

Editorial

Myanmar: India's strategic dilemma

On the brink

Generally known for its turquoise waters, pristine beaches and coral reefs, the name of the Maldives as a destination for Indian tourists is currently mud. The archipelago's complex political scenario has raised concerns not only within the country but also in the larger geopolitical landscape. The looming impeachment motion against Md Muizzu, the Maldives President, coupled with a shocking fall in Indian tourist numbers, underscores a shifting dynamic in the Indian Ocean region. The developments have triggered apprehensions about the country's stability. Given its strategic location, the internal political dynamics are crucial not only for the Maldives but also for the Indian Ocean region. As China seeks to expand its influence, India finds itself at a strategic crossroads, requiring thoughtful and proactive measures to counterbalance these developments. The core of the problem is Muizzu's desire to distance himself from India and align with China. The Maldives is the newest country to fall prey to Chinese designs: The dragon has been steadily increasing its economic and infrastructural footprint in the region by way of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with significant investments in key projects. This has raised concerns in India about China's expanding influence in a region traditionally considered India's sphere of influence. The Maldives has asked India to remove its military base, which is a big loss for India and will make China stronger in the region. Though India has flexed its soft power and dissuaded its tourists from going to Maldives, that approach may not work with China's support to the Maldives. But the position of the Maldives has become a little untenable as it earns the major share of revenue from tourism; the recent decline in Indian tourist numbers has hit it hard. Holding the top spot just three weeks ago, Indian tourist arrivals have now slipped to the fifth position. India and the Maldives share ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious and commercial links steeped in antiquity. The relations have been close, cordial and multi-dimensional: India was among the first nations to recognise the Maldives after its independence in 1965 and to establish diplomatic relations with it. Now, India must adopt a nuanced and strategic approach to maintain influence in the Maldives and counterbalance China's expanding footprint. Strengthening diplomatic ties with our neighbour is paramount. Besides, India should bolster economic cooperation by offering viable alternatives to Chinese investments. Initiatives that promote sustainable development and address the Maldives' economic concerns can help strengthen economic ties. It goes without saying that India would have to back the pro-India Maldivian leaders; for example, the pro-India Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) has recently claimed a landslide in Male's mayoral election. This is indeed a good sign for India and, if Muizzu is impeached, India could have the chance to re-establish its cordial relations with the Maldives that it has always had.

Worried over the influx of refugees and insurgents from across the porous border owing to the unabated crisis, the Indian government has decided to fence the Myanmar border to discontinue the free movement regime (FMR), as with the Bangladesh frontier which may act as a deterrent and preventive measure to control the existing menace. India must act cautiously: Given Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu's honeymoon with China, India needs to evolve a realistic strategic blueprint in line with the 'Neighbourhood First' policy to save Myanmar from China's overtures to the junta through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), besides supporting border areas rebels by brokering peace between warring groups and army generals in this violence-plagued country. India took a cautious stand when the army, known as Tatmadaw, engineered a coup on February 1, 2021. India had diplomatically and indirectly supported the junta, refraining from openly supporting the democratic forces led by Aung San Suu Kyi, which has now put it in a dilemma. India faces the challenge of checkmating China, which is dan-

gerous because it supports some ethnic groups. In this complex scenario, "OPERA-



TION 1027" was undertaken in December 2023 by 'The Three Brotherhood Alliance' comprising the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, AA and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, which had shaken the junta. An offensive against the junta had dealt it a devastating blow, prompting China to support it. 'The Three Brotherhood Alliance' had captured key roads and military posts, hitting the cash-strapped junta's revenues and obstructing troop movements. Reports from the conflict zone suggested that the surprise attacks on the

Shan state were followed by the AA opening a front against the army in its base in Rakhine state

thereby challenging the junta. The Brotherhood is Junta's biggest challenge: The alliance has

been successful in cutting off the junta from a stretch of land that handles about 40% of bilateral border trade with China; around \$1 billion of the trade comes from natural gas piped into China. The fighting erupted recently in Shan, Kachin and Chin states, which are situated in the country's north as well as in Rakhine state in the west. Three Brotherhood fighters have claimed they have overrun dozens of military posts across the region and seized major roads leading in and out besides forcing the surrender of over 100 soldiers of the

