokespersons said, "Maun lakshanam, swikriti lakshanam (Silence means tacit consent)" but called for coordination among NDA allies.

However, sources say there is disquiet among JDU leaders, including Nitish himself. Like always, as he does when he is



unhappy with coalition partners, Nitish called in sick and didn't attend the two-day "Global Investors Summit - Bihar Business Connect 2024"; his two deputies from the BJP, Samrat Choudhary and Vijay Kumar Sinha, showed up. The Chief Minister was expected to address potential investors and share the state's economic vision. A sulking Nitish Kumar also cancelled his visit to Nalanda district on December 20 to inaugurate a statue of Magadh emperor Jarasandha in Rajgir, along with his two deputies. Sanjay Kumar, a Patna-based political expert, says during this time the RJD (Rashtriya Janata Dal) sensed an opportunity. "Nitish went silent. He distanced himself from scheduled programmes. RJD sensed it and made moves to contact Nitish. BJP came to know of these developments and went on damage control mode stating that they will fight elections under Nitish's leadership." The Maharashtra analogy looms, because just like in Bihar, the BJP was the senior partner in the ruling coalition. To reassure Nitish Kumar after Shah's interview, NDA constituents in Bihar held a meeting in Patna on December 20 and reiterated their faith in his leadership for the polls, ruling out any reconsideration. Bihar BJP chief Dilip Jaiswal too sought to explain that key decisions are taken by the parliamentary

Board. Other NDA partners like Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) and Hindustani Awam Morcha (Secular) also lent their support to Nitish Kumar. As Nitish Kumar stayed glum, Samrat Choudhary reasserted that his boss would be the NDA's leader for the 2025 polls. Especially as rumours suggested the BJP may fight elections with Choudhary as its chief ministerial face in Bihar.

Behind the scenes

A beaming and visibly healthy Nitish Kumar launched his 'Pragati Yatra' - his record 14th yatra - on December 23. But all is not well between the NDA

coalition partners. "The statements coming from BJP's state leadership will not satisfy either Nitish or his coterie. They want a clarification from the senior BJP leadership in Delhi," says Ravi Upadhyay, a senior journalist based in Patna. "Nitish's actions and reactions are instant. He hits out intelligently. There is an ongoing political turmoil in Bihar. JDU is alert after the turn of events in Maharashtra," adds Upadhyay.

NK Chaudhury, a senior political analyst, says, "JDU and Nitish are both jittery after

Shah's comments. BJP is only testing waters as it cannot afford to antagonise JDU at this juncture. With Nitish, nothing can be ruled out. Even if Lalu Yadav extends support to Nitish now, it will be short-lived." About jeopardising the coalition governments in the state and at the Centre (where BJP doesn't have a majority and is propped up by the JDU and Telugu Desam Party), Sanjay Kumar says, "Both BJP and JDU are indulging in pressure politics. There is also information about disgruntlement within the JDU and its MPs being in touch with the BJP's central leadership. This may have given confidence to Shah to make such a statement." The BJP may say later that Nitish Kumar overreacted when he skipped out on the investors' meet where investments worth Rs 1.8 lakh crore were declared for Bihar, which the state needs so desperately. Perhaps the BJP is taking a calculated risk knowing that for the 2025 elections, Lalu Yadav will only entertain Nitish on the condition that his son and former deputy chief minister Tejashwi Yadav is made chief minister - which will never be acceptable to Nitish Kumar. It will be good for the BJP to placate Nitish Kumar soon, unless it has something else up its sleeve.





How Manmohan Singh Helped India Beat China To Mars

Mangalyaan was publicly announced by Dr Singh from the magnificent ramparts of the Red Fort in Delhi on August 15, 2012.

Interestingly, when the Moon mission was being planned, Chandrayaan was also announced from the Red Fort by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who was the prime minister in 2003. Dr Singh, as it seemed, took the cue, delivering his speech that was actually written in Urdu. But who could match the visionary

politician Vajpayee, who made sure to call the Moon mission Chandrayaan-1, whereas the bureaucrat in Manmohan Singh merely called it Mangalyaan, not thinking at all about any sequels. What's in a name, you might ask. When the first budgetary clearances of Rs 125 crore were given for the Mars mission on March 16, 2012, during the 2012-13 budget presented by Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee, it was officially re-

corded - "Mars Orbiter Mission envisages launching an orbiter around Mars using the PSLV XL during the November 2013 launch opportunity. Mars Orbiter will be placed in an orbit of 500 x 80,000 km around Mars and will have a provision for carrying nearly 25 kg of scientific payload." In what might be some 10 kg of documents running into thousands of pages, embedded in a book with orange covers called the Expenditure Budget,

placed with tables and millions of figures, was a small annotation that announced this remarkable plan, giving financial sanction. "What a mangal announcement" was the observation on March 16, 2012, when one of the authors was in conversation with jubilant officials in the Prime Minister's Office, thinking about what name the mission would get. How India's maiden mission to the Moon was named Chandrayaan, and how this might perhaps become Mangalyaan was alluded to, and of course, some months later, in his speech from the Red Fort, then Prime Minister Dr Singh referred to the mission as Mangalyaan. This was a deviation from his written speech that was made public in English but written in Urdu, and what Dr Singh read from, and that is why many people, who later reviewed the written English version questioned whether it was ever called Mangalyaan by the prime minister. This resulted in a small technicality that made ISRO formally stick to calling India's maiden mission to the red planet as the 'Mars Orbiter Mission (MOM)'. It seems the Department of Space (DOS) officials had sent a list of names to the Minister of Space, a portfolio always held by the prime minister of India, to select one. As it happened, Dr Singh never returned that list giving his preference, and this led decision makers within the space community, for safety, to stick to referring to it as MOM. This was in sharp contrast with how the Moon mission was named,

when in 2003, a list of names was sent to Prime Minister Vajpayee. ISRO's preferred name was 'Somayaan', but astute officials around Vajpayee renamed it as 'Chandrayaan' and Sudheendra Kulkarni, the press advisor to the PM, told me (Pallava) that Vajpayee himself added, in his own handwriting, the suffix '1' after Chandrayaan, and said how a big country like India could make only one visit to the Moon. This led decision-makers to use the informal names, MOM and Mangalyaan. Interestingly, after demonetisation in 2016, when new currency notes were introduced [by Prime Minister Narendra Modi], the image of Mangalyaan was printed on the Rs 2,000 currency note with Mangalyaan emblazoned below the image as an honour to ISRO. This was a remarkable tribute to the space community that aced the Mars launch and landing on the maiden attempt. India's tiger handsomely beat China by reaching the orbit of Mars ahead of the Chinese dragon. (Disclaimer: The author and publisher of the book are solely responsible for the contents of the book or any excerpt derived therefrom. NDTV shall not be responsible or liable for any claims arising from the contents of the book including any claims of defamation, infringement of intellectual property rights or any other right of any third party or of law. Paragraph breaks and subheadings have been added by NDTV for readers' ease.)

India In 2024: The Great Balancing

As the year concluded, Prime Minister Narendra Modi signed it off with a historic visit to Kuwait, the first visit by an Indian Prime Minister to the country in 43 years. He was awarded 'The Order of Mubarak Al Kabeer' by the Amir of Kuwait, Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al Sabah, which he accepted on behalf of 1.4 billion Indians. The two nations elevated their ties to a 'strategic partnership' with a focus on diverse areas including politics, trade, investments, energy, defense, security, health, education technology, cultural, and people-to-people ties. This visit further reinforced India's substantive outreach to the Middle East where the Modi

government has been to fundamentally reconfigure both India's presence and engagements. At a time when the Middle East is riven with various fault lines and sits on the precipice of a region-wide war, New Delhi's ability to maintain close ties with all the key stakeholders – the Gulf Arab states, Israel and Iran – speaks volumes about India's diplomatic success. This year also saw India and China finally managing to get out of the logjam ushered in by the 2020 Galwan crisis and China's aggression. It has been a significant diplomatic victory for New Delhi to get Beijing to acknowledge that it was because of Chinese actions that the

relationship got derailed. Since 2020, India's position has been clear and categorical, that unless the status quo ante is restored

going back to normal. Where the Indian military continued to hold the line along the border, Indian diplomacy continued to stick to

its posture. In October, China and India reached an agreement on patrolling a stretch of their long-disputed shared border. The deal brought an end, for the time being, to a four-year standoff in the high mountains of the Himalayas that had severely strained ties between the two countries. It also allowed Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping to meet in Russia and hold talks for the first time in five years. In 2020, a bloody confrontation in the Galwan Valley left dozens of soldiers dead and led to the suspension of diplomatic ties to bilateral relations between the two Asian giants entering into a state of deep freeze.



along the LAC, there is no the nation's red lines, which ultimately led China to reorient

OpenAI o3 puts humans on notice with its intelligence

By Javed Anwar

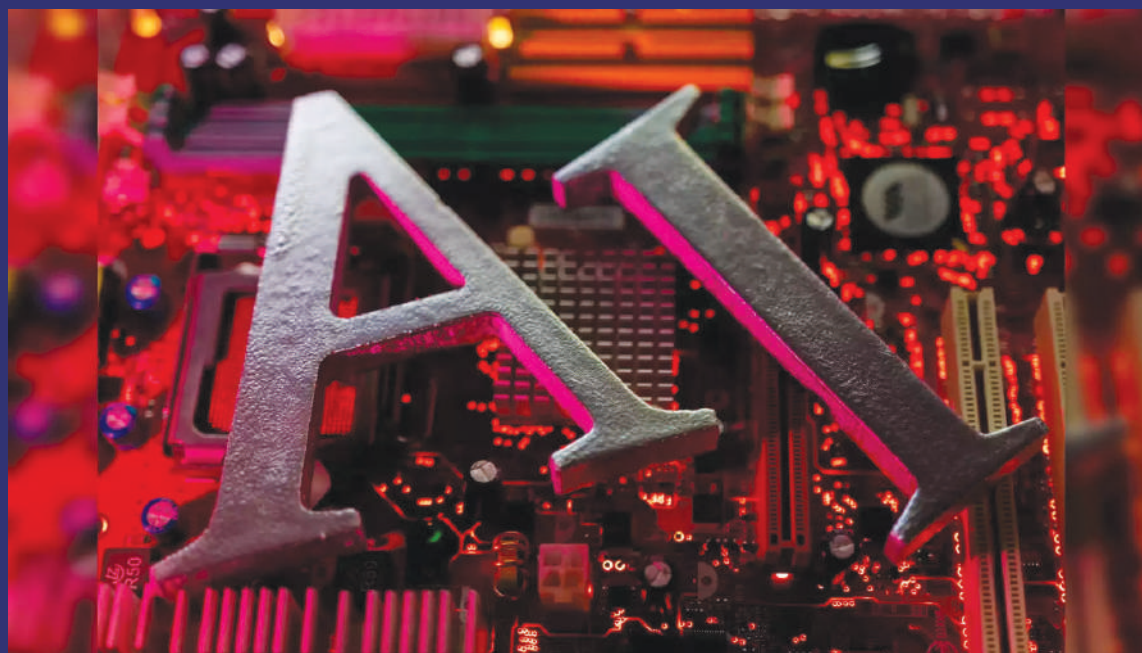
On the internet, particularly on Twitter and Reddit, where such conversations are common, there is a statement that often appears nowadays: 99 per cent of people are walking around having no idea that the world is about to turn topsy-turvy. No, it's not about global warming. Sure, that is real enough. It's also not the much-speculated stock market crash. Although that too remains a possibility. Instead, it is the arrival of an AI system that is so good that it will be considered Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) — or in other words, a system that is as capable as a super smart human. What would the arrival of such a system do? No one has specific answers at the moment. But it would be an epoch-defining moment. For example, hear Elon Musk. Just a day ago he said: "AI will ultimately render money meaningless." The trigger behind Musk's tweet was the arrival of the OpenAI o3 model. It's not AGI yet. And it is not available to the public yet. But the o3 has proven to be the proverbial box of Pandora since it was revealed on December 22. In the last few years, a number of benchmarks have been created to evaluate the "intelligence" of AI systems. The o3 scores on them spectacularly. If the benchmarks hold true when people start using it in a few months, in programming and coding, it might match accomplished software engineers in the world. It is also almost as smart as humans at pattern recognition and problem-solving, the kind of problems that humans solve as part of IQ tests. And in dealing with some of the hardest math questions, it seems as good as PhD scholars. In other words, the o3 is godly good for an AI system. It is certainly arriving with a thousand cheers from its makers. Mark Chen, a senior AI researcher, noted that o3 scored between 1800-2400

ELO in competitive programming. Not even Jakub Pachocki, the OpenAI chief scientist, scores this high. In ARC-

forward in AI's ability to adapt to novel tasks. It is a system capable of adapting to tasks it has never encountered before,

cal scans. Essentially, AI in less than a year might be good enough to reliably handle many tasks that are currently

tions, most of which are transactional. But I believe the most significant questions are going to be around the nature of intelligence and what makes humans humans. These would be abstract and philosophical questions which we would no longer be able to answer by simply relying on our opposable thumbs and pointing to a newspaper. Albert Camus once jokingly wrote, "they'll be able to sum up modern man in a single sentence: he fornicated and read the papers." Well, not in the age of AGI. I touched upon this in an earlier piece. At that time, the o3 was still months away. The question, I believe, is going to be urgent in the coming months and years: If not intelligence, then what makes humans special? "I think, therefore I am" — said Rene Descartes. Despite challenges, this centuries-old axiom by Descartes has rightly been one of the pillars on which humans can lean. Will it survive the age of super smart AI? I am not certain. For the sake of argument, I decided to ask ChatGPT this question. The GPT that answered back was the GPT 4o — an old and outdated AI system. But it is the most advanced free version available to users, so I used it. The 4o debated the question of whether the axiom by Descartes applies to it or not, rightly arguing that one of the central ideas behind the words — doubt — is not part of the AI systems. The whole argument by ChatGPT on why it is not a creature of Descartes's world was coherent — and I must say — rather intelligent. I prodded it further and further, and it argued again and again. In the end, it produced a line which I believe sums up the debate for now. The o3 shows that AI systems are close to mastering logical and scholastic knowledge. But intelligence may not turn out to be merely the ability to calculate a polynomial equation. It might be something more, something that ChatGPT calls "the boundary between simulated thought and genuine intelligence".



