MONDAY, NOVEMBER 18, 2024
ADVERTORIAL, ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY
PROMOTIONAL FEATURE

Delhi Times

OF INDIA

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'DON'T WANT TO BE HERE FOR A HOT MOMENT & THEN BE FORGOTTEN'

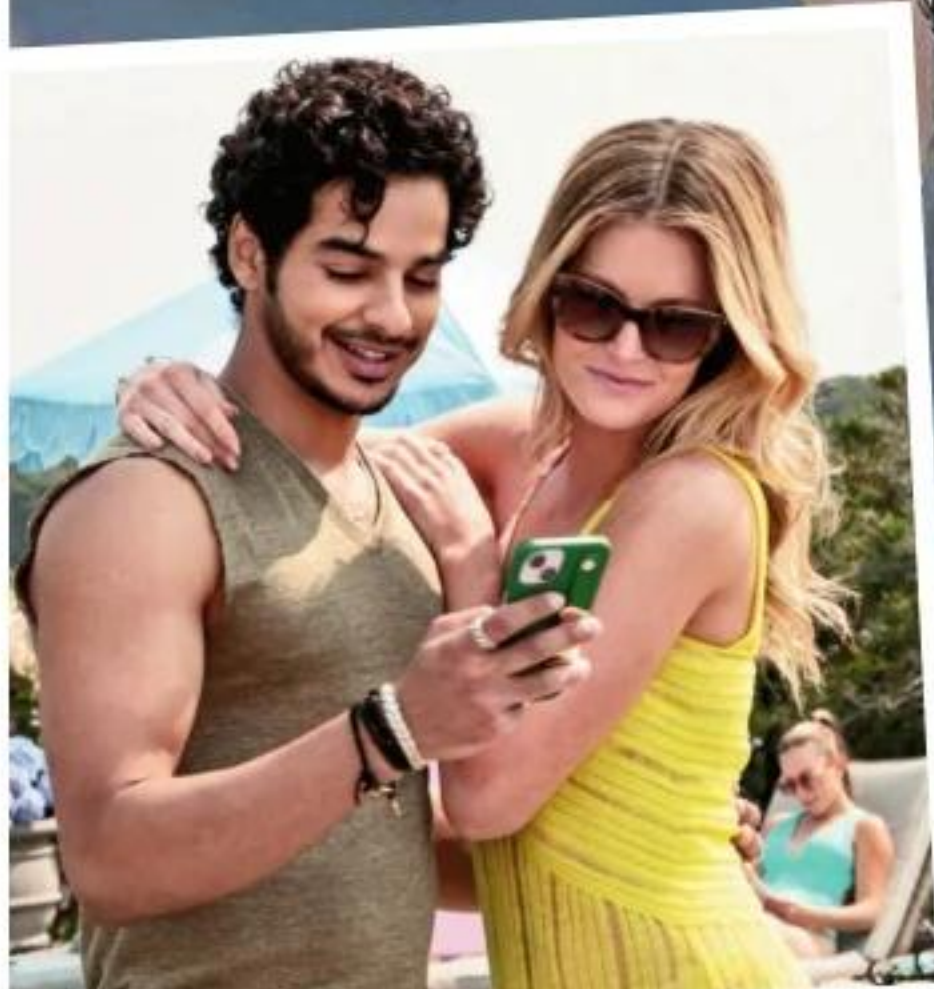ISHAAN KHATTER

Ishaan made his Hollywood debut with *The Perfect Couple*

Renuka Vyavahare

The language of cinema is universal. While various Bollywood actors have dabbled in international films, Ishaan Khatter's promising Hollywood debut in Nicole Kidman starrer *The Perfect Couple* came as a pleasant surprise. Be it *Beyond The Clouds*, *Dhadak* or *A Suitable Boy* – Ishaan has pushed boundaries from the word go. In a conversation with us, the actor reveals what prompted him to head west, craving his own identity and how he's in this phase of self-discovery.

> There are more diverse opportunities for young actors in the west, especially when you're in the main lead space. There are fewer choices of roles here

I am glad roles are finally being written for me, says Mrunal

@mrunalthakur

"There are a lot of scripts that I have been hearing lately, but *Sita Ramam* and *Hi Nanna* have set some really high expectations and benchmarks for me. It has added on to my responsibility. I am not going to disappoint my Telugu audience," says Mrunal Thakur

Onkar Kulkarni

Mrunal Thakur has featured in prominent Bollywood films like *Super 30*, *Batla House*, *Gumraah*, *Pippa*, but her recent experience with Telugu films *Sita Ramam* and *Hi Nanna* changed the lens through which she views her career ahead. The actress says, "There are a lot of scripts that I have been hearing lately, but

Sita Ramam and *Hi Nanna* have set some really high expectations and benchmarks for me. It has added on to my responsibility. I am not going to disappoint my Telugu audience. They are literally the ones who have accepted me as a Telugu *ammayi* and I can't wait to do a crazy, mind-blowing entertainer, and at the same time, a cult film that will strike a chord with the audience."

It's a boy for Rohit and Ritika

Rohit Sharma has announced the arrival of his second child, a baby boy. The Indian cricket captain shared a playful animation featuring himself, his wife Ritika Sajdeh, their daughter Samaira with the newborn. "FAMILY —The One Where We Are Four," he captioned the post.

FAMILY
The one where we are FOUR

Buzzstop

UNWELL GOVINDA LEAVES CAMPAIGN TRAIL MIDWAY

Govinda on Saturday cut short his campaign trail for the Maharashtra assembly elections citing ill health. The actor, who was in Jalgaon for the campaign, returned to Mumbai after halting his roadshow midway. This comes after the actor accidentally shot himself in the leg last month. TNN

Mass appeal trumps thirst trap for Sexiest Man in 2024

While John Krasinski is nothing like the scandal-plagued hunks or thirst-traps who have preceded him, the *Jack Ryan* actor seemed like the ideal choice for the 'Sexiest Man' tag

At a deeply polarised time, the editors of *People* magazine were never going to go for a sex-in-the-hot-tub candidate for their latest 'Sexiest Man Alive.' So it was hardly a surprise when they revealed that this year's crown had gone to John Krasinski.