Myanmar army, demoralizing the junta. The armed groups have taken the fight to the Tatmadaw in Kayah State in the country's east which is important to the Myanmar army. India must rethink its strategy: India will need to rethink its old-fashioned position towards Myanmar before the fall-out threatens its interests. India feels the US should seize the moment to enhance engagement with India in Myanmar and work to alleviate the humanitarian situation thereby supporting the anti-junta forces and establishing a federal democracy. India has tried to maintain equidistance between the military generals and pro-democracy political parties to ensure that the junta does not fall into China's lap. Junta to hit back: The army generals were not ready for the alliance's huge offensive, which set off a chain reaction, cornering the junta. Armed groups are reported to have taken control of fifty towns and villages and 100 posts. Army chief Hlaing has promised to undertake a counterattack on terrorists in the north, which might expose the junta's weakness. Armed rebellion by ethnic armed organiza-

tions has dealt a diplomatic blow to the army generals who have been exposed; China will be directly impacted. The Ukraine war had come as a blessing in disguise for the junta as the US and EU were preoccupied with it. The Hamas attack on Israel has further alienated Western powers from Myanmar but the attack by armed groups may change the entire scenario. The National Unity Government (NUG) formed by opposition lawmakers in Burma is considered close to the West, which is feeling encouraged after the successful offensive by the armed groups. China's double speak: China has urged Myanmar to restore border stability even as the junta's conflict with armed groups intensifies. Myanmar has been asked by China to 'cooperate' with it to maintain stability on the common borders. China's official stand is intriguing: "As a friendly neighbour, China sincerely hopes that Myanmar will restore stability and development as soon as possible, and supports all parties in Myanmar to properly resolve differences within the constitutional and legal framework and achieve reconciliation through dialogue."

Tread the WTO quagmire with caution

In a meeting of the Committee on Agriculture (CoA) of the World Trade Organization (WTO) – held on October 2, 2023, in Geneva, the European Union (EU) agreed to consider India's demand for a permanent solution to public stockholding (PSH) program for food security. This is a significant change of stance since March 2023, when the EU along with the USA and Canada had challenged it. The issue will be taken up for deliberation in the 13th ministerial conference (MC) of the WTO (World Trade Organization), scheduled from February 26-29, 2024 in Abu Dhabi. The MC is the highest decision-making body of the global trade watchdog (read: WTO) that includes 164 member countries. While, the USA and EU countries want a comprehensive discussion on agriculture encompassing the value-chain, market access, and export restrictions besides the PSH program, India has categorically stated "it won't negotiate any other issue in the agriculture sector till a permanent solution on PSH is found". It has also conveyed that support measures given to its poor farmers like in-

put subsidies such as on electricity, irrigation, fertilizer and even direct transfers are non-negotiable. Under the PSH program, government agencies like the Food Corporation of India (FCI) buy agri-produce such as wheat, rice/paddy, and coarse cereals from farmers at the minimum support price (MSP) and distribute it at a subsidized price of Rs 2/3/1 per kg respectively to meet the needs of India's poor and vulnerable population under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) that was enacted in 2013. From January 1, 2023, these staple foods are given to the beneficiaries 'free'; initially in force till December 31, 2023, this arrangement has been continued for five years till December 31, 2028. The excess of MSP plus handling, storage and distribution cost over the realization from the sale (that is, Rs 2/3/1 per kg prior to January 1, 2023, and 'zero' thereafter) is paid as a subsidy from the Union Budget. This can be bifurcated into two components (a) subsidy to the farmer, which is the excess of MSP of, say, rice over its international price also known as External Reference Price (ERP) in

WTO parlance and (b) subsidy to the food consumer, being the excess of ERP over the price paid which currently is 'nil'. The WTO is concerned with (a) branded as "product-specific" subsidies. It requires some explanation. The international price/ERP of any commodity is based on global demand-supply forces and is determined in a competitive manner. All farmers irrespective of their country of location are expected to receive this price. In case, because of the intervention by the government of a member country say India, the farmers therein receive a price/MSP higher than this, they are presumed to have been subsidized to the extent of excess of MSP over ERP. The WTO is also concerned with subsidies on agricultural inputs like fertilisers, seeds, irrigation, power, etc., referred to as "non-product specific" subsidies. The developed countries argue that such subsidies distort international trade; hence these need to be curbed. Their argument found acceptance at the WTO. Accordingly, under the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA), the total of product and non-product-specific