AGI, a pattern-recognition benchmark created by former



Google researcher Francois Chollet, the o3 scores between 75 per cent to 87 per cent, depending on how much resources were allocated to it. Smart humans score around 85 per cent. The score was good enough to impress Greg Kamradt, president of the ARC Prize Foundation, as well as Chollet. Kamradt said that it took AI systems 5 years to go from 0 to 5 per cent in this test, and then less than a year to reach 87 per cent. The chart showing the progress is scarily exponential. Chollet, who often comes across as AI sceptic on Twitter, is impressed. "The o3 represents a significant leap

arguably approaching human-level performance in the ARC-

AGI domain," he notes. The implications are mind-boggling. Looking at how AI has progressed in 2024 — Google Gemini 2, Anthropic Claude 3.5 Sonnet, OpenAI o1 and o3 — even the most hardcore sceptics now believe that AI systems already do, or will soon, match humans in routine and structured tasks. This includes general writing and reading comprehension at graduation level and software programming at the level of an average professional. It also includes analysing reports, generating summaries, office paperwork, clerical work, and even finding patterns in medi-

done by humans.

In fact, systems like o3 in a couple of years might be able to deal with even highly technical — but logical and structured — problems that are currently handled by highly-skilled humans. For example, so good seems the o3 at math that it might be possible in future to ask it to calculate the corners and contours of a planned flyover. Or to tell it to create the blueprints of a hydraulic dam. This is the reason why, in his analysis, Chollet writes that "you should plan for AI capabilities to become competitive with human work within a fairly short timeline." The consensus is emerging that intelligence is going to be a solved — and infinite — commodity in a few years now. Ilya Sutskever, the AI wizard who until May this year was chief scientist at OpenAI, tweeted cryptically last year that mere "intelligence" is losing its importance. "If you value intelligence above all other human qualities, you're gonna have a bad time," he tweeted. It is not clear in what context Ilya said this, but he was probably talking of a world where "intelligence" would be near free and abundant. Once intelligence becomes commonplace, and for many tasks it already is, there will be some fundamental questions. It might lead to rethinking of the entire system that governs our economies, our societies, even our rela-

War Or Peace: What Will Become Of Middle East In 2025?

By Syed Zubair Ahmed

Picture this: the current interim government in Syria, led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), gives way to an elected government. Under this fledgling democratic setup, a phoenix-like Syria rises from the ashes of its long, bloody civil war. Millions of Syrian refugees and internally displaced people are returning home joyously; investors are trickling in; broken infrastructure is being rebuilt; signs of productivity and employment are breathing life into an economy that had been on life support for years under the misrule of former dictator-President Bashar al-Assad.

Not ideal. But certainly a dream start in a collective effort to rebuild Syria. This could be the best case scenario for Syria in the near future.

Now, consider the flip side: the HTS-led rebels, having accomplished their main mission of ousting the Assad regime, begin to implode. Factions within HTS are suddenly in a cutthroat race to outdo each other in chaos and infighting. Meanwhile, the Syrian National Army (SNA) (the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army), and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) (the US-backed Kurdish-led alliance), aren't just holding ground, they are flexing their

muscles and making power grabs for Damascus. Russian military bases remain firmly planted along the coast, Israeli forces patrol the southern fringes, US troops stick to their northeast corner and Turkey



The collapse of the Assad dynasty's 54-year authoritarian rule has sparked a glimmer of hope for millions of long-suffering Syrians. But it's also thrown them headfirst into uncharted waters.

A Game Of Chess

As 2024 draws to a close, a year that has been nothing short of seismic for West Asia, Syria stands at a crossroads—a precarious, nail-biting threshold where the future is frustratingly unpredictable.

If you look closely, Syria appears to be a giant geopolitical chessboard, with too many players hovering over the pieces, waiting to see who dares make the first move. For now, it's all guesswork and a high-stakes game of wait-and-watch. But amid Syria's turmoil, HTS, once the al-Nusra Front, has swapped its militant garb for Western-style suits as its leader, Abu al-Jolani—who now prefers to call himself by his real name Ahmed al-Sharaa—attempts a political makeover.

Western powers, while still labelling HTS a terrorist group, are taking a wait and see approach. They have laid down the terms: protect minorities, ensure a peaceful transition and maybe earn relief from sanctions. But skepticism lingers.

Turkey continues its game of geopolitical chess, backing the Syrian National Army (SNA) against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which it accuses of being a PKK front.

Ankara insists the PKK, a long-time thorn in its side, be disarmed. Meanwhile, the US and UK champion the SDF cause for its role in thrashing the Islamic State terrorists. -- while all the while trying to mollify Turkey's security concerns. HTS, for its part, plays the diplomat, subtly supporting "freedom" for SDF areas while trying to keep the PKK card out of play.

The fall of Assad is a hard punch to Iran's "axis of resistance," slicing through its supply line to Hezbollah in Lebanon and unravelling a carefully knit network of proxies. Israel, never one to miss an opportunity, has stepped up its airstrikes—nearly 500 so far—on Syrian targets while expressing its intention to expand settlements in the Golan Heights.

Gautam Adani: Trial by fire

The Adani Group chairman retains his business resilience in the face of accusations of bribery and concealment of information, and the attendant political backlash

By M.G. Arun

If there were many who left a mark on 2024, billionaire Gautam Adani was one on whom 2024 left a mark. Even if similar, it was not a straight carryover from the storm of 2023, when US shortseller Hindenburg levelled accusations that his group had inflated share prices by round-tripping funds through a maze of dodgy shell companies abroad. Judged only for their content, the new charges would have been par for the course in India. But they acquired more serious dimensions because of who made them: prosecutors at a federal court in Brooklyn, New York. A counter-charge of having vested interests would be difficult to make: this was the US Department of Justice, not a shortseller with skin in the game. Even if the case peters out to a settlement, the global stain would be somewhat more resistant to full repair.

It began on November 20 when the US District Court, Eastern District of New York, accused top executives of Azure Power, an Indian solar power producer listed on the New York Stock Exchange, of colluding with Gautam Adani and two of his senior executives since 2020 to pay



\$265 million (Rs 2,247 crore) in bribes to Indian officials across four states and a Union territory for securing contracts. Adding to the blow, the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) said the Adani Group had concealed the alleged misconduct from investors. The news wiped Rs 2.25 lakh crore off the market value of various Adani Group shares in a single day on November 21.

It stung to the quick because Adani, his nephew Sagar Adani and Adani Green Energy CEO Vneet S. Jaain came out

looking as having been directly named along with four Azure executives in the alleged acts of subornment. Azure faces a criminal charge for violating the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA), which bars companies that operate in the US from bribing foreign officials. The parallel civil case by the SEC was that the Adani Group raised billions of dollars in the US even as the investigations were going on, keeping investors in the dark about those probes. The group denies the allegations. It also says Gautam, Sagar and Jaain only

have against them charges of securities fraud, and the alleged conspiracies related to it and alleged wire fraud, not on the conspiracy to violate the FCPA, which has named only Azure executives and CDPQ, a Canadian pension fund that's the largest shareholder in Azure. 'Officials' in Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Tamil Nadu, Odisha and Jammu & Kashmir were allegedly induced to execute sale agreements with the Solar Energy Corporation of India (SECI), the Centre's nodal agency for renewable projects, which would then buy the power from Adani and Azure to sell to their discoms. Denials notwithstanding, the aftershocks lay in wait. Adani Green Energy had to scrap a \$600 million bond issue in the US. French oil major TotalEnergies, a partner in Adani's renewable energy and gas distribution businesses, spoke of an embargo on investments till the case was resolved. Borrowings too threatened to get dearer as Moody's slashed the ratings outlook on seven Adani firms from 'stable' to 'negative'; Fitch placed some group bonds on watch for a possible downgrade. Politics took no time to stir up either.

Manmohan Singh, Who Brought The India Story To World Stage

Thirty-three years ago, India's mild-mannered Finance Minister delivered a startlingly bold Budget to the nation with the memorable words, 'No power on earth

Singh deserves better. For one thing, we are all living in an India transformed by his path-breaking initiatives. Manmohan Singh's economic

Minister pulled 10 million people out of poverty every year, saw the opening of millions of new bank accounts, the strengthening of rural purchasing power

that could supply us energy and countries that could enhance our food security. Not for him the grand flourish of strutting about on the world stage –

in his quiet and understated way he opened us up to foreign relationships that could benefit our people. Ambassadors used to making grandstanding speeches and cultivating political contacts at cocktail parties and diplomatic receptions were told to refocus their efforts on facilitating trade and investment. There were fewer photo-ops and more concrete agreements.

The real picture of India's clear progress under Dr Singh, in the face of myriad challenges, is far removed from the biased portrayal of a government beset by inaction and failure. Yes, corruption did exist, but it's an Indian problem, not a problem to be blamed on Manmohan Singh alone. Corruption has been endemic despite, before and beyond his Prime Ministership. Though many of the lurid newspaper headlines about corruption on his watch proved



can stop an idea whose time has come.' The idea he was advancing was that of the liberalisation of the Indian economy, and the reforms he ushered in proved almost revolutionary, lifting many of the controls of the 'licence-permit-quota Raj' and transforming India's derisory 'Hindu rate of growth' from below 3 per cent to a galloping, even tigerish, 8 per cent plus in the decade-and-a-half that followed.

Today, that finance minister, and later prime minister, has passed into history. Among the obituaries lamenting his demise, and the encomia recording his services to the nation, come the inevitable reminders, especially on WhatsApp, of the derision once cast his way by his political critics, accusing him of indecision, pusillanimity and presiding over 'policy paralysis' while corrupt colleagues allegedly made off with the nation's silver. His mildness dismissed as timidity, his calm and unflappable manner excoriated as complacency and ineffectiveness, his decency praised by critics damning him with faint praise, he is blamed for not being the kind of leader his critics claim he should have been.

Dr Singh Deserves Better

So as the page turns on the Manmohan Singh chapter, are his critics being grossly unfair? Or was he right to say, in 2014, "I honestly believe that history will be kinder to me than the contemporary media, or for that matter, the Opposition parties in Parliament"?

This is the same man who did more than anyone to earn our country a worldwide reputation as the world's emerging big economic success story. Yes: Manmohan

accomplishments were extraordinary. The India he took by the scruff of the neck in 1991 was an inefficient and underperforming centrally-planned economy which for forty-five years had placed bureaucrats rather than businessmen on its 'commanding heights', stifled enterprise under a straitjacket of regulations and licenses, thrown up protectionist barriers and denied itself trade and foreign investment in the name of self-reliance, subsidised an unproductive public sector and struggled to redistribute its poverty. Today's India boasts a thriving, entrepreneurial and globalised economy with a dynamic and creative business culture, dealing with the world on its own terms. The contrast is extraordinary—and no one deserves a greater share of the credit for this transformation than Manmohan Singh.

