



FIRST COLUMN

SHAPING INDIA'S AI FUTURE

As AI redefines global power dynamics, India is emerging as a key player in its governance and innovation



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

Prime Minister Modi's Paris and Washington visit, meetings with the two most powerful leaders from the developed world, comes at a time of shifting geopolitical sands. The buzzword around both these high-level bilaterals was high-end technology cooperation in a world, increasingly getting fragmented. India was the co-chair of the AI Action Summit in Paris, along with the host country France. This is the third global-level event on Artificial Intelligence, making it a Kumbh of technology leaders, policy makers, experts, corporates and world leaders in France. The theme was how to harness the power of this nearly mind-bending technology, whose evolution has been compared to the invention of the wheel and humans learning to use fire safely. Almost simultaneously, China released a nimble version of the generative AI tool DeepSeek, which is currently a huge challenger to US billions of dollars infused into US technology companies' almost monopolistic dominance on AI tools and standards. US President Biden in his last week at the Oval Office had passed an executive order called the Interim Final Rule (IFR) on Framework for Artificial Intelligence Diffusion, essentially imposing export controls on high-end software and hardware required for AI development across nations which may be considered inimical to US interests (i.e. China) but also, close allies like India.



While the global technology industry stakeholders have requested the new President to be consistent with the Trump Administration's previously stated, Regulatory Freeze Order, and suspend implementation of the AI Diffusion Rule until the Secretary of Commerce and other relevant officials can review the rule appropriately and pursue robust stakeholder engagement so that the rules reflect the government's objectives and ensure companies can engage with key US trading partners. President Trump is yet to revoke the executive order signed by his predecessor, even though he did sign a fresh one on January 23, which potentially hints at a pause.

Three days into the Oval Office President Trump signed the executive order on AI development and deployment stating the purpose as "The United States has long been at the forefront of artificial intelligence (AI) innovation, driven by the strength of our free markets, world-class research institutions, and entrepreneurial spirit. To maintain this leadership, we must develop AI systems that are free from ideological bias or engineered social agendas. With the right Government policies, we can solidify our position as the global leader in AI and secure a brighter future for all Americans. This order revokes certain existing AI policies and directives that act as barriers to American AI innovation, clearing a path for the United States to act decisively to retain global leadership in artificial intelligence. It is the policy of the United States to sustain and enhance America's global AI dominance in order to promote human flourishing, economic competitiveness, and national security."

India is aiming to have an equal say on global high tables of AI governance, innovation and development. It has an ambitious AI mission of its own, which is heavily dependent on high-end chips and Graphic Processing Units (GPUs) currently available from US technology companies. Any restrictions on access to these high-end processors would upset the ambitious goal envisaged under the India AI mission. The conversation in Paris, India's announcement to host the fourth global AI summit in Delhi, and conversations with President Trump and other leaders this week, are steps in the right direction. (The writer is a policy analyst; views are personal)

Palestine in ruins: The unbearable cost of war



KC TYAGI

As political instability deepens and global powers debate the future of Gaza, millions of Palestinians face an uncertain and harrowing future

On October 7, 2023, Hamas fighters successfully launched a massive attack on Israel, but the price that Palestinians had to pay for it is heartbreaking. It will take three centuries to recover from the destruction caused by this war, which lasted for more than 15 months. According to a United Nations survey, it may take more than 350 years to rebuild Palestine, which has been reduced to rubble. The estimated loss in the first four months of the war was \$18.5 billion. At present, about 69 per cent of the structures in Gaza are either damaged or destroyed. More than 50 million tons of rubble have accumulated in the Gaza region, which may take more than 15 years to remove. Piles of rubble are visible throughout Palestine due to bombings and ground operations. A United Nations report states that the accumulated rubble is approximately 12 times the size of the Great Pyramid of Giza in Egypt. According to estimates, even if more than 100 trucks work continuously, it may still take more than 15 years to clear the debris. Three generations born in tents will likely have to make them their permanent homes for a long time. Reconstruction will require billions of dollars, yet no international institution is willing to invest in an ungoverned region that has seen five wars in less than two decades.

Using satellite data, the United Nations estimated last month that 70 per cent of structures in Gaza have been destroyed, including more than 245,000 residential buildings. The World Bank estimated losses of \$18.5 billion in the first four months of the war—an amount nearly equal to the combined economic output of the West Bank and Gaza in 2022. Major roads have been turned into deep trenches, essential water and electricity infrastructure has been destroyed, and most hospitals are no longer functional due to being targeted during the bombings. According to the United Nations, more than 50,000 people have died in Gaza, 44 per cent of whom are children. The children who have survived are suffering from sickness, stress, insomnia, depression, and fear. They are terrified of every stranger. The children of Gaza have lost the will to live. Amidst the devastation, 96 per cent of children express a desire not to live, and 49 per cent say they would have preferred to die. Among those who feel this way, 72 per cent are boys and 46 per cent are girls. A Netherlands-based organisation, War Child Alliance, has collected shocking and heartbreaking data. The alliance gathered this information from 500 parents or caretakers, including families whose children were crippled in the war or separated from their families.

Their findings revealed that 92 per cent of the children surveyed are unable to accept the reality of war. The smell of gunpowder lingers in Gaza's atmosphere. The situation is so dire that 79 per cent of children experience nightmares, and 73 per cent have become so overwhelmed that their behaviour has turned aggressive. Many scream and moan in their sleep. These children have witnessed their homes and schools reduced to rubble. Their young minds are shattered, unable to comprehend why they are being punished and what crime they have committed. Devastated by this horrific situation, the entire Palestinian government, including



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Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh, has resigned. In his resignation letter, he acknowledged that Palestinians in the Gaza Strip are starving. Tensions escalated further when an American airman involved in military operations set himself on fire outside the Israeli embassy in Washington, DC, repeatedly shouting, "No more involvement in genocide." The United Nations has passed a ceasefire resolution, endorsed by 158 nations, including India.

Despite multiple resolutions calling for a ceasefire in the UN General Assembly, all previous efforts had failed. Israel was even included in the List of Shame, a document that records alleged rights violations against children in armed conflict. In this report, Israel is accused of committing severe violations of children's rights. This inclusion has angered rights activists and damaged its international reputation. Several key European Union countries, which previously sympathised with Israel, have now condemned its actions. Despite continued American support, Israel's economy has begun to collapse. In recent months, GDP growth has been only 0.7 per cent. The Israeli army has requested \$16 billion, equivalent to 3 per cent of the country's GDP. Even after the ceasefire, the military requires \$8 billion annually to address new security challenges.

The fiscal deficit has now reached 8 per cent of GDP. Israel is also deeply concerned that fighting has spread to its major business hubs, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. In January, Israel's debt stood at 62 per cent of GDP, which is still lower than the average for most wealthy nations in the OECD. However, prominent credit rating agencies such as Fitch and Moody's have already downgraded Israel's credit rating once this

year, with the possibility of further downgrades shortly. Following the Hamas attack last year, Israel revoked work permits for 80,000 Palestinian workers. No replacements have been hired, leading to a 40 per cent decline in the construction industry. The same trend is observed in the high-tech sector and other industries. Inflation reached an annual rate of 3.6 per cent last month. If the war had continued any longer, the value of the Israeli shekel might have dropped further, forcing banks to rely on their reserves. Although a ceasefire is in place, this does not mark the end of the war. A recent statement by US President Donald Trump has crushed any hopes of peace efforts. Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, is currently visiting the US, where he has been given priority among the foreign guests invited by the President. However, Netanyahu faces growing protests in Israel, driven by both economic instability and widespread public dissent. The situation worsened when Israel's Defense Minister, Benny Gantz, resigned from his position along with other members of his party, putting additional pressure on the government. Both leaders have sparked global controversy following a press conference at the White House, where they announced plans for the US to occupy the Gaza Strip and transform it into a resort city.