An amiable hunk and devoted family man with the requisite multiplatform audience appeal from *The Office*, *Jack Ryan* to *The Quiet Place*, a cosy celeb marriage with Emily Blunt and two young daughters – Krasinski exudes an erotic energy suggestive less of the bedroom athlete than of the proverbial stable provider.
The New York Times

But, what about Glen Powell

Naturally, fans of Glen Powell were distressed about the decision. Why Krasinski and not Powell, the *Twisters* actor with that infectious smile? With the US battered and exhausted by a grueling political season, perhaps Krasinski was the ideal middle-of-the-road choice: visually coded as preppy, familiar, and humorous, secure in his heterosexual identity, and so generally inoffensive as to be the Switzerland of onscreen virility.

Pablo RC
@jpab666
Glen Powell was robbed

Book'em Mary
@MaryG0401
Glen was the guy. John is the guy next door

Notable 'Sexiest Men'

And what John Krasinski is clearly not is one of the scandal-plagued hunks (Johnny Depp, Brad Pitt, Ben Affleck), serial Lotharios (Richard Gere, George Clooney, again Johnny Depp) or obvious thirst traps (Michael B Jordan), who have been anointed the world's sexiest by *People* in the decades since the publication inaugurated its popular "Sexiest Man Alive" franchise with Mel Gibson back in 1985

'Music, dance & drama are integral to a child's holistic development'

Anna Fernandes

In today's fast-paced world, children are not exempt from the pressures of life. Experts emphasise the crucial role of extracurricular activities, especially those involving the arts. From dance and music to drama, these hobbies not only nurture creativity but also bolster cognitive, emotional, and social skills.

Music fosters calmness & mental growth in children:
Jagdeesh MR, musician

Studies have shown that hobbies, like music, dance, drama, positively impact their academic performance. Beyond that, it fosters mental growth and calmness, which is especially important in today's stressful environment. Music is a nonverbal language that directly appeals to the senses. Children naturally express themselves through song, even if they're not singing in the right pitch.

Hobbies allows children creative freedom: Disha Madan, influencer and actor

I believe exposing children to the arts as hobbies is crucial for their development. My son is currently learning the piano. My daughter is too young, but she seems interested in learning as well. She loves to sing and dance. Hobbies allows them creative freedom, helps them focus better, and improves their self-expression.

Art enriches children with new perspectives:
Vilas Nayak, artist

Beyond academic benefits, cultural activities like painting and music cultivate a unique perspective on the world. They encourage out-of-the-box thinking and appreciation for diverse forms of art and culture. By engaging in these activities, children develop a more inclusive mindset and become better citizens.

Theatre and music nurtures empathy, creativity, and public speaking skills, allowing children to step into different roles and perspectives

Dance is proven to increase overall joy: Rukmini Vijayakumar, dancer and choreographer

By incorporating the arts into children's lives, they gain alternate perspectives. The arts provide an emotional and physical release, especially dance. Dance is proven to reduce depression and to increase the joy quotient in anyone's lives because inherently, humans move to express themselves and dance is an extension of that. Including any of these art forms in children's lives is crucial for their growth.

The teamwork, mutual support that theatre offers can enrich a child: Maya Mascarenhas, paediatrician and theatre director

Arts, theatre, singing and dancing is beneficial for children. It's the entire social process - the teamwork, collaboration, and mutual support that truly enrich their development. Students already face significant academic pressure. And unfortunately, many schools compromise their well-being by cutting back on essential extracurricular activities. These activities are crucial for a child's holistic development.

POV

Trump & Musk: A political bromance in the making

Even as Americans scramble to find a word to describe the bond between Donald Trump and Elon Musk, Indians, who have been riveted by Jai and Veeru for generations, know a bromance when they see one.

All this is new for the US that has been fixated with the First Families in The White House. Not many seem interested in dinner dresses or the infamous Christmas decor any more and political commentators are already feeling a twinge of nostalgia for the 'institution' of first ladyhood.

Melania, says a scathing piece in the NYT by Maureen Dowd, has been replaced by "Elonia", outshone by Trump's most vocal and visible cheerleader. A man whose fans call him the real-life Tony Stark – a 'genius billionaire' with a 'complicated, commander-type personality,' who makes cool stuff that leaves the boys in awe of his charisma.

Trump and Musk's banter, their PDA on social media, their electric chemistry at rallies and the fact that the President-elect created the DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency) to make room for his 'first buddy', speaks a lot about the relationship. Musk may have been labelled the 'guest who would not leave' Trump's sprawling Mar A Lago resort in Florida. But guess what, his host is not complaining. "He just loves this place. I like having him here," said Trump.

Bromance, a portmanteau word, was apparently coined in the 1990s by Dave Carnie, editor of a skateboard magazine. Meant to describe intimate but platonic relationships between men who spend a lot of time together, it has become a thing in pop culture over the past two decades, even though men on screen and off it, have long enjoyed a singular friendship that can both induce a chuckle and inspire. The 'cute moments' between Holmes and Watson in Sherlock or the bonhomie between the men in Dil Chahta Hai or Madgaon Express, the partnership between Steve Martin and Marin Short that has given us some of the finest comic moments on screen and life goals off it, are just some cases in point.

Columnists are predicting Musk-Trump's bromance will not last forever. But going by the intensity of the chemistry on display, it may be a while before Jai and Veeru of the first world tire of each other.

Until then, expect more fireworks from the mutual admiration club. More 'genius', 'star', 'love' and other such terms of endearment being exchanged while humanity's future course is reshaped.