Even as the planet faced an unprecedented global economic crisis and recession in 2008-09, India weathered the worldwide trend and remained the second-fastest growing major economy in the world after China—at a time when most countries suffered negative growth rates in at least one quarter in those difficult years. Manmohan Singh's stewardship had a lot to do with this. His was the voice heard with greatest respect when the G-20 gathered to discuss the world's macro-economic situation. "When the Prime Minister speaks, the world listens," President Barack Obama observed, mentioning him first amongst the top three world leaders he admired.

A Far-Seeing Leader

Manmohan Singh's ten years as Prime

through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, and the flourishing of lakhs of new small, micro and medium enterprises, particularly in the services sector. He introduced the Aadhaar scheme that today gives a digital identity to every Indian and has enabled the country's much-lauded "Tech Stack" to be built. Insightful, a good listener and always quick on the uptake, he came up with dozens of new ideas and initiatives, some of which (like the creation of post-office savings banks and the initiation of direct benefits transfers) have endured and others (like GST and simplified direct taxation) were only thwarted by a cussed Opposition.

Of course, Dr Singh's India had problems and challenges: the point is, were we on course to overcome them? Manmohan Singh was not guilty of either complacency or inaction. He had taken the measure of India's major problems and devised far-seeing, practical and effective remedies to overcome them. From the Right to Information Act, which empowered the citizenry and made public officials more accountable, to the Right to Education Act, which brought a record number of children to school and pumped resources into moribund classrooms, his governance changed the face of our society.

The Manmohan Doctrine

In foreign policy, he propounded the Manmohan Doctrine, which saw India's engagement with the world principally as a means to enable its own domestic transformation. Thus, he prioritised India's relations with countries that could invest in our economy, countries

untrue or grossly exaggerated, the allegations that fuelled them were at least proof of Indian democracy at work—institutions like the Comptroller and Auditor-General, the judiciary, the media and civil society functioning with fierce independence and passion, and without the heavy hand of government seeking to curb or stifle them. And the irresponsibly destructive behaviour of his Opposition did more to foment the worst perceptions about India's performance as a nation unready for the opportunities of the 21st century than any of his government's alleged failures.

Beyond Narratives

A more accurate and balanced portrayal of the Manmohan Singh legacy would look beyond the preferred narrative of the current powers-that-be, of an "accidental Prime Minister" presiding over an unscrupulous and ineffective government, to that of a visionary statesman who brought the India story to the centre of the world stage as the planet's fastest-growing free-market democracy, and whose soft-spoken expertise commanded the respect of his peers. Manmohan Singh transformed India, and did so with an uncommon level of integrity, personal incorruptibility and simple decency that were wholly admirable and moved all who had the privilege of knowing him. As one of those who had that privilege, I bow my head in pranaam to a truly great soul. He exalted every Indian through his service, and for that we should be eternally grateful.

May this year bring new opportunities, endless joy: PM wishes nation on New Year

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday extended his New Year wishes to the nation, sharing a message of hope and positivity. He expressed his hopes for new opportunities, success, and joy for everyone as the country marked the arrival of the new year with celebrations and prayers.

"Happy 2025! May this year bring everyone new opportunities, success and endless joy. May everybody be blessed with wonderful health and prosperity," PM Modi tweeted.

The country welcomed the New Year with vibrant celebrations and prayers across the country, marked by fireworks, music, and joyous gatherings. From the streets of metro cities to the remote corners, people came together to bid farewell to the past year and welcome the new one with hope and excitement. President Droupadi Murmu wished harmony and prosperity to all and urged collective efforts for a brighter future for the country. "Wishing everyone a very Happy New Year! May the year 2025 bring joy,

harmony and prosperity to all! On this occasion, let us renew our commitment to work together for creating a brighter, more inclusive and sustainable future for India and the world," she wrote.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, in his New Year message, expressed hope for renewed enthusiasm and happiness in the days ahead. "Happy New Year to all of you. I hope this year brings new enthusiasm, new joy and happiness in your life. Wishing everyone a very Happy New Year," he said.

Priyanka Gandhi shared lines by poet Sohanlal Dwivedi, which talk about welcoming new beginnings with hope.

"Welcome! New year of life. Come, let's build something new, in this era of great awakening, with pride in waking life," she quoted the poet. Other leaders, including Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, and several other chief ministers, also extended their wishes to the people.

Gangster Al Capone is why expiry dates are printed on milk bottles

Food expiration dates have become the staple when it comes to making a purchase on perishable items. So much so that, it might be assumed that the development must have originated as an effort made by concerned citizens. This, however, might be untrue. Allegedly, the development was made by Al Capone and his brother Ralph "Bottles" Capone.

While seemingly unbelievable, the story gains prominence for two main reasons – 1st can be seen in the tale's popularity among people, this post from Reddit managed to rake over 32,000 upvotes. Evidently, becoming a favourable

narrative among audiences. If true, Al Capone acquires an altruistic aura from this narration, however, chances are this might be an exaggeration. As uncovered by Snopes, the second account seems to originate from the 2010 book "Uncle Al Capone: The Untold Story from Inside His Family", penned by his grandniece, Deirdre Marie Capone. On page 43, Deirdre points at the move being motivated by a capitalist sentiment:

Al turned his keen businessman's eye to less conspicuous business — and happened upon the dairy industry. As he put it himself, "You gotta have a product that everybody needs every day. We don't

have it in booze...With milk, every family, every day, wants it on the table... Do you guys know there's a bigger markup in fresh milk than there is in alcohol? Honest to God, we've been in the wrong racket right along." From 1920-1933 America was in its Prohibition Era, this was characterised by outlawing the manufacture, sale and distribution of alcoholic beverages. However, there remained a significant demand for alcohol. Capone capitalised on this demand by running a vast bootlegging (illegal smuggling of alcohol) and smuggling network, controlling breweries and distribution routes. This made

bootlegging a cornerstone of his wealth. Having been arrested in 1931, Capone was looking for legal ways to mark his status in the beverage industry. Having the means of distribution and smuggling, combined with an irresponsible regulation of the milk industry, he saw this business venture legal while still given him and his Chicago outfit the opportunity to still inflate prices and make a profit. While many might want this tale to be the true conclusion it remains difficult to reason and prove if Al Capone was truly such a visionary. After all, not every significant story needs a dramatic origin to leave a lasting impact.

Why Mahakumbh 2025 will be a digital spectacle

Dubbed the 'Digital Mahakumbh', the Prayagraj Mahakumbh 2025 is a testament to how tradition and cutting-edge technology can coexist seamlessly. Spanning over 4,000 hectares and expecting nearly 450 million visitors, the event is looking to leverage artificial intelligence (AI), advanced surveillance systems and a host of digital tools to ensure smooth operations.

From innovative land allotments and safety measures to a tech-savvy pilgrim experience, the Uttar Pradesh government is upping the tech game to efficiently manage what will be one of the world's largest religious congregations.

Land and suvidha allotments

One of the most transformative initiatives of this Mahakumbh is the digitisation of land and service allotments. Historically, this process involved manual coordination, leading to delays and inefficiency. The Prayagraj Mela Authority has improved this by using GIS-based mapping and high-resolution drone surveys to prepare layouts for the 25

sectors of the mela.

Drone surveys conducted before and after the monsoon have generated geo-referenced maps with 0.5 cm accuracy, ensuring precise allocation of land. The Authority digitised data from 5,500 institutions that participated in the previous Kumbh in 2019 and integrated it with applications from new participants submitted through an online portal. Over 10,000 entities—including akhadas, dharmik sansthas, cultural organisations and government departments—benefited.

For the first time, 'suvidha parchis' (permits for services and amenities) were digitised, allowing seamless coordination between institutions, vendors and the Authority. Stakeholders can now view and verify their allotments in real time, enabling swift implementation and reducing room for discrepancies. This transformation not only streamlines processes but also reflects a commitment to transparency and accountability, setting a precedent in large-scale event management.

Tech for safety, navigation and comfort Managing millions of visitors daily at the Prayagraj Mahakumbh 2025 demands

cutting-edge technology interventions. Central to this effort is the AI-powered Integrated Command and Control Centre (ICCC), which will oversee the entire mela area through an extensive network of CCTV cameras, drones and systems for water surveillance. This real-time monitoring enables swift responses to emergencies, helps decongest crowded areas and ensures a secure environment for pilgrims.

A government official informed INDIA TODAY that to enhance navigation in the sprawling temporary city, the Mela Authority has partnered with Google to integrate key landmarks like ghats, toilets, food courts, pontoon bridges and emergency services into its maps—marking the first use of such technology for an event of this scale. The Kumbh app and website further simplify the experience with features like a multilingual chatbot that supports 11 languages to address visitor queries. Additionally, QR code-based services for ticketing, navigation and emergency assistance promise to ensure seamless logistics, allowing pilgrims to focus on their spiritual journey.

Parking, a major challenge in events of this magnitude, has also been reimagined with the deployment of Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) systems across 102 parking lots spanning 1,850 hectares, accommodating up to 550,000 vehicles. This system reduces congestion and ensures quick entry and exit, significantly improving visitor experience. Balancing safety, luxury and sustainability Safety remains a top priority, with over 50,000 security personnel supported by drones, robotic buoys and AI-driven tools monitoring the mela. The ICCC keeps critical zones under constant surveillance while fire curtains, fire gels and rapid response teams are on standby to handle emergencies. The mela area has been divided into 25 sectors, each meticulously planned to ensure smooth crowd management.

For those seeking premium experiences, three tent cities are being set up under the public-private partnership (PPP) model. Offering accommodations ranging from Rs 10,000 to over Rs 1 lakh per night, these luxury set-ups combine traditional ambience with modern amenities, catering to both domestic and international visitors.

From Emergency to Thug Life: Films to watch out for in 2025

The year 2025 promises an exciting lineup of films across various genres, from historical dramas and action thrillers to comedies and sequels. With Bollywood and South Indian cinema gearing up for a stellar year, audiences have much to look forward to. Here's a comprehensive guide to the upcoming films, their release dates, and what to expect.

UPCOMING HINDI FILMS OF 2025

Emergency Directed by Kangana Ranaut, *Emergency* is a historical drama depicting the political unrest during India's Emergency period in 1975. Ranaut portrays former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, offering a portrayal of this controversial era. The film is scheduled for release on January 17.

Chhaava

Chhaava is a historical drama based on the life of Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj, the son of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. Starring Vicky Kaushal, Rashmika Mandanna, and Akshaye Khanna, the film highlights Sambhaji's valour and contributions to the Maratha empire. Directed by Laxman Utekar, it will release on February 14.

Sunny Sanskari Ki Tulsi Kumari

This Varun Dhawan and Janhvi Kapoor-led film, announced in 2024, is a love story touted to be part of the 'Dulhania' franchise. Directed by Shashank Khaitan, it also stars Sanya Malhotra, Rohit Saraf, Akshay Oberoi, and

Bachchan, and Sanjay Dutt. It releases on June 6.

War 2

A sequel to the 2019 blockbuster *War*, this Ayan Mukerji-directed action thriller stars Hrithik Roshan and Jr NTR. The film, part of the YRF Spy Universe, releases in August 2025.

Alpha



Yash Raj Films has set a Christmas 2025 release for *Alpha*, its first female-led action-thriller in the YRF Spy Universe. The film will feature Alia Bhatt and Sharvari as female super agents leading the charge in the Spyverse.

Sitaare Zameen Par

Aamir Khan's *Sitaare Zameen Par* is a sequel to his 2007 blockbuster, *Taare Zameen Par*, co-starring Darsheel Safary. The film will release in mid-2025.

India's heartland, the film delves into the gripping journey of Subedaar Arjun Maurya, who now faces the turbulence of civilian life. The film is helmed by the acclaimed director Suresh Triveni.

Bhoot Bangla, *Welcome to Jungle*, *De De Pyaar De 2*, *Bhoot Bangla*, Akshay Kumar's collaboration with film director

hit theatres on November 21.

Vivek Agnihotri's *The Delhi Files: The Bengal Chapter* will release on August 15, while Azaad, Abhishek Kapoor's action-adventure film that marks the debut of both Aaman Devgan and Rasha Thadani, will release on January 17.