The proposed project would turn Gaza into a hub for employment and tourism in West Asia. The entire area would be levelled to develop infrastructure, and the 2.3 million people currently living in Gaza would be relocated to countries such as Egypt and Jordan. However, both Egypt and Jordan have firmly rejected this proposal. Experts argue that international laws and treaties will pose a significant obstacle to

any US attempt to occupy Gaza. Meanwhile, major Arab nations are mobilising against Trump's plan, with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, and Turkey openly opposing it.

Hamas has strongly condemned the proposal, labelling it ethnic genocide. Several US lawmakers, both Democrats and Republicans, have also voiced their opposition. In the past, Trump had similarly expressed intentions to occupy Greenfield Island, take control of the Panama Canal, and annex Canada as the 51st state of America. The Israeli parliament has enacted several controversial laws that have further inflamed tensions with Palestine and Arab nations. For example, the Jewish State Bill officially declares Israel as a Jewish state, effectively relegating non-Jewish communities to second-class citizenship. Additionally, the decision to shift the capital from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem is widely seen as an act of provocation against Palestinians. Israel also occupies the Syrian territory of the Golan Heights, which has been under Israeli control since the 1967 war.

A massive city, known as Trump City, is currently being developed in the region. The month of Ramadan is approaching, which is likely to bring additional hardships. Tensions surrounding the Al-Aqsa Mosque also intensify during this time, as restrictions are often imposed on Muslim worshippers. At present, the likelihood of renewed conflict appears higher than the prospect of lasting peace. The international community is also deeply concerned about the Trump administration's decision to withdraw US representatives from the United Nations.

(The writer is a former Member of Parliament; views are personal)

India stands on the brink of an AI-driven revolution

By prioritising comprehensive AI education, ethical governance and transparent regulations, India can lead the global AI revolution

India is emerging as a dominant force in Artificial Intelligence (AI), shaping its economy, security, and global influence. At the ongoing AI Summit in Paris, India's leadership in AI highlights its commitment to technological advancement and innovation. The Prime Minister's prominent role at the summit underscores the country's strategic focus on AI, positioning it as a counterforce to China's deepfake threats. Whether in AI, digital transformation, or healthcare, India is rapidly evolving into a global technology powerhouse, striving for AI self-reliance and economic growth.

AI is no longer a futuristic concept—it is an immediate reality reshaping India's digital landscape. Projections suggest that AI will contribute \$500 billion to the Indian economy by 2025, accounting for 10 per cent of the national GDP. The technology is revolutionising industries, from agriculture to healthcare and revitalising cultural and linguistic heritage. India is not merely adopting AI; it is actively leading the revolution through ambitious government initiatives, collaborations with tech giants and extensive investment in AI infrastructure. The Indian government has launched several initiatives to position the country as a leader in AI. The IndiaAI Mission and the establishment of India's first AI University in Maharashtra reflect a strong commitment to technological leadership. Partnerships with global tech



VINAY PATHAK

firms like NVIDIA are helping develop AI solutions tailored to India's unique challenges. AI-driven tools in agriculture, such as CropIn and Intello Labs, assist farmers in predicting weather patterns, optimising irrigation, and detecting crop diseases, thereby boosting productivity and sustainability. India's corporate sector is also investing heavily in AI.

Companies like Infosys and TCS are deploying AI-driven solutions to streamline business processes, automate customer service, and optimise supply chains. Infosys' Nia platform enhances efficiency and reduces operational costs, while Zoho's AI-powered CRM tools empower small and medium enterprises to compete globally. Generative AI tools like ChatGPT are increasingly being utilised by job seekers, with 87 per cent leveraging them to refine resumes and prepare for interviews. Despite its rapid progress, India faces significant challenges in AI adoption. A critical skills shortage in AI-related professions remains a pressing issue. To address this, the National Programme on AI,




launched by NITI Aayog, aims to train over a million workers in AI skills. Additionally, states like Karnataka and Telangana are establishing AI hubs to nurture innovation and talent development. However, while India produces over 1.5 million engineers annually, only a small percentage have the specialised expertise required for AI development. AI's rise also brings security concerns. Cyber threats are

growing, with increasing vulnerability to sophisticated cyberattacks. In 2023, a major Indian bank suffered a ransomware attack, disrupting services for millions of customers. AI-powered cyber tools, while beneficial, can be exploited by malicious actors. The dangers of misinformation and AI-generated deepfakes are also becoming more apparent. The viral deepfake video of actor Rashmika Mandanna in 2023 highlighted the risks of AI-driven disinformation. Similarly, AI-powered voice cloning scams are on the rise, posing significant fraud risks. AI is also playing a crucial role in preserving India's cultural and linguistic heritage. Institutions like IIT Madras are developing AI models to revive

endangered languages such as Toda and Gondi. The Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute is using AI to digitise ancient manuscripts, ensuring the preservation of India's historical knowledge. AI is further enhancing the entertainment sector through immersive experiences, such as virtual reality tours of historical sites and AI-curated regional literature and music recommendations. In healthcare, AI-driven tools like Niramai are revolutionising early cancer detection, while telemedicine platforms like Apollo Telehealth are providing medical access to rural communities. The education sector is benefiting from AI-powered platforms. In disaster management, AI is helping predict natural disasters and

coordinate relief efforts. The Indian Meteorological Department employs AI to analyze weather patterns and issue early warnings for cyclones and floods, thereby minimising casualties. AI is not merely a technological tool; it is a transformative force shaping India's future. However, the country must strike a balance between innovation and regulation to ensure ethical AI deployment. As AI evolves, India must establish a robust framework to address ethical concerns, security risks, and workforce reskilling. Collaborative efforts between the government, industry, and academia will be key in ensuring AI benefits for the society. (The writer is an assistant professor at IIT, Sonapat; views are personal)

what's brewing?



HARSHVARDHAN RANE BRINGS NEW 'POWER OF A LOVE STORY' WITH DEEWANIYAT

Bollywood actor Harshvardhan Rane will be seen in the romantic film *Deewaniyat*, which director Milap Milan Zaveri says is one of the most powerful and heartbreaking love stories he has written along with Mushtaq Shiekh.

The filmmaker said: *Deewaniyat* is one of the most powerful and heartbreaking love stories I've written along with Mushtaq Shiekh. It has the madness of love.

Helmed by Zaveri and co-written by Mushtaq Shiekh, *Deewaniyat* promises to bring an epic tale of passion and heartbreak to the big screen. Harshvardhan, whose re-release of the film *Sanam Teri Kasam* created a tizzy once again, said that he is grateful to the audience for the overwhelming love they have given him for the movie.

"The power of a love story is eternal and when I heard the madness, passion and craziness of the role and script of *Deewaniyat*, I immediately chose it to be my next film. Excited to be collaborating with my director Milap Milan Zaveri and also with producers Amul V Mohan, Anshul Mohan and the co-writer of this powerful script, Mushtaq Shiekh."

Produced by Amul V. Mohan and Anshul Mohan under their banner Vikir Films, *Deewaniyat* is set to go on floors this year, with a theatrical release slated for later in 2025. The leading lady will be announced soon.

'Playing J.P. Singh allowed me to explore world where power is defined by intellect, resilience'

The trailer for *The Diplomat* has been released and it features John Abraham in a compelling new role as real-life Indian diplomat J.P. Singh.

In this highly anticipated film, John portrays the intricacies and challenges of a diplomatic career with authenticity and intensity. The intriguing trailer offers a first look into the world of international diplomacy, highlighting the high-stakes situations and personal dynamics that shape the life of a diplomat. Released on the birth anniversary of the late Sushma Swaraj, the trailer serves as a tribute to her crucial role in 2017, when she supported Indian diplomat J.P. Singh in the mission to bring India's daughter back home.

Speaking about the film, John shared, "Diplomacy is a battlefield where words carry more weight than weapons. Playing J.P. Singh allowed me to explore a world where power is defined by intellect, resilience, and quiet heroism. Uzma's story is a testament to India's strength and courage and I'm proud to bring this



inspiring journey to life on screen."