subsidies or aggregate measurement support (AMS) is capped at 10 per cent of the value of agricultural production for a developing country (for developed countries, this threshold is 5 per cent). If a member country gives AMS over 10 per cent, it is a violation. The AoA came into force in 1995. For India, until 2005, MSP was less than ERP. Thereafter, MSP has been higher than ERP and, in the last decade, this gap widened. During 2018-19, in the case of rice, for instance, AMS was at 11 per cent, exceeding the 10 per cent cap. During 2019-20, it was even higher at 13.7 per cent. For over a decade or so, India along with other developing countries has been making efforts at WTO to wriggle out of the situation. In the 9th Ministerial Conference (MC) held in Bali (2013), it secured sanction for a "peace clause". It said, "If a developing country gives AMS in excess of 10 percent, no member will challenge this until 2017 when the WTO would look for a permanent solution." In the General Council (GC) held in December 2014, this sanction was modified to say "The peace clause will

stay till a permanent solution was found." However, the peace clause comes with several riders, such as the submission of data on food procurement, stockholding, distribution and subsidies. These also include establishing that subsidies are not "trade distorting." Besides, programs implemented after 2013 are not covered under the ambit of the 'peace clause'. India has invoked the 'peace clause' several times at the WTO for breaching the 10 per cent ceiling in case of subsidy on rice - the latest being for the marketing year 2020-21. However, developed countries have objected to such invocation. They want India to be more transparent about its PSH program and put in place safeguards to prevent 'illegitimate' exports. But, this can't go on ad infinitum. The WTO should go for a permanent solution within a time-bound manner. In fact, the MC held in Bali (2013) had implicitly given a deadline of 2017 ".....no member will challenge this until 2017 when the WTO would look for a permanent solution." Unfortunately, the GC held in December 2014

deferred it indefinitely. India has done right by insisting on a deadline now. However, its stance for the 13th MC isn't the right way to go. India is trying to delink PSH from a comprehensive look at agriculture. It is attempting to delink things that are intertwined with each other. The PSH program involves buying food from the farmers and distributing it to the beneficiaries. Here, we are talking about the entire supply chain involving procurement, handling, storage, distribution and so on. So, the issues of market access, and sale in the domestic and international markets can't be brushed aside. India's PSH program is open-ended under which the government's agencies buy the highest possible quantities of wheat and rice from the farmers at ever-increasing MSP. Since these purchases are unrelated to the requirement under the NFSA (courtesy vote bank politics), surplus stocks with agencies are inevitable which they dispose of by auctioning to private traders etc under the Open Market Sale Scheme (OMSS). Under OMSS 'all the bidders are compulsorily asked to give an undertaking that they won't export it'.

YOU WILL BE SURPRISED TO KNOW THAT IF PASTA IS CONSUMED PROPERLY, IT CAN HELP IN REDUCING WEIGHT. TODAY WE ARE GOING TO TELL YOU SOME TIPS TO MAKE HEALTHY PASTA, WHICH WILL MAKE YOUR WEIGHT LOSS JOURNEY

Keep these things in mind while making pasta, the taste will reduce weight easily



Losing extra weight is a very difficult and tiring task. For this people have to follow special diet. Usually people stick to home cooked food during their weight loss journey. But after a point home cooked food starts getting boring and people have no other option but to eat it. If you are also bored of your daily food and are

looking for some healthy and tasty option, then you can include pasta in your diet. Yes, you read it right, eating pasta leads to weight gain. But you will be surprised to know that if pasta is consumed properly, it can help in reducing weight. Today we are going to tell you some tips to make healthy pasta, which will make your weight

loss journey delicious. "Choose the right pasta- If you are consuming pasta to be healthy and lose weight, then it is important to choose the right pasta. Usually people make and eat pasta made of white flour, due to which their weight increases. Instead of pasta made of white flour, choose pasta made of millet, jowar and ragi. Pasta made

from whole grains is rich in many essential nutrients besides being delicious to eat. "Use vegetables- If you are thinking of putting on weight, then consuming only pasta can cost you dearly. That's why you use vegetables in pasta. This will increase the taste and nutrient content of the pasta and will not increase your

weight. You can add vegetables like corn, broccoli, zucchini, bell peppers, onions, olives and jalapenos to pasta. "It is important to use the right oil- Olive oil is considered the best to use for making pasta. Olive oil prevents pasta from sticking to the gut. If you do not have olive oil, you can use mustard oil.

SUMMER NAIL CARE TIPS

Summer season takes away the shine of nails, take care of them like this

THE BEAUTY OF THE HANDS COMES FROM THE SHINY NAILS, WHICH GET SNATCHED AWAY IN THE SUMMER SEASON. THAT'S WHY PEOPLE SHOULD TAKE CARE OF NAILS IN THE SUMMER SEASON. TODAY, IN THIS ARTICLE, WE ARE GOING TO TELL PEOPLE THE TIPS TO TAKE CARE OF NAILS IN THIS SEASON.