Baaghi 4, *Raid 2*, *Chhorii 2*

The year 2025 will also see sequels to hit films *Baaghi*, *Raid*, and *Chhorii*. The Tiger Shroff-starrer *Baaghi 4* is scheduled for release on September 5. The horror drama *Chhorii 2*, which continues Sakshi's (Nushratt Bharuccha) story from the first film, is also set for a 2025 release. Ajay Devgn and Vaani Kapoor's *Raid 2* will hit theatres on February 21.

UPCOMING SOUTH FILMS OF 2025

Vishwambhara This fantasy drama starring Chiranjeevi releases on January 10 and is touted to be one of his costliest projects.

Game Changer

Directed by Shankar, this political actioner stars Ram Charan and Kiara Advani. It releases on January 10 during Sankranti.

The Raja Saab

A romantic horror-comedy led by Prabhas, this film also features Malavika Mohanan and Sanjay Dutt. It releases on April 10.

Thug Life

Kamal Haasan and ace director Mani Ratnam's much-awaited film, *Thug Life*, will hit the theatres on June 5. The story of the film has been written by its star producer, Haasan. *Thug Life* has an ensemble cast including Kamal Haasan, Trisha, Abhirami, Nasser, Ali Fazal, Pankaj Tripathi, Gautham Karthik, Joju George, Aishwarya Lekshmi and Vaiyapuri in pivotal roles.

Kantara: Chapter 1

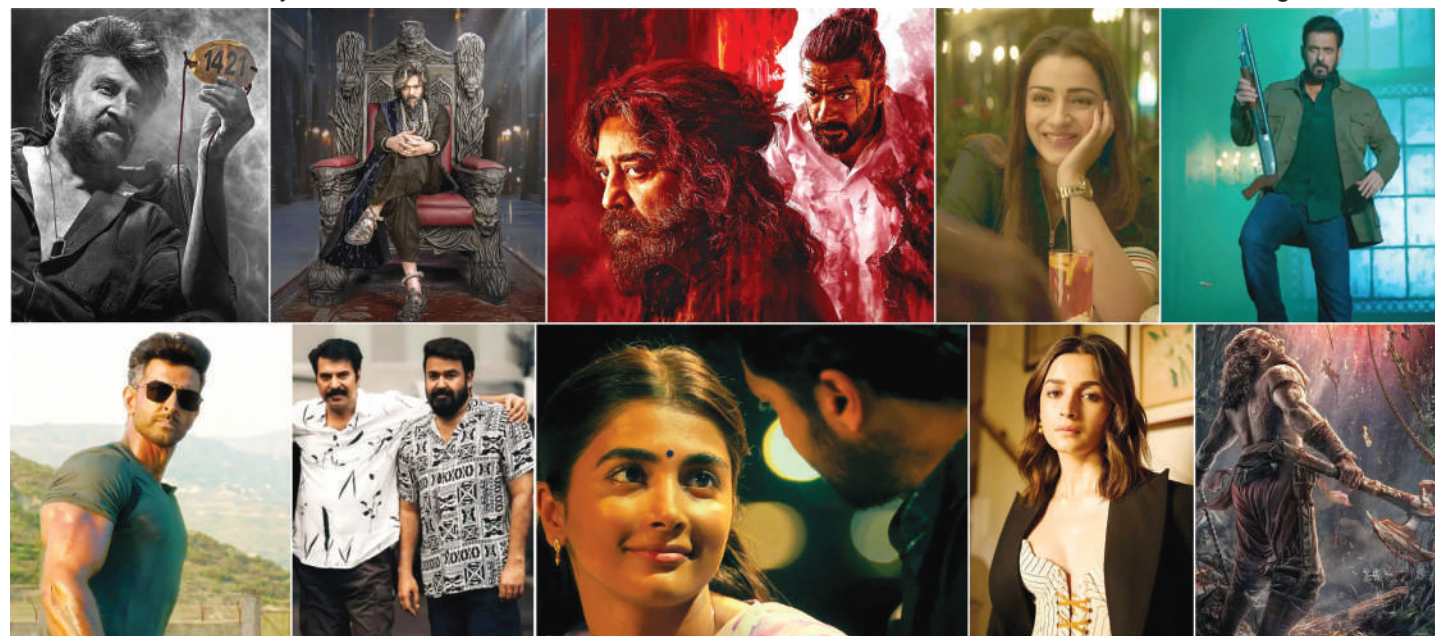
This prequel to the 2022 blockbuster *Kantara* explores events during the Kadamba dynasty. Directed by and starring Rishab Shetty, it releases on October 2.

Coolie

Rajinikanth stars in this action-thriller directed by Lokesh Kanagaraj, which releases in summer 2025.

Thalapathy 69

Touted to be the last film of actor Vijay, *Thalapathy 69* reportedly features the actor as a "torchbearer of democracy," aligning with his recent political ventures, including the founding of the Tamilaga Vetri Kazhagam (TVK) political party. The film also stars Pooja Hegde, Bobby Deol, Mamitha Baiju, Gautham Vasudev Menon, Priyamani, and Prakash Raj, among others. It is expected to release in October.



Maniesh Paul. The film releases on April 18.

Sikandar

Directed by AR Murugadoss, *Sikandar* is an action-packed film featuring Salman Khan, Rashmika Mandanna, and Kajal Aggarwal. It will release during Eid 2025.

Housefull 5

The fifth installment of the *Housefull* franchise promises a blend of humour and entertainment with a star-studded cast including Akshay Kumar, Abhishek

Thama

Ayushmann Khurrana stars as a vampire in this horror-comedy directed by Dinesh Vijan. Also starring Rashmika Mandanna, *Thama* is expected to release during Diwali 2025.

Subedaar

The crime-thriller *Subedaar*, starring Anil Kapoor in the lead role, will stream on Prime Video. It also stars Radhikka Madan, who plays Anil Kapoor's daughter in the film. Set against the backdrop of

on November 14.

Lahore 1947, The Delhi Files, 120 Bahadur, Azaad

Lahore 1947, directed by Rajkumar Santoshi and starring Sunny Deol-Preeti Zinta, is a patriotic drama slated for release in August 2025. Farhan Akhtar's *120 Bahadur*, set against the backdrop of the 1962 Indo-China war, pays tribute to Major Shaitan Singh Bhati PVC and the soldiers of Charlie Company, 13 Kumaon Regiment. It will

An International Cyber Mafia:

Who Is Wan Kuok-koi, the Infamous ‘Broken Tooth Koi’? Know All About Him

A growing cybercrime epidemic, widely known as “pig butchering,” has defrauded billions of dollars from victims worldwide, exploiting vulnerabilities heightened during the Covid-19 pandemic. These schemes rely on fake investment platforms and emotional manipulation, targeting victims under the guise of friendships or romantic relationships. Alarming, this criminal enterprise has been linked to human trafficking networks operating in Southeast Asia. Central to these allegations is Wan Kuok-koi, also known as “Broken Tooth,” a former Macau gangster reputedly tied to scam operations, according to a report by The Wall Street Journal. Despite his alleged connections to organized crime, Wan remains free, exposing gaps in global enforcement efforts.

A Short Intro – Wan Kuok-koi: From Triad Boss to Alleged Cybercrime Architect
Widely recognized by his nickname “Broken Tooth Koi”, is a Macau-based businessman and former leader of the 14K triad’s Macau faction. After serving over 14 years in prison, he was released in December 2012. In the subsequent years, Wan has been linked to illicit gambling ventures in Myanmar, as well as activities associated with drug production and transnational organized crime in the Golden Triangle region of Southeast Asia. In 2018, Wan founded the Hongmen Association in Cambodia, ostensibly as a cultural organization but allegedly linked to cybercrime.

The Hongmen Association’s reach extended into Myanmar with the establishment of the Dongmei Zone, reportedly one of the earliest scam compounds. A 2020 ribbon-cutting ceremony saw Wan publicly associating with militia members, solidifying the zone’s reputation as a hub for human trafficking and cyber scams.



The U.S. Treasury Department subsequently sanctioned the Dongmei Zone, citing its role in exploiting human trafficking victims and perpetrating digital fraud.

How Pig-Butchering Scams Work

The term “pig butchering” metaphorically describes the method of “fattening” victims through prolonged trust-building before financially “butchering” them. Scammers, often posing as potential friends or romantic partners on social media, lure victims into investing in fraudulent cryptocurrency platforms. The financial losses are staggering. In one case, a Kansas banker embezzled \$47.1 million from his own institution to recover his losses. Research by finance professor John Griffin reveals that over a four-year span, criminal networks funneled more than \$75 billion through cryptocurrency exchanges, with Tether emerging as a primary tool for laundering these funds.

“These are massive, well-organized criminal networks operating with little interference,” Griffin stated, emphasizing the

sophistication and scale of these scams.

Human Trafficking and Exploitation

Investigators have uncovered chilling evidence of thousands of individuals being trafficked into scam compounds like Dongmei under false promises of legitimate work. Victims are often stripped of their passports, forced to create fake online profiles, and coerced into scamming under constant surveillance. One survivor, Lu Yihao, described his harrowing experience of being enslaved in Dongmei for seven months: “From my perspective, Dongmei was specifically built for criminal purposes.”

The United Nations estimates that over 200,000 people remain trapped in such compounds across Southeast Asia, highlighting the dire human cost of these operations.

Enforcement Gaps and the Role of Cryptocurrencies

Despite sanctions and ongoing investigations in countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Cambodia, law enforcement efforts have been fragmented and hindered by jurisdictional challenges and lim-

ited resources. The growing reliance on cryptocurrencies further complicates these efforts. Platforms like Tokenlon have been identified as tools for laundering proceeds, and while major exchanges like Binance have collaborated with authorities to freeze fraudulent accounts, the scale of operations continues to overwhelm enforcement mechanisms.

“Money from victims in the United States flows directly into the underground economy in Southeast Asia,” noted Jan Santiago, a consultant with the Norwegian firm Chainbrium, in an interview with Time. Cryptocurrencies, while offering traceability, remain a favored tool for illicit activities due to their global reach and pseudo-anonymity.

A Pandemic-Driven Perfect Storm

The Covid-19 pandemic created ideal conditions for pig-butchering scams to thrive, with isolated individuals becoming more vulnerable to scammers posing as confidants. Victims not only lost life savings but also experienced emotional and psychological devastation. A recent study

titled How Do Crypto Flows Finance Slavery? The Economics of Pig Butchering underscored the global scale of these operations. Tether’s CEO, Paolo Ardoio, defended the platform, stating, “Every action is traceable, every asset can be seized, and every criminal can be caught,” but critics argue that cryptocurrencies remain an enabler of transnational crime.

Wan’s Denial and Public Appearances

Despite mounting allegations, Wan has consistently denied any involvement in illegal activities. In a 2020 video flanked by Chinese national and Communist Party flags, he asserted that his Hongmen Association “follows the law.” A statement attributed to the organization claimed that Wan had “retired from the underworld” to focus on legitimate business ventures. However, Wan continues to appear in videos tied to Hongmen initiatives, including the recent opening of a Macau office. His exact whereabouts remain elusive, with investigations stalling in Macau, Hong Kong, and Kuala Lumpur.

Puerto Rico's power grid collapses, leaving island in the dark on New Year's eve

(News Agency)- Around 90% of clients were without power at 9.30 (1330 GMT) on Tuesday, according to energy distribution company LUMA Energy's real-time portal.

Puerto Ricans were without electricity early on New Year's Eve after a grid failure left nearly all of the island without power.

Around 90% of clients were without power at 09.30 (1330 GMT) on Tuesday, according to energy distribution company LUMA Energy's real-time portal.

It will likely take 24 to 48 hours to turn the lights back on, "conditions permitting," LUMA said in a statement. "While the cause of the outage is under investigation, preliminary findings point to a



failure in an underground line," LUMA added.

Ivan Baez, a spokesperson for power generator Genera, called the grid failure a "major incident"

in a local radio interview.

He said that the line believed to have failed was operated by LUMA and brought down plants belonging to Genera as well as private

generators.

Puerto Rico Governor Pedro Pierluisi said in a post on social media that his administration was "demanding answers and solutions" from LUMA and Genera. He also said that the companies "need to speed up bringing back online the generator units ... and keep the people informed about the measures they're taking to bring service back to the whole island."

Genera's website showed two plants starting up again at 09:30 in the U.S. territory.

Puerto Rico has long dealt with chronic power outages as its infrastructure crumbles. It was hit hard by Hurricane Maria, a Category 4 storm, in 2017.

Man pushes commuter onto New York subway tracks, charged with attempted murder



(News Agency)-This New Year's Eve turned tragic for a 45-year-old New York City subway commuter who is now in critical condition after being pushed onto the tracks while he was waiting for his train at the 18th Street station.