Agree? Disagree? Write to us with your name and city at: pov@timesofindia.com

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LEISURE

EVENTS

EXHIBITION
KNMA: The Elemental You - An exhibit showcasing works by three artistes. Till January 9. From 9.30am-6.30pm. KNMA Saket

Dhoomimal Gallery: The Past Has a Home in the Future, curated by Annapurna Garimella. Till December 6, Dhoomimal Gallery, Connaught Circus

Email us at tims.delhitimes@timesofindia.com

TIMES HITORI

HOW TO PLAY
1. A number may appear just once in each row or column. Eliminate repeat numbers by darkening cells. (see example)
2. Darkened cells must never be adjacent in a row or column.
3. Unmarked cells must create a single continuous area, undivided by darkened cells.
4. Every time you darken a cell, you can automatically circle its vertical and horizontal neighbours, which means they cannot be eliminated.
5. Any cell "sandwiched" between neighbours of the same value can be circled. (e.g. 6 4 6)
6. A "triple" is a special case of sandwich. Circle the centre cells, and darken the ends. (e.g. 6 6 6)

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

Example

LOOP THE LOOP

RULES
• Connect adjacent dots with vertical or horizontal lines, creating a single loop (Fig A).
• Crossovers or branches are not allowed (As shown by dotted lines in Fig B).
• Numbers in the puzzle indicate the number of lines that should surround it, while empty cells may be surrounded by any number of lines.
• You can't draw lines around zeroes.
• Each puzzle has just one unique solution.

(Fig A) / Not allowed (Fig B)

HOW TO BEGIN:
Example (Fig A) - Begin with the zero next to 3. Since no lines can be drawn around zero, mark crosses around it, as shown. Now there is a cross in one space around 3. So we know the three lines of 3 can only be drawn in the remaining three spaces. Next, these lines can only be extended in one direction each. Continue, using the same logic.

Hints: Keep eliminating possibilities by marking crosses in spaces between dots where a line isn't possible, i.e., if you have already completed required lines or where a line extension may create a branch or cause a deadend (Fig B).

THE DAILY CROSSWORD

By Sala Wanetick & Emily Biegas   18/11/2024

ACROSS
1 Roof spots for holiday lights
6 Trims, as grass
10 Highs
13 Swindler's accomplice
14 Milky birthstone
15 "The baby is sleeping!"
16 "DieHard product
18 ___ culpa
19 Sinks, as an easy putt
20 Vampire tooth
21 Debtor's letters
23 "Presence in a pet-friendly workplace
26 Muzzles
29 Learning institution
30 Soccer superstar Lionel
31 Drippy ice cream choice
32 "Los Angeles neighborhood in many John Singleton films
37 Et ___: and others
38 Exposed
40 Lavish
43 Thawed
44 "University in Muncie, Indiana
46 Nickname of the 34th president
47 Disability Pride Month
48 Keyboard instruments
51 Stately tree
52 Leave one's vehicle in a traffic lane, and an apt description of the answers to the starred clues
56 Sch. whose alumni include Anthony Bourdain and Roy Choi
57 Competent
58 Muppet who sings to his rubber duckie
59 Full complement
60 Kitchen protector
61 High-end hair dryer manufacturer

DOWN
1 Key for exiting full-screen mode
2 "I've got it!"
3 Accomplished musician
4 "Zootopia" voice actor Idris
5 High-five sound
6 Repeating design
7 Like some sandwiches
8 Two-person card game
9 Probably plotting
10 Spotting a union label, perhaps
11 Young sensation
12 Like the coats of most sheepdogs
17 General ___ chicken
20 Architectural style that flourished after the American Revolution
21 Ideological suffix
22 Singles
24 Symbol
25 "No way"
27 Most of the time
28 Filmography list
33 Clue
34 Boulder-hurling weapon
35 Craftspeople
36 Chive kin
39 Initials of the 34th president
40 Item
41 Rocky's best friend in the "Rocky" films
42 Comedian Tracey
43 Supper, e.g.
45 Neighbor of Nepal
49 Necessity
50 Nashville's Grand Ole ___
52 Beaver creation
53 ___-Wan Kenobi
54 ___ de Janeiro
55 "Jeopardy!" host Jennings

of players, in men's lacrosse

Saturday's Puzzle Solved
©2024 Tribune Content Agency, LLC   16/11/2024

SUDOKU CHALLENGE
Level: Medium

HOW TO PLAY
Fill in the grid so that every horizontal row, every vertical column and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1-9, without repeating the numbers in the same row, column or box. You can't change the digits already given in the grid. Every puzzle has one solution.

SCRAMBLE
Rearrange the letters in the four word jumbles, one letter to each square/circle, to make four ordinary words

RVEEE
AURIC
IMYCST
AEHRMP

A friend may well be reckoned the ___ of nature. - R W Emerson (11)

HOW TO PLAY
Now arrange the letters in the circles to form the answer to the riddle or to fill in the missing word as indicated

GARFIELD
BURP!
JUST MAKING ROOM FOR THE NEXT COURSE
GARFIELD

ARCHIE
MMM!
I SEE SHE GOT YOU AGAIN, TOO!
MS. BEAZLY'S MASTERED THE ART OF PREPARING MEALS THAT SMELL BETTER THAN THEY TASTE!

SPELLATHON
Today's Ratings:
01-average | 02-good | 03-outstanding

How many words of four or more letters can you make from the letters shown in today's puzzle? In making a word, a letter can be used as many times as it appears in the puzzle. Each word must contain the central letter. There should be at least one seven letter word. Plurals, foreign words and proper names are not allowed. British English Dictionary is used as reference.

R M M Y E U M M (hexagon letters, center Y)

DENNIS THE MENACE
"I'VE HEARD OF THE 'PAST.' I THINK THAT'S WHERE MR. WILSON GREW UP."

You are happiest now when you do something creative and daring.

VIRGO: You may be highly attracted to someone new, because of the novelty and possibilities for adventure. You are not in a very conciliatory mood. You are not willing to accommodate others and meet people halfway.