The upcoming action thriller also stars Sadia Khateeb, Sharib Hashmi, Revathy and Kumud Mishra. The *Diplomat* marks a new direction for Abraham, as he takes on a role that is deeply rooted in strategy, intellect, and negotiation. This portrayal presents a strong-willed and dynamic character, offering a fresh and com-

pellent side of Abraham that audiences have never seen before.

The film is produced by Bhushan Kumar & Krishan Kumar (T-Series), John Abraham (JA Entertainment), Vipul D. Shah, Ashwin Varde, Rajesh Bahl (Wakao Films) and Sameer Dixit, Jatish Varma, Rakesh Dang.

The Diplomat is set to release on March 7.

'I was so charged to do Gully Boy that I took everything head-on'



Vijay Varma has cemented his place as one of the most compelling actors of his generation. From intense crime dramas to psychological thrillers, he has consistently delivered gripping performances that leave a lasting impact. With standout roles in *Dahaad*, *Kalkoot*, *Lust Stories 2*, *Jaane Jaan*, *Mirzapur* and the upcoming *IC814*, he continues to showcase his versatility and depth as a performer.

However, a defining moment in his career came with Zoya Akhtar's *Gully Boy* (2019), where he played the layered and intriguing Moeen Arif. The film not only expanded his reach as an actor but also reinforced his ability to shine in an ensemble cast alongside Ranveer Singh and Alia Bhatt.

Looking back on the challenges of portraying Moeen, Vijay once shared: "I was so charged to do this film that I took everything head-on. I was flowing through the course of this film. The challenge was ensuring Moeen's character arc remained intact, even though he appears intermittently throughout the screenplay. His journey unfolds in layers—what seems like a superficial presence at first gradually reveals deeper complexities. It was a process of constant discovery. While my preparation was mostly mental, the hair and makeup team worked extensively to perfect Moeen's look. He couldn't just appear as a mechanic; he had to embody the many facets of his character."

Now, six years after *Gully Boy*, Vijay Varma continues to push artistic boundaries. His upcoming projects, including *Matka King* and *Ul Jalool Ishq*, are among the most anticipated releases of 2025. With his knack for selecting compelling narratives and delivering powerhouse performances, he is poised to make an even greater impact in the years ahead.



'The women I work with have played a significant role in my growth as an artist'

The much-anticipated first look of *Delhi Crime 3* has been released and actor Rasika Dugal is thrilled to be reprising her role as police officer Neeti Singh. The critically acclaimed crime drama, which has captivated audiences with its gripping storytelling, now introduces another powerful addition to its ensemble cast—Huma Qureshi joins the series as the antagonist, adding to the excitement for the upcoming season.

Expressing her enthusiasm for returning to the show, Rasika shares her admiration for her co-stars, particularly Shefali Shah, who has been an integral part of *Delhi Crime* since its inception. "I'm always amazed by Shefali because she's such a phenomenal actor and a warm, nurturing presence. She juggles multiple responsibilities effortlessly, and despite all that, she remains so much fun to be around. Going back to set with her is always a joy."

Reflecting on her experiences of working alongside talented women in the industry, Rasika emphasizes the value of collaboration in shaping strong performances. "I've had the privilege of working with incredible co-actors and directors—Mira Nair, Nandita Das, Shefali Shah, Tisca Chopra and the brilliant women of *Mirzapur*. They are all immensely talented, and working with them has always been an enriching experience. A great performance isn't created in isolation; it thrives on connection and creative synergy. The women I work with have played a significant role in my growth as an artist, and these relationships are deeply special to me."

With *Delhi Crime 3* promising another intense and compelling season, Rasika Dugal's return, alongside Shefali Shah and the addition of Huma Qureshi, sets the stage for an exciting new chapter in the acclaimed series.

STANDALONE



Ranbir Kapoor's entrepreneurial venture 'ARKS' was launched on Friday, a product line of premium essentials with a curated wardrobe that is modern, minimalist, timeless and elevated. A lifestyle brand that mirrors Ranbir's ethos and aesthetic in this code of quiet confidence, ARKS' launch collection represents a seamless blend of functionality, style and substance with a carefully assorted line of apparels, accessories and sneakers for men and women.

FUN

ARCHIE



CALVIN AND HOBBS



GARFIELD



NANCY



GINGER MEGGS



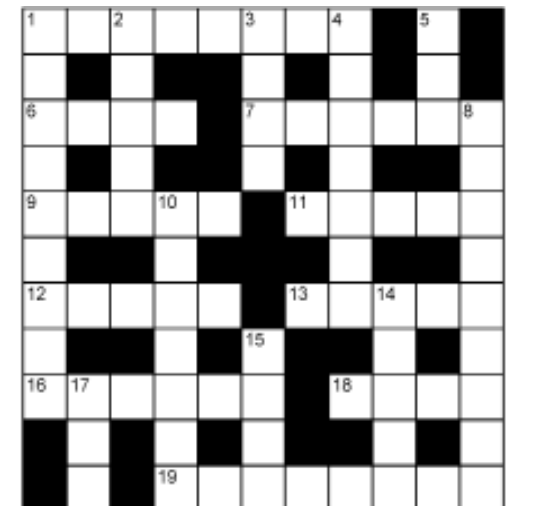
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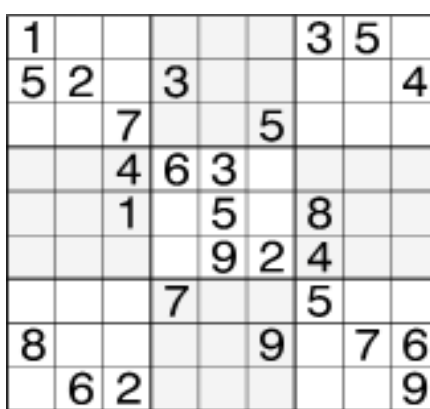
SPEED BUMP



CROSSWORD



SUDOKU



Yesterday's solution

9	5	1	3	8	6	2	4	7
2	3	8	1	4	7	9	5	6
4	6	7	5	9	2	1	8	3
8	2	6	4	7	3	5	1	9
5	7	4	8	1	9	3	6	2
1	9	3	6	2	5	8	7	4
3	1	2	7	6	8	4	9	5
7	8	5	9	3	4	6	2	1
6	4	9	2	5	1	7	3	8

- Rules
- Each row and column can contain each number (1 to 9) exactly once.
 - The sum of all numbers in any row or column must equal 45.

ACROSS

- A flight using words
- Rip
- A root vegetable
- Group of eight
- Not ever
- A fruit with pips
- A hot drink
- Extreme fear
- Grow weary
- A large animal
- Glide over snow
- Not temporary
- Make bigger
- A large country in Asia
- Costing nothing
- A large bird

DOWN

- Someone in a spaceship
- A huge person
- Chews up and swallows
- An underwater missile for attacking a ship



Vicky Kaushal shines in *Chhaava*, but the story deserves a deeper dive

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Plot

Chhaava, directed by Laxman Utekar, is a historical action drama that chronicles the tumultuous reign of Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj, the son of the legendary Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. Set between 1680 and 1689, the film follows Sambhaji (Vicky Kaushal) as he takes charge of the Maratha empire after his father's passing. His daring raid on Burhanpur, where he loots the Mughal treasury, sets the stage for an intense conflict with Emperor Aurangzeb (Akshaye Khanna). However, beyond the battlefield, Sambhaji faces internal betrayal, particularly from his stepmother Soyarabai (Divya Dutta), who schemes to remove him from power. The film navigates his unyielding resistance against Mughal expansion, his bond with his loyal friend and poet Kavi Kalash (Vineet Kumar Singh), and his unwavering defiance in the face of brutal captivity and execution.