According to the police, the accused, identified as 23-year-old Kamel Hawkins, was arrested and charged with attempted murder and second-degree assault for randomly pushing the commuter without any reason.

The incident on Tuesday afternoon was caught on CCTV and the footage shows the accused casually walking about on the platform, while the commuter waits for his train while looking at his phone. As the train enters the platform, Hawkins suddenly pushes the man, following which he disappears from the footage. JUST IN: 23-year-old Kamel Hawkins charged with attempted murder

after pushing a random man in front of a moving train in Manhattan.

The incident happened at the 18th Street station this afternoon.

Police say the 45-year-old victim is expected to survive and only suffered a... pic.twitter.com/sDMYidQXwB — Collin Rugg (@CollinRugg) January 1, 2025

Firefighters immediately reached the spot and worked to pull out the commuter, who miraculously survived despite being hit by the train. As the man was being pulled out, a bystander reportedly shouted, "He's alive", reports The New York Post. Despite being in critical condition, he is said to be stable. Although Hawkins fled the scene shortly after the incident, he was arrested later in the day. This is not the first time that the accused has been caught for committing a crime. According to the police, Hawkins was charged with assault in 2019 for attacking a police officer who caught him misbehaving.

No one can stop our reunification: Xi Jinping warns Taiwan in New Year's speech

(News Agency)-No one can stop China's "reunification" with Taiwan, Chinese President Xi Jinping said in his New Year's speech on Tuesday, laying down a clear warning to what Beijing regards as pro-independence forces within and outside of the island of 23 million people.

In the past year, Beijing has stepped up military pressure near Taiwan, sending

CCTV.

In his New Year's speech last year, Xi said China's "reunification" with Taiwan is inevitable, and that people on both sides "should be bound by a common sense of purpose and share in the glory of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."

Tensions have remained high throughout the year in the sensitive Taiwan Strait,

especially after Lai Ching-te, deemed a "separatist" by Beijing, became the island's latest president in May. Earlier this month, China staged a large massing of naval forces around Taiwan and in the East and South China Seas after Lai



warships and planes almost daily into the waters and air space around the island in what Taiwanese officials view as a creeping effort to "normalise" China's military presence.

China regards democratically-governed Taiwan as its own territory. But Taiwan's government rejects Beijing's claims and says only its people can decide their future and Beijing ought to respect the choice of the Taiwanese people.

The people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait are one family. No one can sever our family bonds, and no one can stop the historical trend of national reunification," Xi said in a speech televised on China's state broadcaster

stopped over in Hawaii and the US territory of Guam on a Pacific trip criticised by Beijing. China, which never renounced the use of force to bring Taiwan under its control, conducted two rounds of war games around the island this year, saying they were warnings against "separatist acts" and vowed to take further actions if needed.

US arms sales to Taiwan, allowed by the Taiwan Relations Act, have also continued to strain Beijing's ties with Washington. China has regularly warned the US against any military ties with Taiwan, and slapped sanctions on military suppliers and their executives.

Adani Enterprises to sell entire Adani Wilmar stake in \$2 billion deal

Adani Enterprises and its wholly-owned subsidiary, Adani Commodities LLP (ACL), have entered into an agreement with Lence Pte Ltd, a fully-owned subsidiary of Wilmar International.

Adani Enterprises Ltd (AEL) announced on Monday its decision to completely exit its 44% stake in Adani Wilmar Ltd (AWL). The stake sale will be executed in two phases: the first involves selling shares to Wilmar International's subsidiary, Lence Pte Ltd, while the second entails a partial divestment to meet minimum public shareholding requirements.

Adani Enterprises and its wholly-owned subsidiary, Adani Commodities LLP (ACL), have entered into an agreement with Lence Pte Ltd, a fully-owned subsidiary of Wilmar International. Under the agreement, Lence Pte Ltd will acquire up to 31.06% of AWL's paid-up equity shares through a call or put option mechanism.

Additionally, Adani Enterprises will divest around 13% of its shares in AWL to meet public shareholding norms. Together, these steps will mark Adani Enterprises'



complete exit from its stake in the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) business. As of December 27, 2024, Adani Wilmar had a market capitalisation of Rs 42,785 crore (approximately \$5 billion). Following the announcement, shares of Adani Enterprises surged by 7% to close at Rs 2,585 on Monday. However, Adani Wilmar's stock declined by 1.81%, settling at Rs 323.25 per share. In line with the agreement, the nominee directors of Adani Commodities LLP on AWL's board

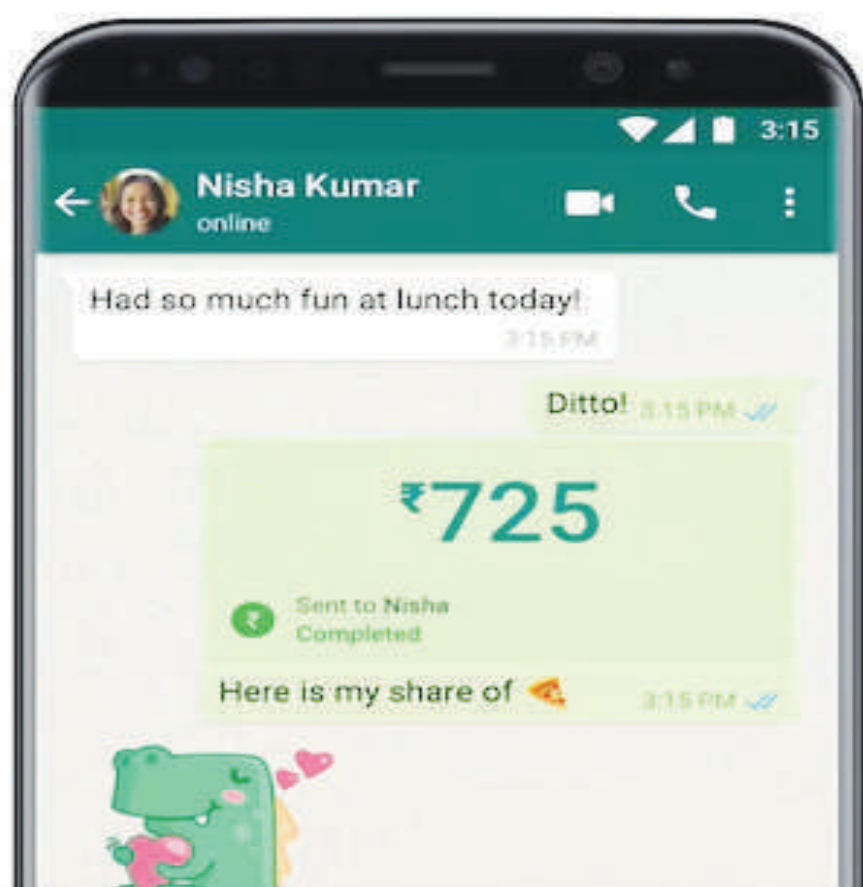
will step down. Furthermore, the parties have decided to rebrand Adani Wilmar under a new name. Options under consideration include "AWL Limited," "AWL Agri Business Limited," or "Fortune Agri Business Limited." The final name will require approval from the Ministry of Corporate Affairs.

Adani Enterprises has indicated that funds from this stake sale will be channelled into its core business sectors, such as energy, utilities, transport, logistics, and other industrial verticals. This aligns with the company's strategy to strengthen its position in critical infrastructure areas.

The transaction is subject to regulatory approvals and other customary conditions. Once completed, it will mark a restructuring of the ownership in AWL, which was a joint venture between the Adani Group and Wilmar International.

Government lifts 100 million cap on WhatsApp Payment, allowing Meta to rollout service to all users

WhatsApp can now expand its payments feature to all users in the country as the Indian government has lifted the previous cap of 100 million users.



India is home to WhatsApp's largest user base of over 500 million people. The government, on Tuesday, has removed restrictions on the app's payments service, WhatsApp Payment, which is a major win for parent company Meta. The National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI), which oversees the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) system, announced that WhatsApp can now expand its payments feature to all users in the country, lifting the previous cap of 100 million users. This was first reported by TechCrunch.

This decision represents a significant shift in regulatory policy, which had previously limited WhatsApp Payment's rollout. Initially capped at 40 million users in 2020 and later extended to 100 million in 2022, the cautious approach by NPCI reflected concerns over market concentration in India's booming digital payments sector.

India's UPI platform processes over 13

billion transactions monthly, with Google Pay and PhonePe controlling more than 85 per cent of the market. WhatsApp's expansion poses a direct challenge to these incumbents, bolstered by its massive user base and seamless integration with the messaging app. The timing is particularly favourable for Meta, as the company recently introduced its generative AI product, Meta AI, which has also gained significant traction in India, further solidifying the country's importance to Meta's global strategy. In addition to lifting restrictions on WhatsApp Payment, NPCI deferred a proposed rule to cap any single app's UPI transaction share at 30 per cent until December 31, 2026. This extension gives WhatsApp more time to establish its foothold in the competitive fintech landscape.

The decision not only amplifies Meta's financial services ambitions but also underscores India's role as a critical growth market for the tech giant.



Spotify users find porn videos in search results, company removes those

New Delhi, Leading music streaming platform Spotify found itself in a controversy when some users saw sexually-explicit material in search results on the platform. According to a report in The Verge on Monday, a Reddit user posted a screenshot of a Spotify search that had “a pornographic video tucked into suggested results for the rapper M.I.A”. A Spotify spokesperson told The Verge that such content “has been removed due to violation of its policies”. According to the music streaming platform’s content moderation policies, it removes content that contains sexually explicit material. Recent posts on Reddit have shown examples of

“unexpected explicit video in search results” on Spotify and “even erotic audio tracks being suggested in one user’s Discovery Weekly algorithmic playlist”. A Vice story in 2022 had claimed that there was “a surprising amount of people who’ve tried to upload hardcore sex images on Spotify”. According to reports, the app has a setting to block explicit content playback in users’ profiles, but even with it turned on, these searches evade that filter. Spotify’s terms of use forbid “pornography or visual depictions of genitalia or nudity presented for the purpose of sexual gratification.”

Emerging tech jobs in India to surge 20 pc next year, GenAI roles to see highest salaries

New Delhi, Indian IT/tech ecosystem is projected to contribute 10 per cent to India’s GDP by 2025, with at least 20 per cent rise in emerging tech roles next year, a report showed on Monday. The generative (GenAI) industry alone is projected to 1 million new job opportunities by 2028, contributing significantly to the nation’s GDP, according to the report by FirstMeridian Business Services. Salaries for GenAI positions like Generative AI engineer, Algorithm engineer and AI security specialist are forecast to rise from the previous year, indicating a 25-30 per cent upward trend in compensation for mid-level category. Industries like global capability centres (GCCs) created over 600,000 jobs between 2018-19 and 2023-24. By 2030, they are projected to employ 2.5 to 2.8 million professionals, said the report. Additionally, other non-tech sectors like BFSI and telecom are likely to increase their intake of IT/tech professionals in the coming year. “Companies must prioritise reskilling and upskilling to foster innovation and maintain a competitive edge in the AI-driven economy. The top five skills expected to define AI roles in 2025 will be AI, ML, cloud computing, data science and cyber security,” said Sunil Nehra, CEO-IT Staffing, FirstMeridian Business Services. In 2024, the Indian IT/tech ecosystem witnessed a 17 per cent surge in new employment opportunities, driven by rapid digital transformation and the concurrent rising demand for emerging tech niche job profiles.

CES 2025: AI-powered tech to dominate world’s biggest electronics trade show

Seoul, South Korean companies are poised to showcase their advanced artificial intelligence (AI) technologies at CES 2025, the world’s largest consumer electronics and IT trade show, scheduled to open in Las Vegas next week. Not only will major home appliance companies like Samsung Electronics Co. and LG Electronics Inc. participate, but other prominent Korean firms, such as SK hynix Inc., SK Telecom Co. and Hyundai Mobis Co., will also unveil cutting-edge innovations. AI is expected to dominate this year’s CES, scheduled for January 7-10, at the Las Vegas Convention Center under the theme “Dive In,” reports Yonhap news agency. Samsung Electronics, the world’s largest mobile phone and memory chipmaker, will present its AI-powered smart home concept, “AI for All: Connectivity

in the Age of AI.” The company plans to introduce its latest home appliance lineup, including the new Bespoke refrigerator, washer and dryer, all integrated with its AI-driven SmartThings connectivity, enabling seamless integration and remote monitoring of its devices. In addition, Samsung will preview its first air-to-water heat pump lineup for the North American market at CES 2025, aiming to expand its footprint in the growing U.S. heating, ventilation and air conditioning sector. Currently available in Europe under the Eco Heating System (EHS) brand, these energy-efficient systems use ambient air heat for heating and hot water. Affiliates of Samsung Electronics — Samsung SDS Co. and Samsung Display Co. — will have separate booths to showcase their innovations to potential global clients.