LIBRA: You are impatient and might behave in an impulsive, irritable way which makes you more prone to accidents. You are more distressed than usual. You may need to realign your thought processes.

SCORPIO: You are optimistic and enthusiastic about your ideas, but disinclined to read the fine print or study all the facts, which can result in an error in judgment. You are likely to come to a very clear, definite decision at this time.

SAGITTARIUS: You are less competitive, more interested in pleasing others and creating harmony. You are more distressed than usual over any dissonance in your personal relationships, and you are inclined to avoid serious discussions. You may speak or act in haste now.

CAPRICORN: Your ego-drive and competitiveness are very strong. Questions of honour, ethics, law, or morality will arise in your mind at this time. The energies could be a bit scattered. The emphasis is now on long-range financial planning, thinking about future security and formulating strategies to achieve your ambitions.

AQUARIUS: You tend to act on impulse. But, you can grasp new concepts very easily, but you tend to be impatient with slower minds or the usual, predictable routine. You are very insistent on your own rights, needs and preferences.

PISCES: You could find that you are appreciated or valued for your ability to act and get things done. This is an excellent time to take the initiative or to begin a project that you have been considering. Members of the opposite sex can be particularly helpful to you at this time.

ARIES: This can be a very frustrating time, and you are likely to feel quite alone, emotionally aloof, or withdrawn. You do not feel very sharp, competitive, or aggressive at this time. An unexpected encounter may catch you off guard.

TAURUS: Sharing a pleasant time with someone you like is more in tune with your feelings now. In all of your relationships, whether romantic or not, you feel quite warm and affectionate. You are apt to throw routine to the wind and do something quite out of character for yourself.

GEMINI: You may find something you believed to be lost or irretrievable. You can be quite pugnacious. Your choices and decisions may lack prudence, realism and sound judgment right now. You tend to be hot-tempered and this is aggravated now. Flexibility and open-mindedness in your relationships is called for now.

CANCER: Emotions and personal biases are apt to cloud your objectivity, however, you may wish to postpone activities that require strict logic and clarity. You can become obsessed with an idea or problem until you have figured it out.

LEO: You are a more relaxed and easy-going. Your imagination and fantasy life is very active and you can dream up some very creative ideas.

SOLUTIONS TO GAMES/PUZZLES
TIMES SUDOKU | LOOP THE LOOP | TIMES HITORI
SPELLATHON
MUMMERY, mummy, rummy
SCRAMBLE
Words: Reeve, curia, mystic, hamper
Answer: A friend may well be reckoned the masterpiece of nature. – R W Emerson

TRIPPIN'

Pics: @khushikapoor

KHUSHI KAPOOR is getting her dose of vitamin sea as she and her friends celebrate **AALIYAH KASHYAP**'s bachelorette in **PHUKET**
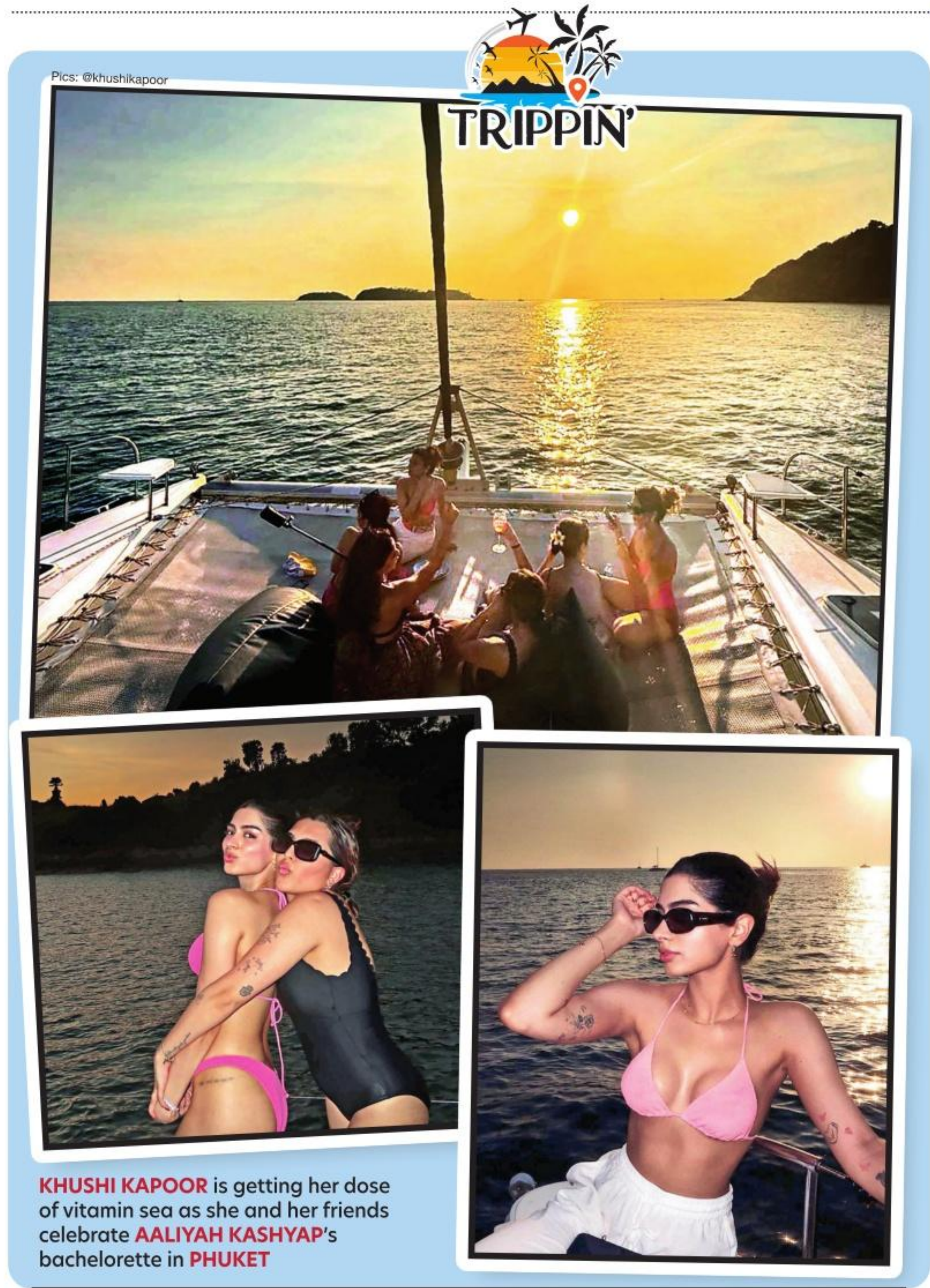
Retrospective of Italy's most iconic actor's films is coming to India soon