The beauty of the hands comes from the shiny nails, which get snatched away in the summer season. Along with taking care of face, hands and feet in summer, it is also necessary to take care of nails. Nail care is not just limited to beautifying the hands. Actually, hands sweat during the summer season, due to

which the risk of spreading the infection increases. In such a situation, if the nails are taken care of daily, then the risk of infection can be reduced. That's why people should clean their nails properly in the summer season. Today we are going to tell some tips, which will be very useful for you while taking care of your nails. "Keep your nails clean- Because of your nails, you can fall ill in the summer season, so always try to keep them clean. To keep the nails clean, you can wash them

with water. Just washing with water cleans the dirt of hands and nails to a great extent. You can also use soap if you want. "Apply top coat on the nails- In the summer season, our nails are more exposed to sunlight and water, due to which they become weak and break. Always keep a top coat on your nails to prevent them from getting weak. Top coat protects nails from sun and water. Apart from this, it also protects the nails from the damage caused by the chemicals present in the swimming pool.

This small carelessness of yours can be dangerous during dinner, know about it



There are many such habits in our lifestyle that make us suffer from diabetes. If you also want to avoid diabetes, then leave these habits from your lifestyle immediately. You should know that what are the mistakes you do, which increase the level of blood sugar. Today we will tell you about the same mistakes, due to which the problem of diabetes can arise. "eating curd everyday" Curd is considered an important part of our healthy diet. The nutrients present in it benefit the body in many ways. But Ayurveda says that by consuming curd daily, you will gain weight and may face problems like poor metabolism. Which causes the risk of diabetes. "overeating at night" Dinner should always be light and nutritious so that it can be easily digested. But some people eat heavy food at night. Which affects their liver. Due to which their metabolism slows down and the risk of many diseases increases. "overeating" Ayurveda experts say that if you are hungry for two rotis, then eat only one roti. Because eating more can cause you many diseases. Eating more food than your appetite can make you a victim of cholesterol, digestive problems and obesity. "not hungry, still eating" Food should be eaten only when you feel hungry.

If you see these signs on your body then your life may be in trouble

Physical illness

Feeling stuck

Loneliness

Reasons You May Feel Like Something Is Wrong With You

Trauma recovery

Overwhelmed

Mental health struggles

Blood clotting is sometimes considered good. This is because if you get hurt somewhere, clots prevent excess blood from coming out of the body. Although blood clots are sometimes dangerous too. Because due to the problem of blood clotting in the blood vessels, the organs do not get enough blood. Due to which serious problems can arise in the body. That's why today we will tell you how your life can be lost due to the formation of blood clot in some parts of the body. So let's know about him. "lungs" The heartbeat becomes faster due to the formation of a blood clot in the lungs. Blood in cough, difficulty in breathing starts. If you feel something like this, go to your doctor immediately. Because your slight negligence can increase the disease further. "Heart" When a blood clot forms in the heart, you may experience symptoms similar to a clot in the lungs. But if you have had a heart attack, you may also feel nausea and vomiting along with chest pain. "Brain" The formation of a blood clot can cause a serious blockage in the brain. In fact, without oxygen from the blood, your brain cells begin to die within minutes. A clot in your brain can cause pain on one side of the head, confusion, seizures, trouble speaking, and weakness. "Abdomen" The formation of a clot in the veins of the stomach and esophagus can lead to cuts, which can lead to bleeding.

An easygoing affair with no soul

AI is the future and co-directors Amit Joshi and Aradhana Sah bring forth a tale of an impossible love story of a man and a female robot, who is fondly known as Sifra with *Teri Baaton Mein Aisa Uljha Jiya*. But, where does it go wrong? Lack of humour in the first half and a plot line that ends up going nowhere but to a stereotypical climax that too of a love triangle. The makers, who have always believed in creating stories with social messaging, back a visionary and futuristic story this time that might stand out in the clutter but it just refuses to be a compulsory watch.

Sifra (Kriti Sanon), a human-like-female robot flies off to meet a robotic engineer Aaryan aka Aaru (Shahid Kapoor) to Delhi. Aaryan falls in love with Sifra but his aunt Dimple Kapadia doesn't approve of it at all, who generated her for human trials. Will Aaru get his lady love Sifra in the end?