WARNING: MAY CONTAIN LEAD

Ayurvedic medicines can contain lead, which can cause learning and behavior problems in children, miscarriage in pregnant women, and infertility.

- If you use Ayurvedic medicines, ask your doctor for a blood lead test.

Call 311 or visit nyc.gov/leadfree for more information.

The Gen Beta era is here.

What will define their journey?

Children of younger millennials and older Gen Z, Gen Beta will be born into a world dominated by technology and AI.



Dr Otta concurs, adding that while automation and AI might make life easier

landlines or mobile phones, careful not to let our parents find out. However, the dynamics of parenting are shifting, even in the Indian context, as younger generations take on this role.

When the clock struck midnight, we all welcomed the New Year with cheers and anticipation. A new year brings along fresh beginnings—be it a new look, renewed resolutions (yes, the same old ones with a sprinkle of extra hope), or new aspirations. But 2025 is particularly special because it marks the arrival of a brand-new cohort: Generation Beta, some of whom will live long enough to witness the dawn of the 22nd century. Before you scratch your head to do the maths, let us tell you, that Generation Beta includes those born between 2025 and 2039. By 2035, they are projected to make up 16 per cent of the global population, positioning themselves as a crucial demographic shaping the world's future.

But what will their traits look like, and how will they be any different from the previous generations - Gen Alpha (2013–2024), Gen Z (1997–2012), Millennials (1981–1996), Gen X (1965–1980) and Baby Boomers (1946–1964)? Let us dig into it.

What traits are expected of Gen Beta?

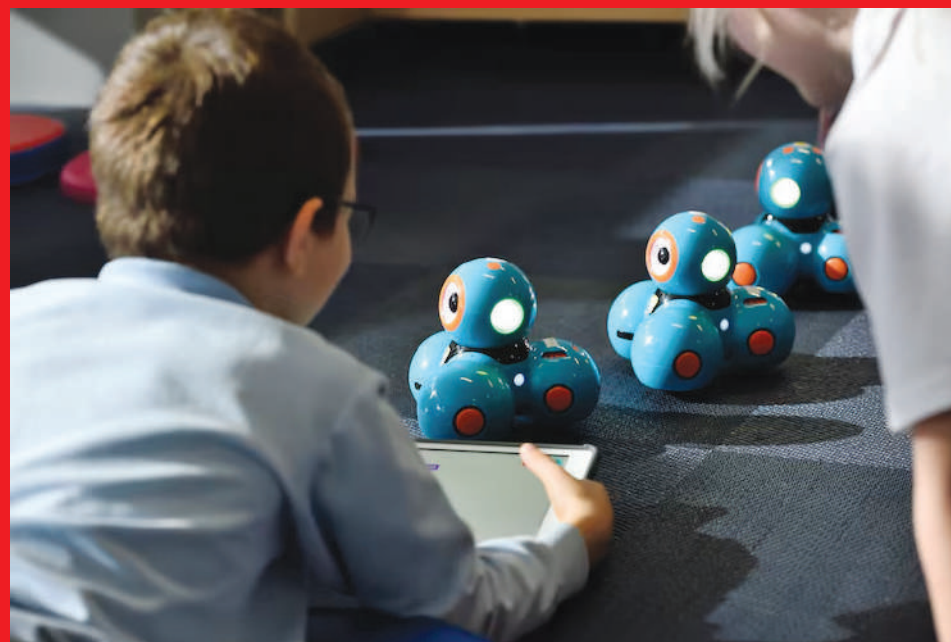
Children of younger millennials and older Gen Z, Gen Beta will be born into a world dominated by technology and AI. Experts suggest this generation will start life differently from their predecessors.

Dr Arvind Otta, a senior psychologist and mental health activist, explains that Gen Beta will grow up during significant advancements in technology. They might even have AI applications powerful enough to personalise their learning and entertainment experiences. These differences may enable Gen Beta to navigate complex digital environments from a young age. Additionally, with societal perspectives on technology evolving, there could be greater emphasis on privacy and mental health concerns for this generation.

Riddhi Doshi Patel, a Mumbai-based child psychologist and parenting counsellor, agrees. She adds that learning, entertainment, and social interactions for Gen Beta will shift even further online.

According to demographer and futurist Mark McCrindle's blog post, another defining trait of Gen Beta will be their adaptation to a world grappling with significant societal challenges. With climate change, global population shifts, and rapid urbanisation at the forefront, sustainability will not just be a preference but an expectation. Environmental challenges will shape societal values during their formative years.

In essence, Gen Beta might be seen as



a 2.0 version of iPad or "Shephora kids," complete with a sprinkle of sass. However, like every generation, they'll face their own unique set of challenges. 'Indian six-year-old thinks blue eyes and fair skin are beautiful'

Suriti Chakrabarti, a mum of a three-year-old and expecting her second child next month, reflects on how parenting has evolved. Despite enjoying a "blessed childhood" with an open relationship with her parents, she admits her approach will differ due to changing times.

She anticipates a "generation gap" between her children, even though they'll only be three years apart. One concern she expects to remain consistent is the struggle to build interpersonal relationships in an era of rapid technological evolution.

"As kids, we weren't as tech-savvy, but at least we could form meaningful relationships. That's something I feel is developing slowly in today's generations," Suriti says.

for Gen Beta, skills like creativity, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence will require deliberate nurturing. These skills may not develop naturally in an AI-saturated environment. Riddhi also points out that Gen Beta's reliance on AI could hinder their decision-making abilities. Virtual reality and the metaverse, which are just emerging now, will likely become commonplace for them. However, frequent immersion in virtual environments could blur the boundaries between real and virtual life, affecting their mental and emotional well-being. She recalls a troubling incident with a six-year-old patient who believed being "beautiful" meant having blue eyes and fair skin—a perception shaped by societal and technological influences. Such skewed ideals, if not addressed, could become more prevalent among Gen Beta.

Kids of younger millennials and older Gen Z Growing up, many of us discreetly used

Sushmita Marik, a 30-year-old learning and development specialist and soon-to-be mum, shares her thoughts on parenting in this tech-driven era. She plans to embrace her child's curiosity by addressing their questions openly and fostering communication.

While her child will grow up in an age dominated by technology and social media, she intends to maintain a healthy balance and prevent over-dependence on it.

Like Sushmita, experts like Riddhi suggest that millennial and Gen Z parents may adopt parenting styles that are radically different from their predecessors. Unlike previous generations, they value flexibility, inclusivity, and mental health awareness. Modern parents are less embarrassed to discuss emotions and mental well-being with their children. This openness fosters vulnerability and communication.

These new approaches, combined with the challenges of raising tech-savvy children, will likely define parenting in the Gen Beta era.

Tips for parents to raise Gen Beta kids We asked the experts to share some tips that can be followed by the soon-to-be parents. Have a look:

Foster self-love and acceptance With AI and social media creating unrealistic beauty and lifestyle standards, parents must instil a strong sense of self-worth in their children. Encourage them to embrace their unique qualities and prioritise inner happiness over external validation. **Balance technology and offline experiences**

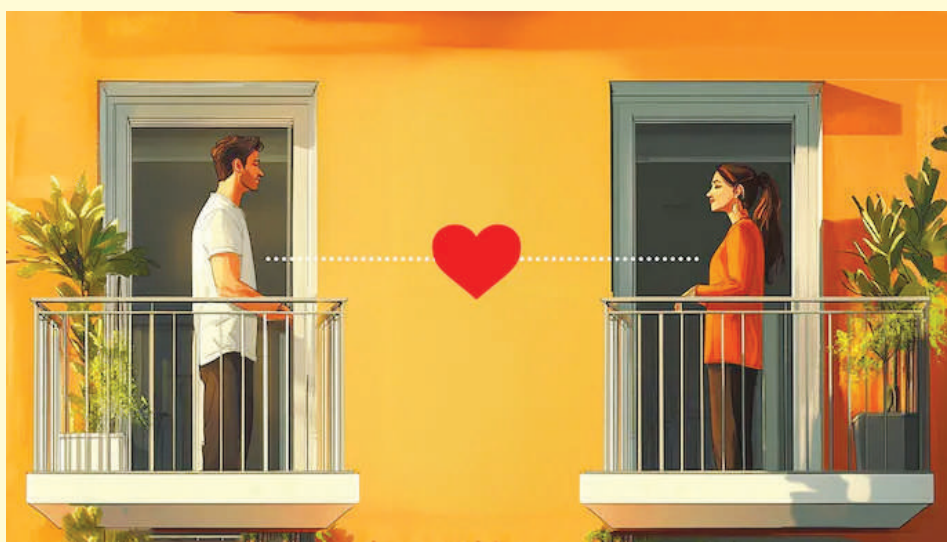
Can 'Living Apart Together' marriages be a hit in India?

Living Apart Together (LAT), a growing trend among committed and married couples in the West, refers to couples intentionally avoiding cohabitation in order to keep the spark alive.

By Medha Chawla

We may not have the same addresses, but we are happily married – this is what the new preferred arrangement among modern couples looks like.

Living Apart Together (LAT), a growing trend among committed and married couples in the West, refers to couples intentionally avoiding cohabitation in order to keep the spark alive. No more fights over putting the toilet seat down, leaving the towel on the bed, adjusting the AC temperature, or dealing with mismatched sleeping patterns! It's about two individuals leading their own lives, chasing their goals, and focusing



apart allows them to strengthen their bond by reducing daily pressures.

"Modern couples who value personal space, independence, and privacy benefit from this arrangement. It allows each person to maintain their own lifestyle while preserving their individuality," adds Dr Nisha Khanna, a Delhi-based psychologist and marriage counsellor.

The idea that distance can make a heart grow fonder is a key reason why LAT works for some couples.

"Being apart can help couples appreciate each other more, deepening their connection. They may realise the importance of their partner more acutely and feel a strong desire to meet and spend time together, making those moments even more special," explains Dr Khanna.

So, there is a mix of both 'me time' and 'couple time'. The couple can enjoy personal space and pursue individual interests while also looking forward to spending quality time together. This way, LAT couples stay refreshed and feel eager to connect as well. The regular bickering over daily household work and chores also takes a backseat and doesn't hamper the relationship. It is among the major pros of Living Apart Together.

"One significant advantage is that when partners don't share a living space, the need for constant adjustments and negotiations about responsibilities, chores, or the division of labour is minimised. This reduces potential sources of conflict and relationship-related frustration. Without these daily pressures, the couple can focus on maintaining harmony and avoid unnecessary disputes," says Dr Khanna, a marriage counsellor with over 22 years of experience.

Reduced daily conflicts, increased quality time, and a better work-life balance can help prevent some marriages or relationships from deteriorating. However, it is not a universal solution.

Living Apart Together works well for certain types of couples, although it may not suit everyone. The suitability of an LAT arrangement largely depends on the personalities and specific needs of the individuals involved.



on themselves while remaining committed to each other.

The decision to live in separate homes, despite being married, is not solely driven by these daily issues. Sometimes, the reasons are broader. It may stem from the need to maintain individuality or a strong belief in the importance of personal space - an idea mentioned by Lebanese-American writer Kahlil Gibran in his poem On Marriage: "But let there be spaces in your togetherness, And let the winds of the heavens dance between you."

In LAT couples, physical distance is a reality, but they remain romantically and emotionally committed to each other. But is that even possible?

According to relationship experts and LAT couples themselves, the answer is a resounding yes. LAT certainly challenges the traditional norm which

dictates that couples need to live together, but for some, it is a saviour of their bond. Such couples can live in the same building, the same housing society,

or even in different cities—it just isn't the same home. They mutually agree on this arrangement while keeping their time together flexible, such as setting specific days or weekends to meet at one partner's place, go on outings, or take vacations. Unlike in a separation, these couples maintain intentional communication and stay committed.

Why LAT works for some couples

"This trend allows couples to maintain their bond while avoiding the conflicts that often arise from cohabitation. It can be genuinely helpful for a few people who want to preserve their individuality, reducing daily conflicts and keeping the romance alive," says Ruchi Ruuh, a Delhi-based relationship expert.