Pics: Lokesh Kashyap

Andrea Anastasio, director of the Italian Cultural Institute in Delhi

Mastroianni's *La Notte* was screened in Delhi recently. Directed by Michelangelo Antonioni, it also features Jeanne Moreau in the lead

Italian actress Iaia Forte
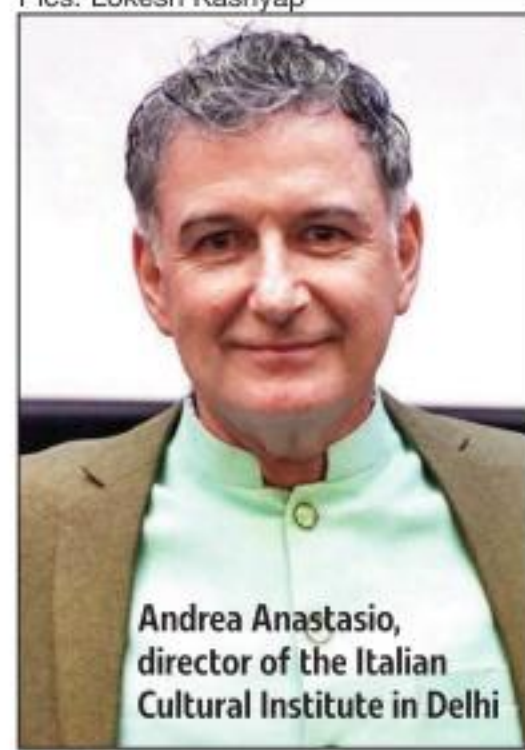
Niharika Lal

To mark Italian actor Marcello Mastroianni's 100th birthday, the Italian Institute in India is rolling out the red carpet for some of his most-loved films. Known for his performances and three Best Actor Oscar nominations, Mastroianni remains a global star. The officials say the series has been curated to celebrate his work and timeless appeal.

The retrospective of Mastroianni will begin in January next year and continue through March at the Italian Embassy Cultural Centre. To commence Mastroianni's centenary celebrations, his film *La Notte* was screened in Delhi recently.

Talking about the retrospective, Andrea Anastasio, director of the Italian Cultural Institute in Delhi said,

> At the screening, I read a letter that in the film *La Notte* is read by Jeanne Moreau's (lead) character. It captures universally relatable emotions – the essence of love, loss, and longing
> – Iaia Forte, Italian actress

"Mastroianni represents a bridge between Italian neorealism and the international art cinema movement." He also spoke about why *La Notte* was chosen for screening. "It is one of the most powerful films because, at that time, Italy was emerging from neorealism, and the Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni steps away from that by introducing themes fundamental to modern society, such as the crisis of relationships and the role of intellectual society in urban life."

Italian actress Iaia Forte was also present at the screening. She said, "Mastroianni is the most iconic star of Italy's vibrant 1960s cinema, and this film holds a very important place in Italian cinema."

Zubeen Garg enthralls audience in Delhi

Pics: Lokesh Kashyap

The singer performed his Hindi hit *Dil Tu Hi Bataa* as well as Assamese tracks like *Jantra* and *Maya* at the event

The crowd couldn't stop grooving to his songs

SNAPSHOTS FROM Zubeen Garg live at Northeast Festival

>> Meenakshi Lekhi also graced the event

Best part about Delhi weddings is the food: Jigyasa

Jigyasa Singh

Shivika Manchanda

How Delhi blends tradition, joy, madness and love in weddings is unmatched," says Jigyasa Singh, who recently attended her cousin's wedding in the capital. The actress, known for her roles in *Thapki Pyar Ki*, *Shakti – Astitva Ke Ehsan Ki* and *Sasural Simar Ka*, loves being a part of Dilli *wali shaadi*. "What I miss the most about *Dilli ki shaadiyaan*, when I'm in Mumbai, is the food. The way *golgappas*, *aloo tikki*, and *papdi chaat* burst with flavour is just amazing," she says.

'DELHI WEDDINGS ARE UNFORGETTABLE'
Sharing a crazy wedding memory, she says, "Delhi weddings are filled with unforgettable memories. A few years back at a cousin's wedding, the *baraat* went on for hours and even random people from the street joined in; it was like the whole city was celebrating with us! Moments like that remind me of the unique spirit of Delhi weddings."

Jigyasa's Delhi must-haves
A self-confessed foodie, Jigyasa makes it a point to indulge in *chhole bhature* every time she is in the capital. "One spot that's extra special to me is Anand Ji Chhole Bhature in Lajpat Nagar. I also love going to Roshan di Kulfi in Karol Bagh and Chandni Chowk to satiate my chaat cravings."

BACK BEAT


ISHAAN KHATTER

'I'm not trying to ride on someone else's success'

In The Perfect Couple we saw you in a significant, non-stereotypical role. How was the experience of blending in?
I wanted it to be distinct and clutter-breaking in that sense. My debut film, *Beyond the Clouds*, was largely an Indian crew. And even Mira Nair's *A Suitable Boy* was shot in India. (But) *The Perfect Couple* is a very American story and it's very different to be part of an entirely American shoot. I saw the opportunity when I read the part. I couldn't draw a reference for it. It was completely different from anything I've done before.