The first half is too exhausting. It only has humour in parts and a funny take on an unpopular subject that might look interesting in lot of ways than expected. The interval point is predictable but second half is gullible enough. The highlight of the film is the concluding twenty minutes — Kriti's tribute to Madhuri Dixit Nene with *Dhak Dhak Karne Laga* is probably the only moment that compels to laugh out loud amidst chaos and the core conflict. Although, Joshi and Sah's attempt

Title: *Teri Baaton Mein Aisa Uljha Jiya*
Directors: Amit Joshi and Aradhana Sah
Cast: Shahid Kapoor, Kriti Sanon, Dimple Kapadia, Dharmendra, Rakesh Bedi and others
Where: In theatres near you
Rating: ★★

to make a love story like this is genuinely commendable but there's absolutely nothing much to look out for except for a couple of scenes that may lift your mood organically. The first half demands a tad bit trimming to suit the atmosphere of the film in totality.

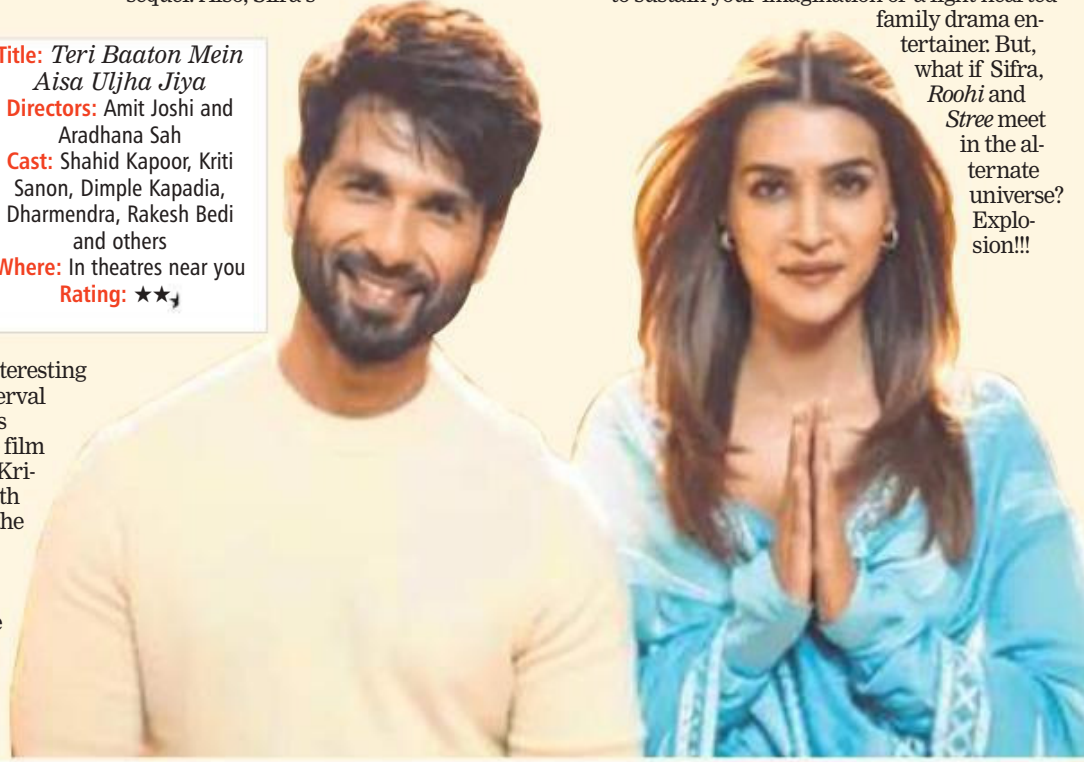
With the runtime of 143 minutes, *TBMAUJ* is a one time watch. The beauty of the film is its ensemble cast — Dharmendra, Rakesh Bedi, Dimple Kapadia etc. but the makers had always done a fabulous job with their secondary and tertiary casting, be it in *Hindi Medium* or *Luka Chhupi* in the past.

Jahnvi Kapoor's cameo is refreshing and is a good sign of hinting at the sequel. Also, Sifra's

rekindled love for Aaru despite being relaunched is equally intriguing. *TBMAUJ* is strictly an easygoing affair with no soul. The album that comprises of three groovy numbers — title track, *Laal Peeli Akhiyaan*, *Akhiyan Gulab* are quite the savoury to the not-so-engaging ride.

Shahid is a great match for a film like this and so does his performance, Kriti manages to impress especially in the second half since she has a bigger playground than the rest — courtesy producer Dinesh Vijan. The rest of the cast including Ashish Verma are bang on.