Analysis

While *Chhaava* delivers thrilling battle sequences and high-stakes drama, it focuses primarily on Sambhaji's military prowess, often sidelining other crucial aspects of his life. The film briefly touches upon his intellect—his fluency in multiple languages and his poetic abilities—but these elements are not explored in depth. Utekar's direction excels in crafting a gripping war narrative, yet it does not delve into the internal conflicts within the Maratha empire or the political chess

game that defined Sambhaji's rule. The father-son dynamic between Shivaji and Sambhaji, which could have added emotional depth, is largely absent. The screenplay prioritises action over character development, making the film an exhilarating but somewhat one-dimensional historical account.

Highlights

One of the film's standout moments is the depiction of Sambhaji and Kavi Kalash's friendship. A particularly poignant scene features them engaging in a poetry duel while imprisoned, a reminder of their shared intellectual bond despite their impending fate. The film also does justice to Sambhaji's final stand, showcasing his steadfast refusal to submit to Aurangzeb, which remains one of the most powerful moments in history. The battle choreography is another highlight, with meticulously designed fight sequences that effectively capture the chaos and intensity of war.

Drawbacks

Despite its visual grandeur, *Chhaava* struggles with a few narrative shortcomings. The political intrigue within the Maratha empire, particularly the role of Soyarabai and other internal factions, is not explored in sufficient detail. The screenplay misses an opportunity to showcase the strategic mind of Sambhaji beyond his battlefield heroics. Rashmika Mandanna's character, Yesubai, is given limited space to shine and her dialogue delivery feels disconnected, possibly due to dubbing issues. Akshaye Khanna's portrayal of Aurangzeb, while menacing, occasionally dips into exaggerated villainy, particularly with his repetitive execution of messengers, which borders on unintentional comedy. Additionally, the



film's pacing dips in the first half, slowing down the momentum before picking up in the latter portion.

Performances

Vicky Kaushal dominates the screen with a powerful performance, embodying the grit and intensity of Sambhaji Maharaj. His physical transformation, coupled with his commanding presence, makes him a convincing warrior king. However, while his action sequences are riveting, the film does not offer enough moments to explore Sambhaji's more nuanced qualities. Rashmika Mandanna portrays Yesubai with grace, but her role is largely relegated to the sidelines. Vineet Kumar Singh shines as Kavi Kalash, bringing warmth and depth to his portrayal of the poet-warrior. Akshaye Khanna, under heavy prosthetics, delivers a calculated performance as Aurangzeb, though his character's over-the-top cruelty at times undermines his menace. Ashutosh Rana, as Hambirao Mohite, delivers a solid performance, while Divya Dutta, as the scheming Soyarabai, is underutilised.

Technical Aspects

The film's production values are top-notch, with grand set designs and elaborate battle sequences that effectively recreate the era. Saurabh Goswami's cinematography captures the sweeping landscapes and the gritty battlefield clashes with precision. The editing by Manish Pradhan ensures the second half maintains a gripping pace, though the first half could have been tighter. AR Rahman's background score adds gravitas to the film, but the inclusion of electric guitar elements in crucial sequences feels jarring and out of place for a historical drama. A more traditional

Indian orchestration would have been more fitting. The costume and production design successfully transport the audience to the late 17th century, lending authenticity to the film's visual storytelling.

Verdict

Chhaava is an engaging historical action film that thrives on its battle sequences and Vicky Kaushal's commanding performance. However, it falls short of being a comprehensive biopic, as it largely focuses on Sambhaji's military campaigns while overlooking the deeper complexities of his reign and personality. While the film is a treat for action lovers and history enthusiasts, those expecting a more layered exploration of Sambhaji's legacy might find it lacking. Nevertheless, as a cinematic tribute to one of India's bravest warrior kings, *Chhaava* is a compelling watch, even if it leaves some aspects of his story untold.

DIRECTED BY: Laxman Utekar

PRODUCED BY: Dinesh Vijan

CAST: Vicky Kaushal, Rashmika Mandanna, Akshaye Khanna, Ashutosh Rana, Divya Dutta, Vineet Kumar Singh, Diana Penty and more

MUSIC BY: A. R. Rahman

RATING: 3.5/5

DESIGNING WITH SOUL



PNS/HYDERABAD

Form and function blend together like delicate vine shoots in Ambereen Gupta's symphony of spaces, creating an incredibly beautiful universe. Her store, CASA AMBER, is a creative canvas where each brushstroke, colour and texture conveys a story of talent, passion and an unshakable commitment to creating environments that speak to the soul and transcend the ordinary. She has spun a tapestry of brilliance throughout the course of her more than 20-year career, establishing herself as a visionary interior designer who captures the spirit of her customers' ambitions and transforms them into ageless, exquisite and incredibly personal settings!

"My vision in curating this one-stop experience center was rooted in 'exclusivity'—a value that has always been close to my heart when it comes to selecting what surrounds me," Ambereen explains in an exclusive interview with us, describing how she is motivated by an unwavering passion for innovative design! "During my time styling and creating houses, I frequently heard complaints about how difficult it was to find the ideal carpeting, coordinate sofas, or find décor in the appropriate proportions. I wanted to eliminate the headache of having to look for these components one at a time, which they found difficult. My goal with this area was to create a place where peo-

ple could acquire everything they needed for their homes in one place, with the added benefit of being able to customise it to their unique preferences."

For her, a home is more than just a physical building; it's a dynamic, living thing that reflects the soul, feeds the spirit and creates important connections. She is renowned for her skillful fusion of aesthetics, utility and emotional intelligence! She puts her entire being into making rooms that are classic, elegant and incredibly intimate with each project. "I am trying to reinvent luxury for the contemporary day, fusing sustainability with style. I accept this progress while maintaining my distinctive elegance as the world shifts toward conscious living! My strategy supports Indian craftsmen and craftsmanship by incorporating locally sourced and environmentally safe materials. To ensure lifetime and save waste, I place a high priority on quality, robustness and classic design. Luxury is not only beautiful but also significant because each item is carefully crafted to reflect the distinct preferences, lifestyles and values."

From conception to completion, she has gained critical praise in the design community thanks to her painstaking attention to detail, unshakable dedication to perfection and sincere passion for design. The founder continues, "It is situated at the nexus of modern elegance and legacy in this dynamic setting. Despite extraordinary talent for creating intricate and varied designs, I have

always thought Indian artists are underappreciated. I like to embrace international aesthetics while honouring this expertise. Because we are rooted in India's rich cultural heritage, we integrate international influences—from Scandinavian minimalism to Mediterranean warmth—and

work with international artisans to curate exclusive handcrafted pieces. We also refine traditional motifs, textures and patterns to suit individual preferences and needs, guaranteeing a seamless fusion of classic artistry and contemporary luxury."

Finding the ideal balance between classic elegance and modern designs is crucial, even though trends come and go frequently, lasting only a few months. So her design strategy is based on an 80-20 approach, with 80% of her collection devoted to timeless, enduring pieces and 20% incorporating current trends through accessories like cushions, throws and other decor elements. She places a strong emphasis on timeless silhouettes and neutral colours. This guarantees that her areas will always be effortlessly fashionable while making room for new, seasonal additions!

She added more context to this interview by saying, "I am thankful that I have increased my global presence while maintaining a keen awareness of the various cultures and customs that influence my designs! Every project is designed with the local climate, architecture and way of life in mind, guaranteeing a smooth fusion of style and use. Transforming visions into reality requires open communication. In order to add authenticity to each place and create settings that are not only aesthetically pleasing but also deeply entrenched in local culture and context, I work directly with local arti-

sans, suppliers and designers."