Your accent on the show doesn't seem put on. How did you work on that?
It was something that I partly worked on with Susanne Bier (director). It didn't make sense to me that I would be the only character speaking with a slightly different accent. So, I said, 'Maybe we should go with a standard American accent'. And she said, 'Yeah, go ahead'. I put in some extra work, some side sauce on my own; I was given that freedom. The lack of stereotyping was interesting.

Indian actors are often stereotyped in non-glamorous, not as significant roles in commercial Hollywood films. Do you see that changing with time?
The part I was offered (Shooter Dival) is
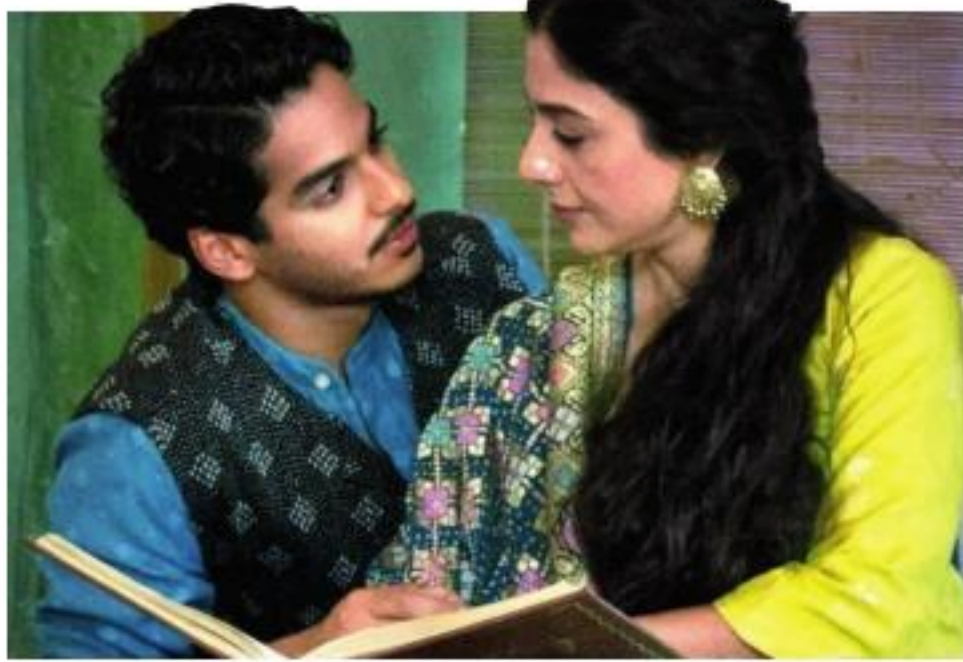
Ishaan says he was "lucky" to have worked with Tabu in *A Suitable Boy*, in the early days of his career

> When you grow up on a certain kind of cinema, they shape your sensibilities. You want to push yourself as an actor early. It was a good time for me to try something new. I'm still in a phase of self-discovery

proof enough that times are changing, and I think it's a milestone in that sense. I know that they were open to casting pretty much across the board, irrespective of ethnicity. To me, that's the bigger step, that they're looking at parts not locked in with race or ethnicity but what an actor can bring to a character.

When you are romancing someone as talented as Tabu on screen or facing a force like Nicole Kidman on camera, do you feel nervous?
I've grown up watching them and I'm lucky. Who gets to work with Tabu as a romantic pair or with Nicole Kidman this early in their career? I just say thank you God and do the work. When good things happen to me, I just treat them like it's just another part, just another day. You can't get too excited about it before you've done the work. My priority was always to become capable before doing anything. My previous experience as a dancer doing intensive courses or as an assistant director prepared me for this life.