Couples choose to live apart for a variety of reasons. Some value their solitude



and personal space, finding that maintaining independence enhances their overall happiness. For many, living

together, but for some, it is a saviour of their bond. Such couples can live in the same building, the same housing society,

Yoga for a beautiful mind: Trends to embrace in 2025

Optimising emotional and psychological wellbeing through yoga will be the way to go in the New Year

Mental health yoga combines traditional practices with modern wellness needs. Himalayan Siddha Akshar, author and founder of Akshar Yoga Kendraa, lists the major trends shaping how people will use yoga for emotional and psychological wellbeing in 2025.

Wake up early: Getting up early is good for the body and mind. Your body works better when you wake up with the sun—it also helps you sleep better. Morning sunlight is a natural source of Vitamin D and lifts the mood. Many people find early mornings peaceful and quiet, making it a great time to think, meditate or pray. The calm morning hours can help you feel more centered and ready for the day.

Practise Surya Namaskar: Surya Namaskar is a series of yoga poses done at sunrise. It's a way to say 'good morning' to the sun through movement. The sun gives us energy and life, and

these poses honour that. The routine has eight basic positions that flow into 12 steps, done on both the right and left sides of your body. It comes from old Indian traditions of Sun Yoga.

Bust stress: Quick 10-15 minute yoga breaks are becoming a standard at workplaces and schools. These short sessions focus on breathing exercises and simple stretches to reduce stress and improve focus. Companies are setting up dedicated spaces for employees to practise these mini-sessions between meetings or during breaks.

Take to tech: Wearable devices track stress levels, heart rate and sleep patterns to show how yoga boosts mental wellbeing. This information helps people understand which yoga styles and poses work best for their specific needs, whether managing anxiety, depression or stress in general.

Connect with nature: Outdoor yoga is becoming popular as research has



shown the combined benefits of exposure to nature and movement on mental health. Parks and gardens are hosting regular classes while forest yoga retreats offer extended programmes for deeper healing.

Move mindfully: Classes emphasise on the connection between physical movement and the mental state. Teachers guide students to notice how different poses impact mood and energy levels, building better self-awareness and emotional regulation skills.

Research-based practices: Programmes now incorporate findings from mental health research, including specific breathing patterns proven to reduce anxiety. These include pose sequences that help with depression, meditation techniques for better sleep, and movement patterns that boost the mood. Mental health yoga helps tackle modern challenges while staying true to its ancient roots. These trends show how the practice adapts to serve people's emotional and psychological needs in increasingly effective ways.

Diet Coke with protein shake? The new viral drink is not what experts recommend

A few months ago, when the Dua Lipa, shared her version of Diet Coke, it created quite a frenzy on the internet. The recipe had simple ingredients, Diet coke, pickle juice, pickles, jalapeño juice, and jalapeños, but were they ever mixed together? We don't think so.

When the recipe went viral on social media, everyone wanted to try this version of coke, uhm sorry, Diet Coke. From fans to curious food enthusiasts to celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay, who did not like it at all, everyone wanted a taste of this. But Dua is not the only one. Today, Diet Coke is somewhat of a staple food (yes, girl dinner) for many of us, and such bizarre recipes, where people want to personalise their Diet Coke, are not new. Who else remembers the Coke and Mentos experiments? Now, it seems like there is a new addition to your Diet Coke—or, according to the internet, a way to make your protein shake a little more interesting in taste.

Where's the dirt?

Protein Diet Coke is a blend of Diet Coke and a flavoured protein shake (mostly vanilla) that was introduced by Rebecca Gordan, a teacher from Utah, USA, on TikTok. Her viral video showcasing the fizzy creation garnered widespread popularity, and now this trend it has



reached India as well through Instagram. The Protein Diet Coke is rooted in the trend of "dirty soda", a soda enhanced with syrups, creamers, or other ingredients for added flair. This trend was popularised by shows like The Secret Lives of Mormon Wives, dirty soda has become a cultural phenomenon, and this new twist is no exception.

But should you be adding Diet Coke to your protein shake or visa versa? We

asked the experts.

What do experts have to say?

When it comes to the trending combination of protein shakes and Diet Coke, experts have shared their thoughts, and the consensus is not overly optimistic. Parmeet Kaur, HOD-dietician and nutritionist at Marengo Asia Hospital, Gurugram, highlights that while this mix might sound intriguing, it often leads to digestive discomfort.

The carbonation in Diet Coke produces gas when combined with protein powder, and can result in bloating. Moreover, artificial sweeteners like aspartame present in Diet Coke are known to cause sensitivity in some individuals, including headaches or digestive upset. Dr Bhavna Garg, senior consultant, dietitian, and nutritionist at Yashoda Super Speciality Hospital Kaushambi, agrees. She adds that the combination does not enhance the nutritional value of protein shakes. She notes that while the frothy mix might appear appealing, the caffeine and carbonation in Diet Coke can disturb digestion and potentially lead to bloating or discomfort. Both experts stress the importance of prioritising balanced nutrition over trendy mixes that may not serve any significant health purpose.

Dr Narendra Shetty, chief wellness officer at Kshemavana Yoga and Naturopathy Centre, agrees.

"As a naturopathy doctor, I find it highly dangerous in the long term to take carbonated drinks, and when it comes to trends like protein Coke or Diet Coke, it may seem like a new initiative, and I find it attractive. However, the company has studied the nerves of the consumers, and they sell the product," he adds.



Smokers lose 20 minutes of life with a single cigarette, new study warns

Women lose an average of 22 minutes of life per cigarette, while men lose 17 minutes, according to a new study by researchers from University College London (UCL). Earlier estimates suggested that each cigarette shortened life by about 11 minutes. However, the latest study, based on long-term population health data, found that smoking costs an average of 20 minutes of life per cigarette across both genders. The research, commissioned by UK's Department for Health and Social Care, highlights that the damage caused by smoking is cumulative. This means the earlier someone quits smoking, the better their chances of living a longer and healthier life. The study highlights the immediate benefits of quitting, if one does it on January 1. For example: A person smoking 10 cigarettes a day could prevent the loss of one

full day of life within just eight days of quitting.

By February, they could gain an extra week of life. By August, they could extend their lifespan by an entire month. "A person smoking 10 cigarettes per day who quits smoking on the 1st of January 2025 could prevent loss of a full day of life by the 8th of January, a week of life by the 20th of February, and a month by the 5th of August. By the end of the year, they could have avoided losing 50% days of life," the authors wrote.

Dr Sarah Jackson, principal research fellow from the UCL Alcohol and Tobacco Research Group, said, "The sooner a person stops smoking, the longer they live. Quitting at any age substantially improves health, and the benefits start almost immediately." The study also pointed out that smoking primarily affects relatively healthy middle years of life, rather than shortening the end-

of-life period marked by chronic illness. For instance, a 60-year-old smoker typically has the health profile of a 70-year-old non-smoker. UK health officials have encouraged smokers, via this study, to use resources like the NHS Quit Smoking app and the Personal Quit Plan, which offer advice and support to help quit smoking successfully. Professor Sanjay Agrawal, special adviser on tobacco at the Royal College of Physicians, emphasized the broader impact of smoking: "Every cigarette smoked costs precious minutes of life, and the cumulative impact is devastating—not only for individuals but also for our healthcare system and economy." The study concluded with a clear message: quitting smoking at any age brings immediate and long-term health benefits. It's never too late to take the first step towards a healthier life.

Is Working Out On An Empty Stomach Better For You?

Working out is highly beneficial for overall health, promoting physical fitness, mental well-being, and long-term disease prevention. Regular exercise strengthens the heart, improves circulation, boosts mood, supports weight management, and enhances muscle and bone strength. It also sharpens cognitive functions and reduces the risk of chronic illnesses like diabetes, hypertension, and depression. Working out on an empty stomach can offer additional benefits, particularly for fat burning and metabolic efficiency, as the body may utilise stored fat for energy when glycogen levels are low. Keep reading as we share a list of benefits you can achieve from working out on an empty stomach.

When you exercise on an empty stomach, typically after an overnight fast, glycogen stores in the liver and muscles are low. This forces the body to use fat as the primary energy source. Fasted workouts can increase fat oxidation, making them effective for individuals aiming to reduce body fat or improve body composition. This adaptation trains the body to become more efficient at burning fat over time. Regular fasted exercise can enhance the body's sensitivity to insulin, allowing cells to absorb glucose more efficiently. This is particularly beneficial for managing blood sugar levels and reducing the risk of type 2 diabetes. Increased insulin sensitivity helps the body process nutrients better, leading to improved energy levels and metabolic health. Fasting naturally boosts growth hormone levels, and when paired with exercise, this effect is amplified. Growth hormone plays a key role in muscle repair, fat metabolism, and overall recovery. Higher levels of this hormone can improve muscle growth, aid in fat loss, and accelerate post-workout recovery. Training in a fasted state helps the body adapt to using both carbohydrates and fats efficiently as energy sources. This metabolic flexibility is especially beneficial for endurance athletes, as it enhances energy sustainability during prolonged physical activities and optimises performance over time.



Here Are 10 Signs Your Body Is Too Acidic

When the body is described as "acidic," it refers to a lower pH level in the blood and tissues, leaning towards acidity rather than alkalinity. The body's pH is tightly regulated, typically between 7.35 and 7.45, with even minor deviations potentially causing health issues. An acidic environment can result from dietary habits (high in processed foods, sugar, and animal proteins), chronic stress, or certain medical conditions. While the body has mechanisms

to maintain balance, prolonged acidity can strain systems like the kidneys and lungs, potentially leading to fatigue, inflammation, or poor immunity. Though mild acidity is not always immediately alarming, persistent imbalance may contribute to chronic conditions over time. Read on as we discuss some common signs that may suggest your body is too acidic. 10 Signs that suggest your body may be too acidic An overly acidic body can disrupt cellular

energy production, leaving you feeling tired and drained. Acidity hampers oxygen delivery to cells, reducing their efficiency and causing persistent fatigue, even after adequate rest or sleep. Acidic environments can impair immune function, making you more susceptible to infections like colds or flu. Chronic acidity creates inflammation, which suppresses the immune response and hinders the body's ability to fight off pathogens effectively.



Baby John box office Day 6: Pushpa 2 overshadows Varun Dhawan's film

Baby John starring Varun Dhawan in the lead role has failed the first Monday test. The action thriller, which released on Christmas, has yet to cross the Rs 50 crore mark after six days in theatres. Alongside a lacklustre audience response, the film is also grappling with the box office dominance of Pushpa 2. According to industry tracker Sacnilk, the Atlee-produced Baby John saw a sharp decline in earnings on Monday,

collecting approximately Rs 1.85 crore compared to Sunday's Rs 4.75 crore. The film reported a modest overall Hindi occupancy of 10.77 per cent, with the majority of footfall during night shows.

After six days, the film's domestic earnings stand at Rs 30.50 crore, while its global collection is Rs 43 crore. Made on a reported budget of Rs 160 crore, the film faces an uphill battle. Trade experts predict that Baby John,

adapted from Atlee's Tamil hit Theri, may conclude its box office run with a total collection of Rs 60 crore. Check out the day-wise breakup of Baby John in India :

- Day 1: Rs 11.25 crore
- Day 2: Rs 4.75 crore
- Day 3: Rs 3.65 crore
- Day 4: Rs 4.25 crore
- Day 5: Rs 4.75 crore
- Day 6: Rs 1.85 crore

Meanwhile, Allu Arjun's Pushpa 2,

which has been in theatres for 26 days, outperformed Baby John on Monday, earning Rs 6.65 crore on its fourth Monday alone. The film has grossed over Rs 1,760 crore worldwide. Whether Baby John can gain traction during New Year's Eve or succumb to being labelled a 'flop' remains to be seen. With no major Hindi releases scheduled this week, the film, which also stars Keerthy Suresh, has a brief window to regain momentum.

Sikandar teaser X reactions: Salman's 'mass bonanza' hypes fans, say 'bhai is back'

The teaser for Salman Khan's Sikandar was unveiled today, instantly creating a buzz on social media. Fans praised the superstar's commanding presence, the electrifying background music, and the high-octane action sequences.

The teaser showcases Salman Khan in a never-seen-before avatar brimming with charisma, power, and his trademark swag. With jaw-dropping visuals and high-octane action, Sikandar promises to redefine cinematic grandeur. One user wrote, "Whattaaa beats mannn. And what a teaser to give us a glimpse of what is coming to this EID. The mass bonanza will explode soon, and the OG will be back to take what belongs to him. @ARMurugadoss sir, make a blast this EID (sic)."



Whattaaa beats mannnand what a teaser to give us an glimpse of what is coming this EID.