Despite being unconventional in comparison to her job in design, her teaching experience has been crucial in forming her design philosophy! She thinks that areas should be memorable, loving and supporting, regardless of how opulent, minimalist, or very practical they are. Beyond aesthetics, her goal is to design spaces that arouse feelings, stimulate the imagination and help people form deep connections with one another. Designing involves more than just form and function; it also involves creating environments that have a deeper emotional impact on people. Her mother's love of nature and her grandmother's passion for bright colours also have a big impact on her design philosophy! She was enthralled as a child by her grandmother's ability to use fabrics and flowers to evoke feelings while transforming her house into a kaleidoscope of hues and textures. She was inspired by them and used natural components, organic textures and vibrant colours to create environments that are not only eye-catching but also profoundly meaningful and personal.

Furthermore, "The foundation of it is the idea that 'home is where the heart is.' Every house has a story to tell and it is my responsibility to help clients make their come to life. I adopt a deliberate strategy, striking a balance between their own vision and my creative know-how. I investigate their values, way of life and goals through in-depth discussions to make sure that every design decision captures their spirit. I create houses that are not just aesthetically beautiful but also profoundly personal—homes that have meaning and tell a story that is all their own—by collaborating closely all along the way."

Although there are always high standards in interior design, she doesn't think perfection is the goal! Rather, she concentrates on designing environments that are visually appealing, imaginative and genuinely significant for the people occupying them. She has experienced periods of self-doubt and creativity block like any other designer. She takes a step back during those moments, looks to art, nature and other cultures for inspiration, and reminds herself that great design is about feeling and experiencing rather than just doing it perfectly. She overcame obstacles by remaining receptive to fresh concepts and having faith in the design process. Here she is, years later, demonstrating that every adventure is a teaching moment. She has developed and grown with every step and she is still thankful for the opportunity to create homes across the world.



AI & infrastructure; the drive force behind industry growth

A Year-on-Year (YoY) increase is a key financial metric that compares a company's performance over a 12-month period, measuring the percentage change in revenue, profit, or other financial indicators against the same period in the previous year. A high YoY growth rate often signifies strong business performance, driven by higher sales, improved operational efficiency, or successful expansion strategies. Unlike quarter-on-quarter (QoQ) comparisons, YoY analysis eliminates seasonal fluctuations, offering a clearer view of long-term growth trends. Companies and investors closely track YoY changes to evaluate financial health, market trends, and future growth potential.

Reflecting this strong performance, Ceinsys Tech Ltd reported a 79% YoY increase in consolidated revenue for Q3 of FY25, reaching Rs1,118 million.

The company's Earnings Before Interest, Taxes, Depreciation, and Amortization (EBITDA) saw an impressive 102% YoY growth, rising to ₹214 million, with an EBITDA margin of 19.14%. Meanwhile, Profit After Tax (PAT) grew 71% YoY, reaching Rs 178 million, highlighting enhanced profitability and sustained business momentum.

For the nine-month period ending December 31, 2024, they reported a total revenue of Rs 2,757 million, reflecting a 58% YoY increase. EBITDA for the period stood at Rs 513 million (+62% YoY), while PAT surged by 77% to Rs 414 million, underscoring the company's ability to scale operations while maintaining profitability.

As of December 31, 2024, their order book stood at an impressive ₹13,900 million, reflecting its diverse portfolio across geospatial, engineering services (53%), and technology solutions (47%).

Key contract wins include: River Linking Project, Maharashtra – Rs 3,811.8 million, IoT-based Water & Sanitation Project, Maharashtra – Rs 3,316 million, GIS Enterprise Implementation for CIDCO – Rs 291.9 million and Digital Transformation for MHADA – Rs 277.6 million. They also enhanced its financial agility, significantly reducing its working capital cycle from 237 days in March 2023 to 124 days in December 2024. In addition, Rs 2,350 million was raised in Q2-FY25 through equity issuance and share warrants, providing a strong foundation for future expansion and innovation.

In a strategic move to align with its evolving business model, Ceinsys Tech Ltd officially rebranded as CS TECH AI on January 1, 2025. This transformation reflects the company's growing emphasis on AI-driven solutions and digital advancements.

The new brand identity, supported by the tagline 'Enhancing Possibilities,' underscores CS TECH AI's commitment to leveraging cutting-edge technology across industries. With a strong financial trajectory and a robust project pipeline, the company is poised for continued success in AI-led digital transformation and engineering solutions.

As companies adapt to changing market demands, maintaining financial discipline and delivering on large-scale projects will remain critical challenges. The coming years will test how well businesses can sustain growth amid evolving technological and economic landscapes.

ICC announces prize money for Champions Trophy

PTI ■ DUBAI

Winners of the upcoming Champions Trophy (CT) will walk away with a whopping \$2.24 Million cash reward after the International Cricket Council (ICC) announced a 53 per cent hike in its prize money pool for the eight-team tournament starting February 19. The winners' purse would be close to 20 crore in Indian currency. The runners-up will receive half the amount, \$1.12 Million (INR 9.72 Crore), while each losing semi-finalist will take home \$560,000 (INR 4.86 Crore). The total prize pool has increased to \$6.9 Million (₹60 Crore approx). "The substantial prize pot underscores the ICC's ongoing commitment to investing in the sport and maintaining the global prestige of our events," ICC chairman Jay Shah said in a statement ahead of the tournament which will be held in Pakistan and the UAE. Each group stage win would



be worth over \$34,000 (INR 30 Lakh) for the victorious team. Teams finishing in fifth or sixth place will receive \$350,000 each (INR three Crore), while the seventh and eighth-placed sides will take home \$140,000 (INR 1.2

Crore). Additionally, all eight teams will receive a guaranteed \$125,000 each (INR 1.08 Crore) for participating in the event. This tournament marks the first time Pakistan will host an ICC event since 1996.

However, India will play all their matches in Dubai owing to security concerns related to travelling to Pakistan. Rohit Sharma's men will begin their campaign on February 20 against Bangladesh. The Pakistan leg will feature games in Karachi,

Lahore and Rawalpindi. The 2025 edition features eight teams split into two groups of four, with the top two from each group advancing to the semi-finals. "The ICC Men's Champions Trophy 2025 represents a pivotal moment for cricket, reviving a tournament that highlights the pinnacle of ODI talent, where every match is critical," the ICC chairman emphasised in his statement. "Beyond the financial incentive, this tournament ignites fierce competition, captivates fans worldwide, and plays a vital role in fostering the growth and long-term sustainability of cricket for future generations," Shah added. The men's Champions Trophy was held every four years from 2009 to 2017 before a COVID disruption and deliberations on its relevance led to it being postponed. The tournament was first introduced as a biennial event in 1998. The women's Champions Trophy will make its debut in 2027 in the T20 format.

Injury rules out Ben Sears from Champions Trophy

PTI ■ CHRISTCHURCH

Pacer Ben Sears has been ruled out of the Champions Trophy (CT) due to a hamstring injury, a significant setback for New Zealand ahead of the ICC event which kicks off on February 19. New Zealand Cricket (NZC) has named Jacob Duffy as Sears' replacement. "Sears felt some pain in his left hamstring at the team's first training in Karachi on Wednesday and a subsequent scan revealed a minor tear that would require at least two weeks' rehabilitation," NZC said in a statement. "The rehabilitation timeframe means that Sears would likely be available for only the team's final Group A match against India in Dubai, and so the decision was made to rule him out," Sears' absence has paved the way for Duffy, who is currently with the squad for the ODI Tri-Series against Pakistan and South Africa. "We're all really feeling for Ben. It's always tough being ruled



out of a major event at such a late stage, and it's especially tough in Ben's case given it would have been his first major ICC event," said New Zealand head coach Gary Stead. "The timeframes for Ben to be fit to play again meant he would likely miss the majority of the group stage, and given the short nature of the tournament, we felt it was appropriate to bring in a player who is fully fit and ready to go." "Ben is a player with huge potential and given the short rehabilitation timeframe, we're sure he'll be fit and raring to go for the home series against

Pakistan back in New Zealand." On Duffy's inclusion, Stead said, "Jacob showed with his performances in the recent home series against Sri Lanka that he is more than capable at international level. "He's been part of the squad for the ODI Tri-Series so he's fully acclimatised and he's got plenty of experience in these conditions and is fit and ready to go." "He's another player who will be experiencing his first senior ICC event, so it will be an exciting few weeks ahead for him."