TBMAUJ is a coming of age rom-com that is flawed upto large extent but somehow bounds to sustain your imagination of a light-hearted family drama entertainer. But, what if Sifra, *Roohi* and *Stree* meet in the alternate universe? Explosion!!!



Zac Efron shines in a familiar and relatable tale

Wrestling forms, the backdrop of this sports film, which occasionally borrows tropes from this well-worn genre. Here, instead of a competitive, straightforward sports film, the narrative is more of a drama about brotherhood, the weight of irrational expectations, and the noxious influence of an autocratic father.

Set during the late 1970s and early '80s in Texas, the film is a tough, heart-breaking story loosely based on the life of the American wrestling dynasty - The Von Erichs - Parents Fritz aka Jack and Dorris (Holt McCallany & Maura Tierney), and their five sons; Jake, Kevin (Zac Efron), Kerry (Jeremy Allen White), David (Harris Dickinson), and Mike (Stanley Simmons). It tells us what happens when the myth of "being great" runs into the reality of a dysfunctional family.

The film begins with black and white frames circa the 1960s with Jack in the wrestling ring aggressively displaying his signature move, the Iron Claw, a vice grip that he applies to demolish his opponent, leaving him in a pulpy mess. A few moments later, in the parking lot, he assures his wife that

renting a new Cadillac despite being tight on funds is necessary for his freedom. This only shows us the type of person he is.

Thereafter, the tragicomic melodrama unravels from Kevin, Fritz's oldest surviving son's point of view. At the very onset, he tells us, "Ever since I was a child, people said my family was cursed. We never talked about it. We brothers never believed it, but bad things kept happening. Mum tried to protect us with God, and Dad tried to protect us with wrestling..."

As the story progresses, the narrative persuasively details

Title: *The Iron Claw*
Director: Sean Durkin
Cast: Zac Efron, Jeremy Allen White, Harris Dickinson, Stanley Simmons, Maura Tierney, Holt McCallany, Lily James, Kevin Anton
Where: In theatres near you
Rating: ★★★

the brother's relationships with one another, the warm and sweet intimacy, their father's abusive treatment, and their cycles of trauma. It also touches upon themes of toxic masculinity, American enterprise, and exploitation.

What makes the film shine is the well-etched characters. Unfortunately, none of them, except for Kevin and, to some extent, Kerry, have clear arcs and tidy endings.

On the performance front, no one gets more noticed than Zac Efron. He has bulked his physique to suit his role, and he shines as the man who takes the onus of being the oldest despite grappling with his inner demons.

The film boasts decent production and aesthetic values. While some transitions and the 'Afterlife' scene are jarring, the era in which the events occur is well-captured with fashionable hot pants to crop tops and hairstyles. Each shot feels like a period frame. The film does not only transport you on its visuals alone. The wonderfully designed rock soundtrack layers in emotional fervour, as events swirl into a horrific frenzy. Overall - the film is a familiar and relatable tale of emotional repression, misplaced ambition, struggle, and fate.



A canvas of perspective and perception

Set around a school and dealing with issues about truth, perspectives, and getting to the bottom of things, this film is about growing up and understanding how people deal with each other and why.

What you see and what you perceive may not be the truth of the whole story, and the director Hirokazu Koreeda, known for previously critically acclaimed films *Shoplifters* and *The Brokers*, weaves this very brilliantly.

The film begins with a building fire observed from a distance by Saori (Sakura Ando), a single mother, and her son, Minato (Soya Kurokawa).

Over the next few days, Saori notices her son exhibiting strange behaviour like asking weird questions, inexplicably cutting his hair, and at one point, throwing himself out of her car.

On questioning Minato, Saori suspects that Mr. Hori (Eita Nagayama), his sixth-grade teacher, maybe bullying him.

As the narrative unfolds, you wonder, "Who is the monster?" despite Minato asking this question very early in the film.

When Saori takes her concerns to the school principal, Makiko Fushimi (Yuko Tanaka), and confronts Mr. Hori, everyone is overly apologetic despite showing no empathy or concern. But when Minato's strange behaviour continues, Saori con-

fronts Mr. Hori directly. He informs her it is Minato who is bullying another student, Yori Hoshikawa (Hinata Hiiragi).

Wanting to get to the bottom of this, Saori visits Hoshikawa's house and learns that he, despite his strange behaviour, is fond and concerned for Minato.