The mass bonanza will explode soon and the OG will be back to take what belongs

to him. @ARMurugadoss sir make a blast this EID. #SikandarTeaser#SalmanKhan — fmu pic.twitter.com/CK8j6z6MGZ — Nehang (@NEhanag63) December 28, 2024

A second user wrote, "Broo #SikandarTeaser slaps and slaps hard and #SalmanKhan looks great as always (sic)."

Broo #SikandarTeaser slaps and slaps hard and #SalmanKhan looks great as always — Satyam (@ssatyam_) December 28, 2024

A third fan called Sikandar a "blockbuster in loading." Sikandar — Blockbuster loading #SalmanKhan #SikandarTeaser pic.twitter.com/3ErMCmcrRp — Iftykhan (@Iftykhan15) December 28, 2024

Another social media user wrote, "Totally mass & goosebumps. Santosh Narayan BGM Is Awesome & AR Murugadoss presentation is literally amazing. Salman Khan is Always Good (sic)."

Tejasswi Prakash suffers injury on set

Mumbai, Dec 29 (VOICE) Television actress Tejasswi Prakash took to social media to inform fans that she suffered a burn injury on the sets of her upcoming show "Celebrity MasterChef."

On Sunday, the 'Naagin 6' took to her Instagram stories and posted a photo of herself with a burn mark on her hand. Sharing the image, she wrote, "The show must go on."

Tejasswi is preparing for her return to television after a brief hiatus following her successful run on "Naagin 6."

The actress is widely known for her stint in shows like

"Swaragini – Jodein Rishton Ke Sur." In 2021, she participated in the reality show Bigg Boss 15 and emerged as the winner. She made her Marathi film debut with "Mann Kasturi Re." "Celebrity MasterChef" is a cooking-based reality show, similar to Laughter Chefs. The show will feature popular personalities such as Dipika Kakkar Ibrahim, Gaurav Khanna, Nikki Tamboli, Rajiv Adatia, and many others, alongside Tejasswi. The makers have already released promos for the show on social media.

Choreographer and director Farah Khan has been roped in as the host of the cooking-based reality show "Celebrity MasterChef." Farah revealed her passion for experimenting with recipes and discovering new cuisines. Speaking about the show, Farah said in a statement, "I've always been an avid foodie, I enjoy experimenting with recipes, exploring new cuisines, and adding my own twist. I've channelled my love for food by starting my own digital cooking channel. When I was approached to host 'Celebrity MasterChef', I jumped at the opportunity."

Kriti Kharbanda pens romantic birthday wish for hubby Pulkit Samrat



Mumbai, Actress Kriti Kharbanda recently took to social media to share a heartwarming birthday wish for her boyfriend, actor Pulkit Samrat.

The post, filled with love and affection, was accompanied by a series of sweet photos that captured their special moments together. Kriti expressed her deep appreciation for Pulkit in her birthday message. In her Instagram post, the actress wrote, "Happy birthday to my favourite person, best friend, lover, companion, tour guide, chef, my anything and everything! Kya karti main tere Bina! Tu hai toh Sab hai, Tu Nahin toh kuch Nahin!" The pictures

shared by Kriti showcased the couple enjoying their time together, radiating joy and warmth. Whether it was cozy moments at home or adventures together, the photos gave fans a glimpse into their happy and carefree relationship. Last month, the couple shared glimpses from their Diwali celebrations and captioned the post, Happy Diwali! Firsts are always special! #happydiwali #loveandlight." For the unversed, Kriti and Pukit got married on March 15 at ITC Grand Manesar. Sharing photos from their dreamy wedding on social media, the couple wrote on Instagram, From the deep blue sky, To the morning dew. Through

the low and the high, It's only you. From the start to the end, In every now and every then, When my heart beats different, It's got to be you. Constantly, Consistently, Continually, You!" The couple first starred together in the 2018 film "Veerey Ki Wedding." They also appeared in the 2019 comedy "Pagalpanti." Additionally, Kriti collaborated with Pulkit in Bejoy Nambiar's "Taish," a film that also featured Harshvardhan Rane, Jim Sarbh, Sanjeeda Sheikh, and Abhimanyu Singh. Kriti Kharbanda has worked in Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu films, with notable appearances in "Housefull 4," "Pagalpanti," and "14 Phere."



While Taimur enjoys skiing, mom Kareena captures the moment



Kareena Kapoor Khan and her son Taimur Ali Khan are making the most of their family vacation in Switzerland. The actress recently captured a heartwarming moment of her son enjoying a fun day of skiing. On Sunday, the 'Jab We Met' actress, who often shares glimpses of her family life with fans on social media, took to her Instagram handle to share a photo of Taimur happily skiing down a snowy slope, dressed in

a cozy winter outfit, complete with a helmet and ski gear. The little one looked thrilled as he effortlessly glided on the snow. Proud mommy Kareena snapped pictures of her son with a big smile, proudly watching him take on the sport. Sharing the image, Kareena wrote, "Mera Beta" along with a red heart emoji. She captioned the next follow-up post, "Don't ask me if I Ski! I take my sons picture someone needs to." The 'Singham

Again' actress recently shared photos from her intimate Christmas celebration, showcasing heartwarming moments with her family, including husband Saif Ali Khan and their sons, Taimur and Jeh. For the past few years, the couple has made it a tradition to celebrate the festive season in this special way, and this year was no different. In the caption, Kareena admitted that she had been so caught up in the festivities with her loved ones that she

didn't get a chance to post earlier but wanted to send her warm wishes now. In the first photo, Kareena and Saif were seen sharing a tender moment, enjoying their drinks while gazing lovingly at each other. Their younger son, Jeh, playfully photo-bombed the sweet moment. Another photo captured the adorable sight of Jeh sitting on Saif's lap, with the father and son sharing an intimate pose. Meanwhile, Kareena could be seen giving

Taimur a gift while explaining something to him. The pictures also featured a beautifully decorated Christmas tree, with Taimur and Jeh twinning in matching red outfits. The two were seen playfully running around in front of the tree, which was surrounded by presents. Sharing the post, the actress wrote, "Sorry was too busy enjoying my day love and happiness People Keep searching for Magic."

Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani to re-release in theatres, fans say 'Bunny and gang is back'

Attention, Bunny and Naina fans! The beloved rom-com Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani is making its way back to theatres. Dharma Movies, the production house behind the film, announced that the Ranbir Kapoor and Deepika Padukone starrer will hit the big screens again in the New Year.

Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani will re-release in theatres on January 3, 2025. Earlier, a post on Dharma Movies' official Instagram account sparked speculation among fans of the hit Bollywood film, suggesting a possible theatrical re-release of the romantic comedy. On Friday, the makers shared a post announcing the happy news. The caption read, "We are all screaming because #YehJawaaniHaiDeewani is re-releasing on 3rd January! Save the date!" Fans of the film couldn't contain their excitement, reacting to the post and commenting un-



derneath it. Several fans expressed their delight and enquired about the ticket booking process. "Where can we book the tickets and when?", asked one user. While the other wrote, "Koi jaaye na jaaye mai toh zaroor jaaungi (Whether anyone goes or not, I will definitely go) (sic)." A third fan wrote, "My soul moving is coming again (sic)." Another fan expressed her excitement about the return of "Bunny and his gang." Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani (2013), directed by Ayan Mukerji, is a coming-of-age romantic drama that struck a chord with audiences, especially the youth, for its relatable themes of love, friendship, and self-discovery. Starring Ranbir Kapoor and Deepika Padukone in lead roles, alongside Kalki Koechlin and Aditya Roy Kapur, the film beautifully balanced heartfelt emotions and vibrant energy. Its soulful songs and inspiring dialogues ensured its enduring appeal among fans.

On mom's birthday, Parineeti Chopra gives a glimpse of her special film

Actress Parineeti Chopra has penned the sweetest birthday wish for her mother, Reena Chopra. On Monday, the actress took to her Instagram and shared a series of photos with her mother. In the caption, Parineeti showcased



cutest, giggliest, and literally the most intelligent woman I know. We love you, mom! @reenachopra.art." The post features Parineeti's joyful memories with her mother, father, and other family members. One of the photos shows her politician husband, Raghav Chadha, sharing a heartfelt moment with Reena Chopra, where they can be seen laughing together. Earlier, the 'Ishaqzaade' actress shared a series of photos reflecting on her whirlwind December. In her post, the Kesari

actress revealed a month filled with intense work, personal moments, and plenty of travel. She expressed her gratitude for a December that "really Decembered"—a playful nod to the busy yet fulfilling month she had. Parineeti wrote, "December, you really Decembered! Shot my film in Goa, Pune, and Bombay. Spent 2 days in Delhi winter. Fell ill on set but still did night shifts. Went to Sri Lanka with my team. Had some soul healing with R. Enjoyed spicy home food on days off and took around 20 flights! And I'd do it all over again. #Shooting #Travel."

her quirky side while giving a glimpse of her upcoming special film, titled "Parineeti, Sahaj, and Shivang." She wrote, "Film: Parineeti Chopra, Produced by: Reena Chopra, Directed by: Reena Chopra, Dialogues (how to speak): Reena Chopra, Action (how to walk): Reena Chopra, Food and Beverage (lifelong): Reena Chopra (and papa, but it's not his birthday)." She continued, "Happpppy bdayyyy to my producer, director – basically everything! This film called Parineeti, Sahaj and Shivang would have never released without you. The

actress Dia Mirza, who was recently seen in the streaming series 'IC 814: The Kandahar Hijack', is enjoying the festive time on a holiday. On Monday, the actress took to her Instagram, and shared a series of pictures and videos in which she can be seen having a gala time on her holiday. She can be seen swinging, enjoying an ice-cream, listening to Christmas carols, and walking down the beach in the pictures and the videos. She wrote in the caption, "Small joys".

Earlier, the actress heaped praise on her actor Vijay Varma with whom she worked in 'IC 814: The Kandahar

actress revealed a month filled with intense work, personal moments, and plenty of travel. She expressed her gratitude for a December that "really Decembered"—a playful nod to the busy yet fulfilling month she had. Parineeti wrote, "December, you really Decembered! Shot my film in Goa, Pune, and Bombay. Spent 2 days in Delhi winter. Fell ill on set but still did night shifts. Went to Sri Lanka with my team. Had some soul healing with R. Enjoyed spicy home food on days off and took around 20 flights! And I'd do it all over again. #Shooting #Travel."

WHO IS VAANI KAPOOR'S JAAN?

Vaani Kapoor has revealed who her 'jaan' and closest companion is. Taking to Instagram, the 'War' actress shared a heartwarming birthday wish for her sister Nupur Chopra, calling her a "forever friend." Vaani posted a series of candid photos with her sister, capturing their special moments together. In the caption, Vaani wrote, "Happy Birthday my jaan, my forever friend, my heart's closest companion. You deserve a day as special as you are, filled with love, joy, and all the little things that make you smile. Missing you!! Our funny endless chats, our silly jokes, and just being together today. But no matter the distance, know that I'm here loving you endlessly. #happybirthday #siblings."

The images shared by Vaani feature heartwarming moments from their trips and family gatherings, reflecting the strong bond she shares with Nupur. Last month, Vaani made headlines for hosting a 'Qawwali night' at her home, attended by her close friends, including Aditya Seal, Anushka, and Akanksha Ranjan.



Yash urges fans to refrain from displaying grand gestures on his birthday, prioritise safety

Kannada cinema superstar Yash, who is known for the 'KGF' franchise, has urged his fans to prioritise their safety and mindfulness during his birthday celebrations. The actor said that his happiness lies in knowing that his fans are thriving and pursuing their goals. On Monday,

the actor took to his Instagram, and shared a note in Kannada language and English in which he urged his fans to refrain from extravagant celebrations. He reflected on the unfortunate incidents that occurred during his birthday celebrations in the past, tragically resulting in the loss of lives.

Shilpa Shetty Kundra shares dreamy pictures from her vacation in Finland

Actress Shilpa Shetty Kundra, who was last seen in 'Indian Police Force', is all set to ring in the New Year in the biting cold of Finland. On Monday, the actress took to her Instagram, and shared several pictures and videos of herself and her family enjoying the Finnish winters. The dreamy pictures and videos capture the beauty of the Nordic country. Earlier, the actress and her husband, Raj Kundra's premises were raided by the Enforcement Directorate (ED). After this, Raj had issued a public



statement about him fully complying with the authorities. Raj took to the Stories section of his Instagram, and penned a long note.

Dia Mirza indulges in 'small joys' as the year draws to close