What prompted you to head the West?
There are more diverse opportunities for young actors in the West, especially when you're in the main lead space. There are fewer choices of roles here. If you see young actors here, their careers start shooting in their late 20s or 30s. My brother (Shahid Kapoor) and I both started very young – we've seen that lack of opportunity when you are raring to go. I'm in a place today where I know myself better. I don't want to be here for a hot moment and then be forgotten.
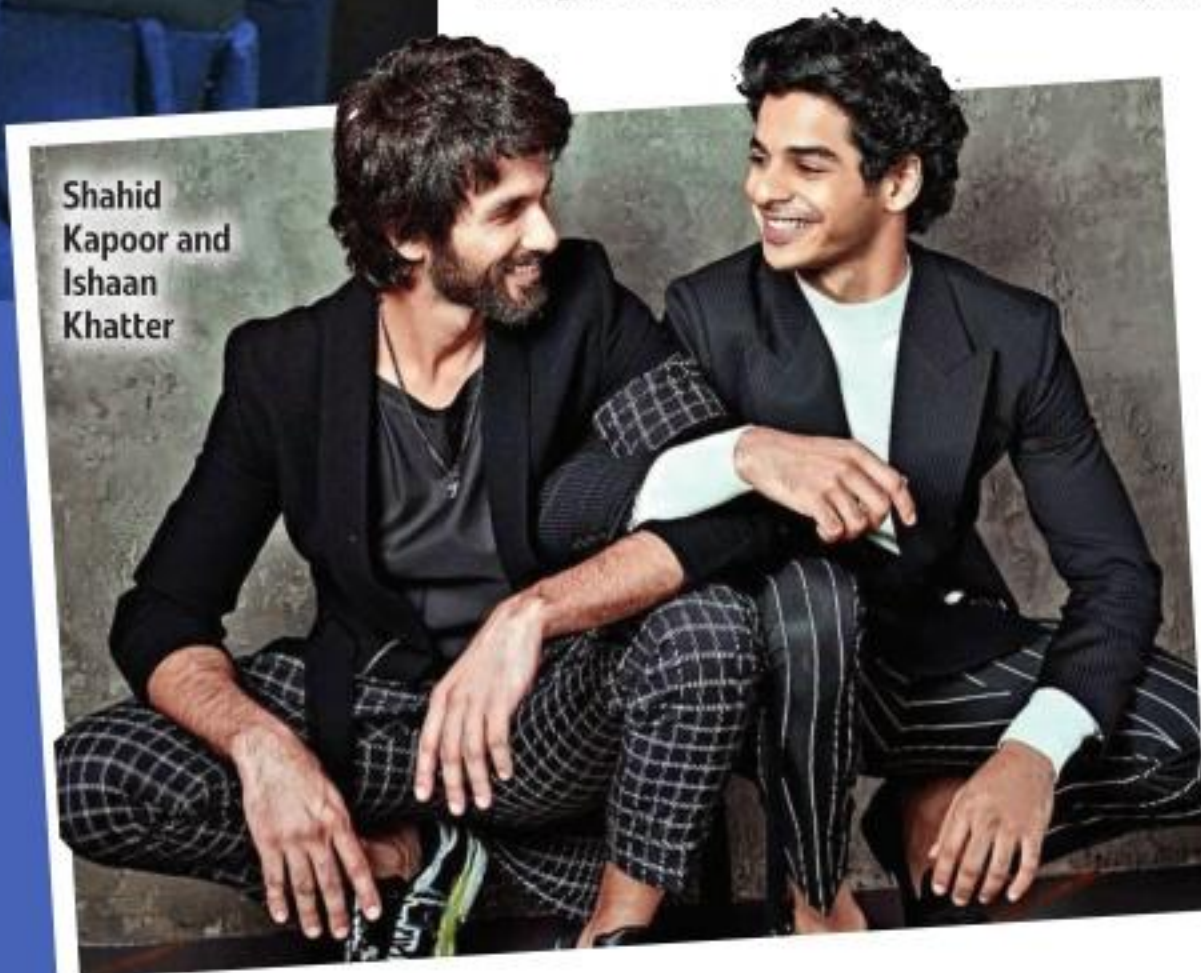
Shahid Kapoor and Ishaan Khatter

What goes through your mind when some people still refer to you as Shahid Kapoor's brother?
I was 21, on the stage of my first film's trailer launch, when someone asked me if there was competition back home? Perhaps, this is the public perception. But to me, I see it as a blessing that I have an elder brother that I share a common passion with. I can learn from him, we share notes. And the thing is, I know that I'm the younger brother and will always be the younger brother. I'm never going to fight that. That's not something that I need to fight. I know who I am - I am not a shadow of anyone, I'm not trying to imitate anybody. I'm not trying to ride on someone else's success. This is what I want to do and I'm happy with that.

> The leading man in Bollywood is seen in a certain light. It's only when you start looking a little older, there's a wider blanket of roles at your disposal. My brother and I both started very young. We were 21. So, we've seen that lack of opportunity when we were raring to go

I believe in taking one film at a time: Mrunal Thakur

Mrunal Thakur

'I KEEP CLIMBING ONE STEP AT A TIME'
Ask Mrunal if she feels that makers from the Telugu film industry have been able to tap into her talent more than Hindi filmmakers, and she explains, "I think my journey has been like climbing a ladder. I keep climbing one step at a time. I am thankful to director Tabrez Noorani, who saw me, identified me in the crowd of girls and gave me an opportunity to be Sonia, in *Love Sonia*. Also, to director Vikas Bahl who gave me an opportunity to play Supriya in *Super 30*. I think if you get success in a blink of an eye, you don't appreciate it as much."

'I HOPE MY CAREER GOES BEYOND HINDI, TAMIL AND TELUGU FILMS'
The actress has stepped up slowly, but she believes that she's now at a point where she's being offered strong parts. "I feel happy when filmmakers meet me and say, 'We want to make a movie with you, but *Sita Ramam* and *Hi Nanna* set the benchmark so high that we are going to wait and make sure we write a character for you and then reach out'. It gives me some kind of satisfaction knowing that finally there are roles which are written for me. So, one step at a time, one film at a time. *Khaane ke thaali mein ek ek niwala aaram aaram se, zindagi lambi hai*. I have a long way to go, and I hope my career is not restricted to just Hindi, Tamil and Telugu but also different languages including Malayalam, Punjabi or even French and Spanish for that matter."

> I have a long way to go, and I hope my career is not restricted to just Hindi, Tamil and Telugu but also different languages including Malayalam, Punjabi or even French and Spanish for that matter"