Eventually, Mr. Hori is removed from his position. One stormy day, to plead his innocence, Hori lands up at Minato's house, it is then that Saori realises Minato has gone missing, only to find him and Hoshikawa in a deserted cabin in the nearby mountain.

The fire and the stormy day bookend the events in this cinematic uni-

Title: *Monster*
Director: Hirokazu Koreeda
Cast: Sakura Ando, Eita Nagayama, Soya Kurokawa, Mitsuki Takahata, Akihiro Kakuta, Shido Nakamura, Yuko Tanaka, Hinata Hiiragi
Where: In theatres near you
Rating: ★★★★★

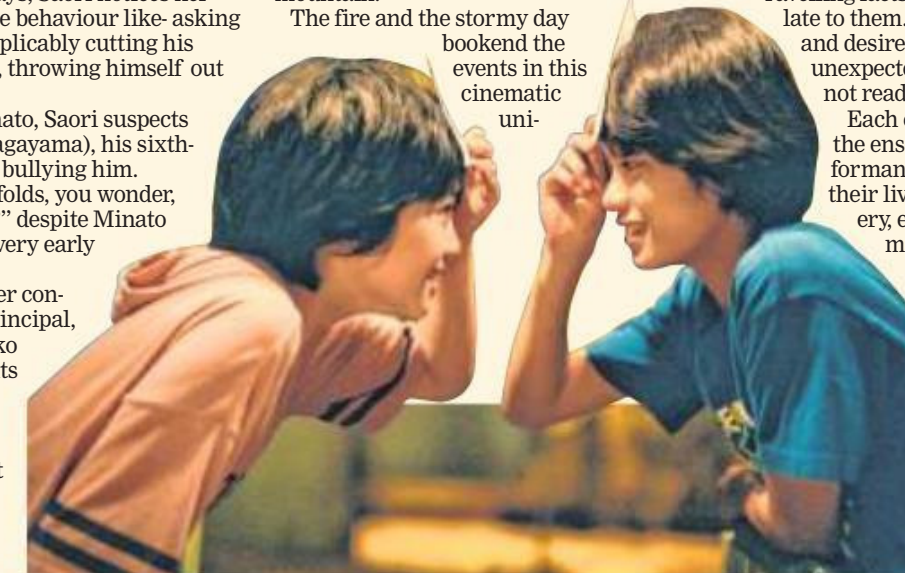
verse. Everything in the story happens between these two events and is used effortlessly as signposts to navigate the plot.

Inspired by Akira Kurosawa's 1950 classic *Rashomon*, the screenplay of this film too tells the story from multiple perspectives. The story unravels three times. First by Saori, then from Mr. Hori's perspective, and lastly from the perspective of Minato and Hoshikawa.

How the narrative evolves is highly dependent on the point-of-view of the narrator. The entire film is like a puzzle, revealing and unravelling facts that happen and later you relate to them. It dissects, reticence shame, and desire in society, and goes about some unexpected emotional areas that one is not ready and it takes you by surprise.

Each character is well-etched, and the ensemble cast delivers a good performance that you get subsumed into their lives. In fact, the sense of discovery, especially their personal trauma, drama, and sometimes closely held beliefs and secrets, is exciting.

Written by Yuji Sakamoto, the film won the best screenplay and the Queer Palm at Cannes Film Festival 2023. Honestly, the queer component is so subtle that if you blink, you might miss it.



Good writing and intense performance keeps you engaged

This review of *Aarya Antim Vaar* or Season 3 of the crime thriller, is based on episode numbers five to eight.

Told in a non-linear manner, Episode 5, titled, '*Sherni Ke Shikar Ka Waqt Aa Gaya Hai*,' which means, 'It's time to hunt the Tiger,' begins with a bait. We see a brutally wounded Aarya (Sushmita Sen) holding her mobile phone to her ear. A voiceover that tells us, "This may be the mid-point of the story or..." We hear a gunshot. Hit by a bullet, Aarya falls sprawled on the floor; and the narrator continues, "This may be the end of the story."

This less than 15-second scene is enough to hook you on. The narrative then rewinds two weeks earlier to tell us how and why Aarya was shot.

For those not initiated into the series, Aarya Sareen (Sushmita Sen) is just a working mother, roped into the criminal world due to her family connection. She is trapped - in a twisted game of survival. To keep her children safe, she fights and conspires against the forces, especially the drug cartel, the police, and the Child Welfare Officer.

How she single-handedly struggles to keep her kids and near and dear ones together while running her "business" forms the ongoing crux of the episodes.