India lose to Japan 0-3 in quarterfinals of BAMTC

PTI ■ QINGDAO

H Pranoy fought valiantly, but India succumbed to a 0-3 defeat against a second-string Japan in the quarterfinals of the Badminton Asia Mixed Team Championships (BAMTC), ending their campaign on a disappointing note here on Friday. India, the 2023 bronze medalists in Dubai, struggled to find their rhythm, and trailed 0-1 after going down in the mixed doubles. Dhruv Kapila and Tanisha Crasto, ranked 37th in the world, showed resilience before going down 13-21, 21-17, 13-21 to world number 12 Hiroki Midorikawa and Natsu Saito. With PV Sindhu sidelined due to a hamstring injury, India faced an uphill task against Tomoka Miyazaki, who has quickly risen to world number 8 following her triumph at the 2022 World Junior Championships. World number 31 Malvika Bansod, stepping in for Sindhu, put up a brave fight, especially in the second game, but struggled to match the control and consistency of her younger opponent and lost 12-21, 19-21, leaving India 0-2 behind. It all came down to Pranoy to keep India alive, but despite a determined effort, the 32-year-old, returning after a long

break and struggling with early-season form, couldn't sustain the pressure against world number 16 Kenta Nishimoto. The Japanese star sealed the rubber with a 21-14, 15-21, 21-12 victory in 1 hour and 17 minutes. India will be disappointed with the loss, especially as Japan did not field their full-strength team, with several top players absent. Japan were the inaugural edition champions in 2017 and were runners-up in 2019. Miyazaki vs Malvika Miyazaki, leading the new-look Japanese team, was sharp and precise, quickly surging to an 11-3 lead after Malvika hit long. Despite some good net play from the left-handed Indian, Miyazaki's cross-court drops and winners kept Malvika on the back foot. Malvika narrowed the gap to 12-19, capitalising on unforced errors from Miyazaki. However, two mistakes from the Indian allowed the Japanese to take the first game. The second game was more competitive as Malvika took a 5-3 lead, engaging in tight rallies. She managed a slim 11-10 advantage after Miyazaki went long. Malvika stayed sharp, not allowing her opponent to play her usual drops freely, moving to 17-15.

Playing 10 months a year will lead to more injuries: Kapil Dev

PTI ■ KOLKATA

World Cup-winning captain Kapil Dev on Friday expressed concern over the rising number of injuries among Indian cricketers, attributing it to the demanding schedule that keeps players in action for almost 10 months each year. The National Cricket Academy in Bengaluru has turned into a rehabilitation hub, with players spending more time recovering than training. The latest casualty being India pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah who was forced to sit out of the second innings of the final Test in Sydney due to a back injury. Initially named in the Champions Trophy (CT) squad, Bumrah has now been ruled out. Mohammed Shami, India's top wicket-taker in the 2023 ODI World Cup (24 wickets), suffered a leg injury post-final and underwent surgery. His 14-month recovery ruled



him out of the BGT series, which India lost for the first time in a decade. Shami's absence left Bumrah without a reliable bowling partner. "The only thing that worries me is that they play for 10 months a year -- injuries will be much more common," the 1983 World Cup-winning skipper said at the Tata Steel Golf prize distribution ceremony here. Asked whether Bumrah would be missed in CT, Kapil urged players to focus on

supporting each other rather than dwelling on injured players. "Why talk about someone who is not in the team? It's a team game, and the team has to win, not individuals. This is not badminton, tennis, or golf; we are playing a team sport in the Champions Trophy. If we play as a team, we will definitely win," said the 66-year-old. "You never want your main players to get injured, but if it happens, you can't do

anything about it. Good luck to my Indian team -- go and play well," he added. India will begin their Champions Trophy campaign against Bangladesh in Dubai on February 20. Kapil said he's excited to see so much rising talents in the Indian cricket team these days. "When you see the youngsters, their confidence is unbelievable. We didn't have this much confidence when we were young. Good luck to them." A known golf enthusiast and the current PGTI president, Kapil also made a playful pitch for the sport. "Tell everyone to play golf. If they are not playing cricket, they should come and play golf. If they do, their performance will be better. There is a lot of fun in golf." Emphasising on the importance of infrastructure for young golfers, he said: "If young players get the right facilities, they will improve. We are trying our best."



We trained plenty for India tour: McCullum

PTI ■ AHMEDABAD

England's head coach Brendon McCullum has dismissed suggestions that his team did not prepare adequately during their white-ball tour of India, calling such claims "factually incorrect". The New Zealand great was responding to criticism that emerged during TV commentary for the third ODI, where Ravi Shastri and Kevin Pietersen suggested that, apart from Joe Root, England's players had not trained during the ODI series that India swept 3-0. "Firstly, it's factually incorrect, the whole statement that we don't train," McCullum told 'talkSPORT' after England's third ODI defeat here on Wednesday. "We've trained plenty right throughout, and guys have come from a lot of cricket as well. I think it's an easy thing to have as a throwaway line that guys don't train enough when the results aren't right. While England had trained before the first match in Nagpur, they opted against formal sessions ahead of the second and third ODIs in Cuttack and Ahmedabad. England suffered a 142-run defeat to India in their final ODI before the Champions Trophy slated in Pakistan and Dubai next week. The ODI series loss came after a 1-4 drubbing by India in the T20I rubber. McCullum also pointed out the injury setbacks to Jacob

Bethell (hamstring) and Jamie Smith (calf). "We've got a style and a method that we believe in. We've got guys who are battling injuries and trying to make sure that we've got enough bodies out on the field, knowing that we've got a huge assignment coming up in a week or two. "Ultimately it's factually incorrect what's been said and we'll stay true to what we believe in," he asserted. England's Test coach McCullum, who took charge of the white-ball side before the India series, also stressed the importance of fostering a positive team environment despite recent setbacks. "Ultimately, you're judged on results... From our point of view, we've got to strip away the fear of failure that results can bring," he said. "Guys are fiercely determined and competitive... How do you allow an environment to provide the freedom and clarity of thought to go out there and allow your talent to come out?" he asked. England will be in UAE for a short break before beginning their Champions Trophy campaign against Australia in Lahore on February 22. McCullum said the squad-building will continue over the next week as well. "We'll give the guys a fresh-up in Abu Dhabi, make sure all the bodies are fit and ready to go, and have a full squad to pick from come that first game against Australia," he said.

Mourinho's Fenerbahce beats Anderlecht 3-0 in Europa League playoff

PTI ■ LONDON

José Mourinho's Fenerbahce might have only just squeezed into the Europa League knockout playoff round but it is already on the brink of the round of 16. Fenerbahce dominated to beat Anderlecht 3-0 on Thursday and take a comprehensive lead to Belgium for the second leg next week. Two of Mourinho's former clubs, Porto and Roma, drew 1-1 in Europe's second-tier competition. Fenerbahce only just reached the playoffs by placing 24th in the new 36-standings format — the last qualification place, and on a tiebreaker of goal difference. Anderlecht had finished 10th, only missing out on automatic progression to the last-16 by goal difference.

Fenerbahce took the lead in the 11th minute Thursday. Anderlecht failed to clear a corner and the ball was put back to the area where Yusuf Akçicek nodded it on for Dusan Tadic to head into the net. Edin Dzeko doubled his team's advantage shortly before halftime following good work from Filip Kostic down the left flank. Dzeko's initial shot was blocked by Anderlecht defender Lucas Hey but the veteran forward fired home the rebound. Youssef En-Nesyri added a third with a powerful header in the 57th minute and Fenerbahce missed several chances to extend its advantage. Notably, Yusuf Akçicek's header was deflected onto the post — it would have been the 19-year-old's first career goal, after recording

his first-ever assist in the first half. Dutch club AZ Alkmaar also has a healthy advantage to take into next week's second leg after it beat 10-man Galatasaray 4-1. **Dybala injured:** Key Roma forward Paulo Dybala limped off in the first half of the match in Portugal with a knee injury. Dybala had yelled out in agony when his knee felt the full force of Porto midfielder Alan Varela's boot in the 20th minute but the Argentina World Cup winner had played on for another 15 minutes before admitting defeat. Roma took the lead with practically the last kick of the first half, with defender Zeki Celik scoring his first goal for the club. Porto leveled against the run of play in the 67th minute through Francisco Moura's deflected shot.