The episodes are packed with dodgy deals, violent threats, and double-crosses. There are also gun and sword fights.

Loyalty plays a very significant role in the lives of those involved. Thus, the

Title: *Aarya Antim Vaar*
Directors: Kapil Sharma, Shraddha Pasi Jairath, Ram Madhvani
Cast: Sushmita Sen, Ila Arun, Sikander Kher, Vikas Kumar, Vishwajeet Pradhan
Where: Streaming on Disney+ Hotstar
Rating: ★★★

sixth episode titled, '*Khabri Ki Saaza Mauz*' (The Punishment for the Informer is Death) brings to the fore the rules of the underworld.

The episodes that follow are 'Aarya Sareen Is An Unfit Mother', and '*Paanjanee Nikalne Ka Waqt Aa Gaya*' (The Time Has Come To Get The Claws Out).

Adapted from the Dutch Series *Penoza*, the writing by Amit Raj, Khushboo Raj, and Anu Singh Choudhury stands out for the meticulous attention to detailing the story. The characters are well-defined, and the scenes are focused, taut, and intense. There is not a moment of liberty taken or digression in the storytelling.

Aarya is Sushmita Sen's canvas, and she does full justice to her role. Her interactions with the other characters are both fascinating and disturbing. Her demeanour on screen is palpable as she adds a lay of psychological depth to the narrative, especially in episode seven when she has a showdown with the Child Welfare Officer.

She is aptly supported by ace actors who slip into their characters with natural grace. Among the cast are Viren Vazirani, Viri Vaghani, and Pratyaksh Panwar, who portray Aarya's children Veer, Arundhati, and Aditya. Ila Arun essays Nalini, a Royal from Rajasthan, Vikas Kumar portrays ACP Younus Khan, and Sikander Kher plays Daulat, Aarya's handyman.

The song '*Bade Achhe Lagte Hain*' oft played along with other numbers as background score to uplift the scenes.

Overall, the episodes are engaging and end on a cliffhanger, ensuring you look forward to the next season.



Missed potential rather than genuine engagement

Bhakshak, meaning predator, showcases a journalist's travails against the system to bring the predators to book.

Set in Bihar, the narrative follows Vaishali Singh, a determined journalist played by the competent Bhumi Pednekar, as she delves into the dark underbelly of the vicious shelter home system, especially housing girls. The story brings to the fore how the girls are abused, exploited, and even murdered.

The film is intended to be provocative, igniting the call for ethics, principles, and morals today. While the subject matter is undeniably significant, the execution of this film falls short, resulting in an unsatisfactory viewing experience.

To begin with, the film is perfunctorily mounted. It relies on tired tropes and clichés to drive the narrative forward. The plot is talk heavy, clunky, with undramatic and sluggish pacing. The heinous laughs and crass conversations among the male supporting cast take centre stage, making the entire set-up appear forced.

Also, keeping in mind today's media scenario, the script is a bit basic and outdated. It's only after the mid-point that - there is a mention of social media platforms. While Vaishali's tenacity to pursue the wrongdoings is commendable, the story lacks nuance and passively provides meaningful insights into the complexities of the issues.

Pednekar delivers a solid performance,

capturing Vaishali's passion and resolve while working in collaboration with Bhaskar (Sanjay Mishra) at Koshish News, a local broadcast channel, but her character lacks depth and development, feeling more like a generic archetype middle-class, married woman pursuing a career in B-town than a fully realised passionate individual.

The entire cast is sincere, and they deliver what is expected, of them. Sanjay Mishra - as Bhaskar, Vaishali's colleague, is underutilised, and Sai Tamhankar's character, Jasmeet Gaur, the Superintendent of Police, works as the deus ex machina in the plot.

Furthermore, the supporting characters, be it the politician, the caretaker of the Girls Shelter Home, the henchmen, or anyone else, are all stereotypical, serving as mere plot devices rather than fully fleshed-out individuals. None of them stand apart. So is the case with the victims. Visually, with dark tones, congested and lacklustre aesthetic frames, Kumar Sourabh's cinematography is competent, where Munawwarpur and Patna are fleetingly captured.

The poignant lyrics of the song *Ganga* and the background score lift the spirit of the narrative, but by then, it is too late to transcend mediocrity, which ultimately undermines its impact, leaving the viewers with a sense of missed potential rather than genuine engagement.

Overall, *Bhakshak* is a well-intentioned film. In the end, as one of the characters says, "*Baki aap samajdhar hain.*"