Roma midfielder Bryan Cristante was sent off five minutes later following a

second booking. **Teenager scores for Ajax** Ajax won 2-0 at Union

Saint-Gilloise, with 16-year-old Jorthy Mokio netting his side's second goal.

Mokio scored in the 71st minute. A corner was cleared but only as far as the Belgium Under-21 international on the edge of the area and he volleyed it in for his first goal for the senior Ajax team. Mokio, aged 16 years and 350 days, became the youngest player to score in a knockout stage match in the Europa League, UEFA said. Christian Rasmussen netted the opener in 59th. Elsewhere, Real Sociedad won 2-1 at Midtjylland and Ferencváros beat Viktoria Plzen 1-0. Romanian team FCSB came from behind to win 2-1 at PAOK and a stoppage-time penalty saw Twente beat Bodo/Glimt by the same scoreline. **Another youngest goalscorer record** Sixteen-year-old Michael Noonan netted on his

Shamrock Rovers debut to help the Irish team win 1-0 at 10-man Molde. That made Noonan, at 16 years, 197 days, the youngest-ever goalscorer in a European club competition, his team said. Noonan scored from close range in the 57th minute. He also forced a red card for Molde defender Valdemar Lund for a last-minute foul, three minutes before halftime. Vikingur Reykjavik became the first-ever Icelandic club to win a European knockout match by upsetting Panathinaikos 2-1. The match was held in Helsinki as no stadium in Iceland met the requirements to host the game. Armandas Kucys scored twice but also missed a late penalty as Celje drew 2-2 against 10-man APOEL.

OH MY LAILA! – A LESSON IN HOW NOT TO MAKE A FILM

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Vishwak Sen's latest film, *Laila*, released on Valentine's Day, marking his first film of the year. Known for his back-to-back releases, Vishwak has been taking on diverse roles, and in *Laila*, he attempts something unconventional by playing a female character. While legendary actors like Kamal Haasan, Rajendra Prasad and VK Nareesh have successfully portrayed female roles in Telugu cinema before, *Laila* struggles to make an impact. Directed by Ram Narayan and featuring Akanksha Sharma as the female lead, the film has also been in the news for the controversy surrounding actor Prudhvi's political comments.

STORY

Sonu (Vishwak Sen) runs Sita Beauty Parlour in Hyderabad's Old City, treating it as more than just a business—he sees it as a sentimental venture. One day, he helps a customer financially and allows her to use his name as a brand for her homemade oil, hoping to boost her business. Meanwhile, Rustum (Abhimanyu Singh), a butcher searching for a bride, sees a woman (Kamakshi) at Sonu's parlour and decides to marry her. However, after the wedding, he realizes her appearance was entirely due to makeup and blames Sonu for the deception.

During Rustum's wedding, several guests—including a local MLA—fall sick due to food poisoning. Investigations reveal that they had used Sonu's branded oil, leading the police to take action against him. Adding to Sonu's troubles, a police inspector (Prudhvi) with a personal grudge sees this as the perfect opportunity to target him. To escape the situation, Sonu disguises himself as a woman named Laila. How he navigates the chaos and what ultimately unfolds forms the rest of the story.

ANALYSIS

The concept of a male protagonist donning a female avatar is not new in Telugu cinema. However, success in such roles depends on how well the transformation is woven into the story. Unfortunately, *Laila* falls flat in this regard. Director Ram Narayan fails to present an engaging narrative, resulting in a weak screenplay that struggles to justify the protagonist's female disguise.

One of the biggest questions is how an actor like Vishwak Sen agreed to be part of this film. In today's industry, producers are often criticised for blindly investing in projects based solely on an actor-director combination, without evaluating the story's potential. *Laila* serves as a prime example of this flawed approach. The film lacks a compelling story, engaging moments, or even decent humor. What was intended to be an entertaining comedy instead turns into an outdated, adult-themed film with



CAST: Vishwak Sen, Akanksha Sharma, Abhimanyu Singh, Prudhviraj, Prudhvi, Vineeth Kumar, Kamakshi Bhaskarla, Sunisith, and others

MUSIC DIRECTOR: Leon James

CINEMATOGRAPHER: Richard Prasad

PRODUCER: Sahu Garapati

DIRECTOR: Ram Narayan

RATING: 0.5/5

mediocre execution. From start to finish, it feels more like an endurance test than an engaging cinematic experience.

While cinema allows for creative liberties, there still needs to be some logic, especially when entertainment value is lacking. The film also suffers from poor scene transitions, making it difficult for the audience to stay invested. Rather than feeling like a well-crafted feature film, *Laila* resembles a low-budget YouTube web series.

PERFORMANCES

None of the actors manage to make a lasting impression. Vishwak Sen, portraying both Sonu and his female alter ego Laila, fails to bring depth to either role. His performance lacks conviction and his portrayal of Laila neither amuses nor engages the audience. What could have been an exciting transformation ends up feeling forced and unconvincing.

Akanksha Sharma, the female lead, serves little purpose beyond adding glamour to the film. Abhimanyu Singh, Prudhvi (Pelli fame), Prudhvi (30 Years), and Kamakshi Bhaskarla contribute little to the story. The film also features YouTube personality Sunisith, but his presence does not enhance the narrative. Additionally, the decision to cast Hindi actors for Telugu character roles, along with their poorly dubbed dialogues, further diminishes the film's impact.

When a male actor takes on a female role, there needs to be a strong and justifiable reason behind it, coupled with an

engaging script. Unfortunately, *Laila* fails on both fronts.

TECHNICAL ASPECTS

Musically, *Laila* fails to impress, and even the cinematography remains ordinary. The dialogues, particularly the double-meaning ones, add to the film's overall mediocrity rather than enhancing the humour.

For any actor, there are films that elevate their career and others that become forgettable missteps. *Laila* is undoubtedly one of the weakest films in Vishwak Sen's career. From its outdated story and unimpressive dialogues to the lackluster screenplay, weak music, and unremarkable cinematography—everything falls short. The writing department also deserves criticism for failing to deliver a strong narrative.

While the director shoulders much of the blame, the producer and actor also bear responsibility for backing such an uninspired project. A film should either evoke emotions or provide entertainment—*Laila* does neither. Hopefully, Vishwak Sen makes better choices in his upcoming films.

VERDICT

Laila is a disappointing attempt at comedy, weighed down by an outdated story, weak screenplay, and subpar execution. With no memorable moments or engaging performances, the film stands out as one of Vishwak Sen's least impressive projects. Those looking for entertainment would be better off skipping this one, as it offers little beyond a frustrating cinematic experience.

Brahma Anandam

Vennela Kishore shines in this slow narration drama

PNS/HYDERABAD

The real-life father-son duo, Veteran comedian Brahmanandam and Raja Gowtham play the roles of grandfather and grandson, respectively in this film that was released on Friday. Rahul Yadav Nakka, who has previously produced acclaimed films like Agent Sai Srinivas Atreya, Malli Rava, and Masooda, is the producer for this film. With Chiranjeevi supporting the film and the promotional videos generating interest, expectations were high.

STORY

Brahma aka Brahmanandam (Raja Gowtham) is a theatre artiste, living in an apartment with his friend Giri (Vennela Kishore). Having lost his parents, he lives alone and dreams of making it big in the film industry but struggles to get opportunities. One day, he gets an offer to perform in Delhi, but the organizers demand Rs 6 lakhs for his participation. Desperate for funds, he seeks help from his grandfather Ananda Ram Murthy (Brahmanandam), who lives in an old age home.

Murthy offers him a deal—Brahma must accompany him to a village near Kodada and stay with him for a few days, after which he will transfer his 6-acre land to him. Brahma agrees and, along with Giri, travels with Murthy to the village. What follows is a series of events—did Brahma get the land, or did Murthy have other plans? What is Murthy's love story with Jyothi (Talluri Rameshwari)? What's the conflict between the sarpanch (Rajiv Kanakala) and his brother (Sampath Raj)? The film unravels these answers as the story progresses.

ANALYSIS

Many young filmmakers are making their debuts with fresh concepts, and RVS Nikhil attempts to do the same with *Brahma Anandam*. However, while the film has an interesting premise, the execution falls short due to weak storytelling and inconsistent narration.

Before its release, the film was promoted as a heartfelt story about a grandson and his grandfather. However, the bond between them is not explored deeply enough. Instead, the film introduces another interesting element in the second half, but the director fails to develop it effectively. If the story had balanced both aspects well, the result could have been much better.

The first half focuses on Brahma's struggles—his life as a theatre artiste, his dream of becoming a film actor, his frustration, his girlfriend and his roommate. The narrative takes too long to establish his journey, making it feel stretched. The film picks up only after Brahma meets Murthy and heads to the village. The second half, set in the village, has some engaging moments but is weighed down by forced subplots.

Certain portions work well, with good dialogues and occasional humor, but other elements feel unnecessary—such as Sampath Raj's character and his bizarre goal of passing the 10th grade. This subplot is completely illogical and adds no value to the story. The biggest



CAST: Brahmanandam, Raja Gowtham, Priya Vadlamani, Vennela Kishore, Divija, Sampath Raj, Prabhakar, Rajiv Kanakala, Talluri Rameshwari and others
CINEMATOGRAPHER: Mitesh Parvaneni
MUSIC DIRECTOR: Sandilya Peesapati
PRODUCER: Rahul Yadav Nakka
WRITER AND DIRECTOR: RVS Nikhil
RATING: 2/5

flaw of the film is its lack of emotional depth. A story revolving around a grandson-grandfather relationship should evoke strong emotions, but the film fails to create that connection.

Some scenes drag on unnecessarily, making the pacing feel sluggish. For instance, the repeated conversations about the land, the prolonged bus journey scene between Raja Gowtham and Brahmanandam, and forced comedic elements slow down the narrative. Additionally, Brahma's sudden transition into a teacher in the village feels random and disconnected from the main plot.

While the last 20 minutes of the film introduce an interesting twist, the director fails to establish it effectively throughout the film. Murthy's love story with Jyothi, which could have added emotional weight, is underdeveloped and does not create the intended impact. The slow narration and stretched sequences make the film feel more like a television serial than a theatrical release. Given its simplistic execution and low-budget production values, it seems more suited for an OTT release than a big-screen experience.

PERFORMANCES

Vennela Kishore steals the show with his natural comedic timing, providing

some much-needed laughs. Brahmanandam plays a dual-shaded role, balancing his signature humor with a serious side. While he delivers a decent performance, his character's emotional depth is underutilised. Raja Gowtham puts in an earnest effort, especially in the last half-hour, making it one of his better roles. Rajiv Kanakala performs well in his role, but Sampath Raj's character feels unnecessary and unrelated to the core story. Priya Vadlamani does a fine job but has limited screen time, appearing only in the first half. Divija, Aishwarya, Prabhakar, and others provide adequate support.

TECHNICAL ASPECTS

The music is average, with no stand-out tracks that elevate the emotional quotient. The cinematography is functional, capturing the village setting decently but lacking visual flair. While some dialogues work well in certain places, they could have been sharper. The editing could have been tighter, especially in the dragged-out portions, to improve the film's pacing.

FINAL VERDICT

Brahma Anandam is a film with potential, but weak storytelling and slow narration prevent it from reaching its full impact. While it has a few good moments, inconsistent pacing, lack of emotional depth, and forced subplots drag it down. With a tighter script and better execution, it could have been a heartwarming entertainer. As it stands, it feels like an overextended TV serial rather than a compelling theatrical experience.

It is good on paper, but when translated onto the big screen, the slow narration and lack of emotional connection values, make it a disappointing watch. Though the film has a solid concept and some engaging moments, it ultimately fails to deliver.

Watching this film is like watching a TV serial!

'RAMAM RAGHAVAM IS AN EMOTIONAL FATHER-SON DRAMA'

Actor Dhanraj, widely known for his work on the *Jabardasth* show, has now ventured into direction with *Ramam Raghavam*. In addition to directing, he also plays the lead role alongside acclaimed actor Samuthirakani in this emotional father-son drama. The film, produced by Prithvi Polavarampu, is set to release on February 21. The story revolves around a father who dreams of seeing his son reach great heights and the emotional journey that unfolds between them. Dhanraj, who has previously proved his versatility as both a comedian and a serious actor, is now stepping into the director's chair for the first time with this heartfelt drama.

The trailer of *Ramam Raghavam* was officially launched on Friday by actor Nani. Speaking at the event, Nani shared his admiration for Dhanraj, saying, "Dhanraj has been my acquaintance since the early days of my career and I have always recognised his talent. So, I wasn't surprised when I heard that he was directing a film." He further revealed that he initially expected Dhanraj to make a comedy film, but after watching



the trailer, he was taken on an unexpected emotional journey. Expressing his fondness for Samuthirakani's work, Nani added, "I personally admire Samuthirakani a lot; he is like family to me." He wished the entire

team great success. Dhanraj, elated by the trailer launch, expressed his gratitude, saying, "This is my first time trying something different—an emotional father-son drama. I hope the audience appreciates it."



Kobali season 2 confirmed

The latest web series *Kobali*, streaming on Disney+ Hotstar, has received an overwhelming response from audiences across India, including strong appreciation from the North. Directed by Revanth Levaka, the series is set against a faction backdrop and is packed with intense action sequences. Following its success, the makers have now officially confirmed that *Kobali* will return for a second season.

Actor Ravi Prakash, known for his character roles in mainstream Telugu cinema, played the lead role in *Kobali*. Reflecting on the journey, he shared, "I have been in the industry for 20 years and always wanted to create something different. When I first heard this story in a coffee shop, I loved it, but I wasn't sure if it would take off. There

were no big stars or major selling points. However, Hotstar trusted us, and the viewers gave us success. This proves that honest work always pays off."

Actor Rocky Singh also played a significant role in the series. Additionally, senior actor Venkat, known for Sri Sita Ramula Kalyanam Chootamu Raarandi, made a brief appearance in the final episode. His character is set to have a much larger role in Season 2, where the real story behind the killings will be revealed. Speaking about the show's success, Venkat said, "This web series proves that good content matters more than big names." The producers expressed their excitement, stating that while they expected the series to do well, the response has far exceeded their expectations.

ARCHANA IYER AS DEVI IN SHAMBHALA

Actress Archana Iyer, widely recognized for her role in the critically acclaimed *Krishnamma*, is playing the female lead in the supernatural horror thriller *Shambhala: A Mystical World*. The makers reveal character posters one by one of Aadi Saikumar and Swasika and now Archana Iyer's look was unleashed.

Archana's tense expression and the somber mood of the surroundings suggest that her character named Devi is caught up in an intense, supernatural event, hinting at the film's chilling plot. Aadi Saikumar plays the role of a geo-scientist in this one, directed by Ugandhar Muni and produced by Rajasekhara Annabhimoju and Mahidhar Reddy.

The movie needs lots of graphics as it is a supernatural subject, so the makers are not taking any risk and putting a lot of money on it. The shoot of the movie is presently progressing in RFC, Hyderabad.