Sophie Turner might headline the Tomb Raider series

Sophie Turner; (inset) Lara Croft in Tomb Raider video game

Sophie Turner, who became popular after playing Sansa Stark in the *Game of Thrones* (*GOT*) is in negotiations to play Lara Croft in a forthcoming *Tomb Raider* series.
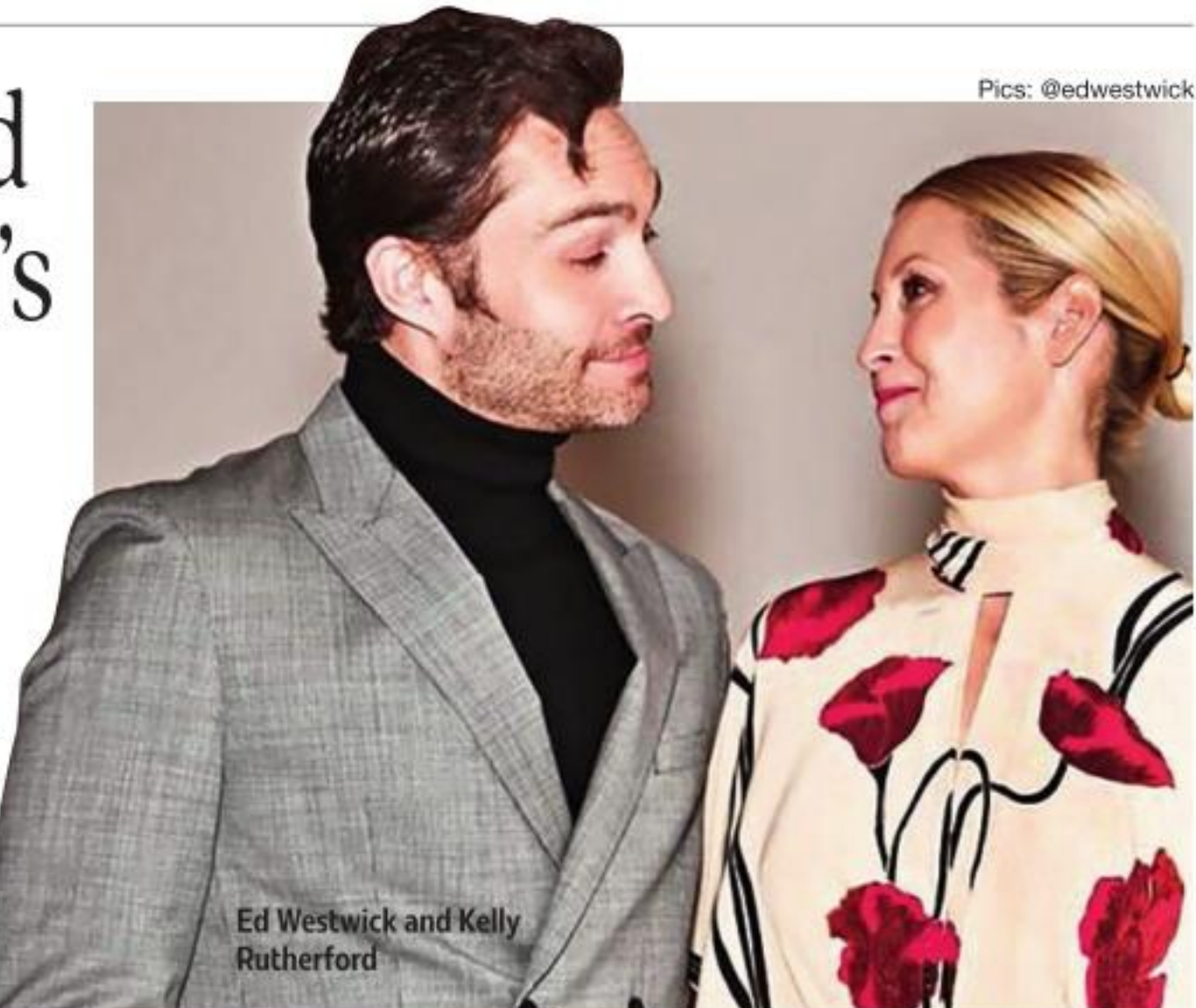The series adaptation of the popular video game franchise comes from *Fleabag* creator Phoebe Waller-Bridge, who is on board as a writer and executive producer, reported *Deadline*.
If finalised, the British actor will step into the boots of the iconic archaeologist-adventurer, who was earlier played by Oscar winners Angelina Jolie and Alicia Vikander in film adaptations.
AP

Ed Westwick and Kelly Rutherford's mini GG reunion

Much to the delight of *Gossip Girl* (*GG*) fans, Ed Westwick, who played Chuck Bass and Kelly Rutherford who portrayed Lily Van der Woodsen on the show, had a mini reunion at an event in Manhattan. Westwick took to Instagram on Sunday to share a series of pictures with Rutherford and wrote, "Meanwhile, on the Upper East Side." He also shared glimpses of Manhattan in the carousel.
They were also joined by another *GG* actress, Caroline Lagerfelt, seen as Cece Rhodes – mother of Lily Van der Woodsen. TNN

Pics: @edwestwick
Ed Westwick and Kelly Rutherford

I would love to be part of Suchitra Sen's biopic: Raima

Raima Sen, who started her career very early, says, "At 17, I just went with the flow. I did not organise or strategise my career well. I had no PR manager to guide me, like the young actors have now"

Raima Sen (right) paid a tribute to her grandmother, late actress Suchitra Sen, by recreating one of her iconic looks

Tanvi Trivedi

Despite being legendary actress Suchitra Sen's granddaughter, and Moon Moon Sen's daughter, Raima Sen, admits that paving her way into Bollywood wasn't easy. In a chat with us, the actress opens up about constant comparisons with her grandmother, her struggles and what she is looking for in love. Excerpts.

'NEVER GOT QUALITY ROLES IN BOLLYWOOD'
"During my grandmother's time, the Hindi film industry made very interesting and progressive films. She essayed strong roles in *Devdas*, *Aandhi* and films like *Bambai Ka Babu*. Bengali cinema always offered me strong roles, so there's no paucity of good content. In Bollywood, I never got quality roles. However, I am glad that the Hindi film industry is changing and apart from women, every character is playing an important role now. Even supporting actors are playing meaty roles, and the digital medium is not just a hero-based platform," says Raima.

'THINGS CHANGED FOR ME AFTER CHOKER BALI'
"As a star kid, I got work for the first few years, but then I struggled to get work. I was thrown out of auditions and for almost a year I did not have work. After *Choker Bali*, things changed for me. I also decided that I would never work in any of my grandmother's remakes because that would mean people would have tremendous expectations," she says.

> 'If a biopic is planned on my grandmom, Suchitra Sen, my family will be totally involved'
> There are talks of a biopic on Suchitra Sen. Ask her if that's on the cards and she says, "Yes, if a biopic is planned my family will be totally involved. We don't want anyone to sensationalise her life. And I would love to act in it. My grandmother lived a very private life and even her neighbours did not know her. She wanted it that way after she quit films. So, the script would have to be a tribute to her professional career and not something that would upset her.

Textbooks in 22 Indian languages will popularise multilingualism

The education ministry is pushing various initiatives to develop digital study materials in all the scheduled languages

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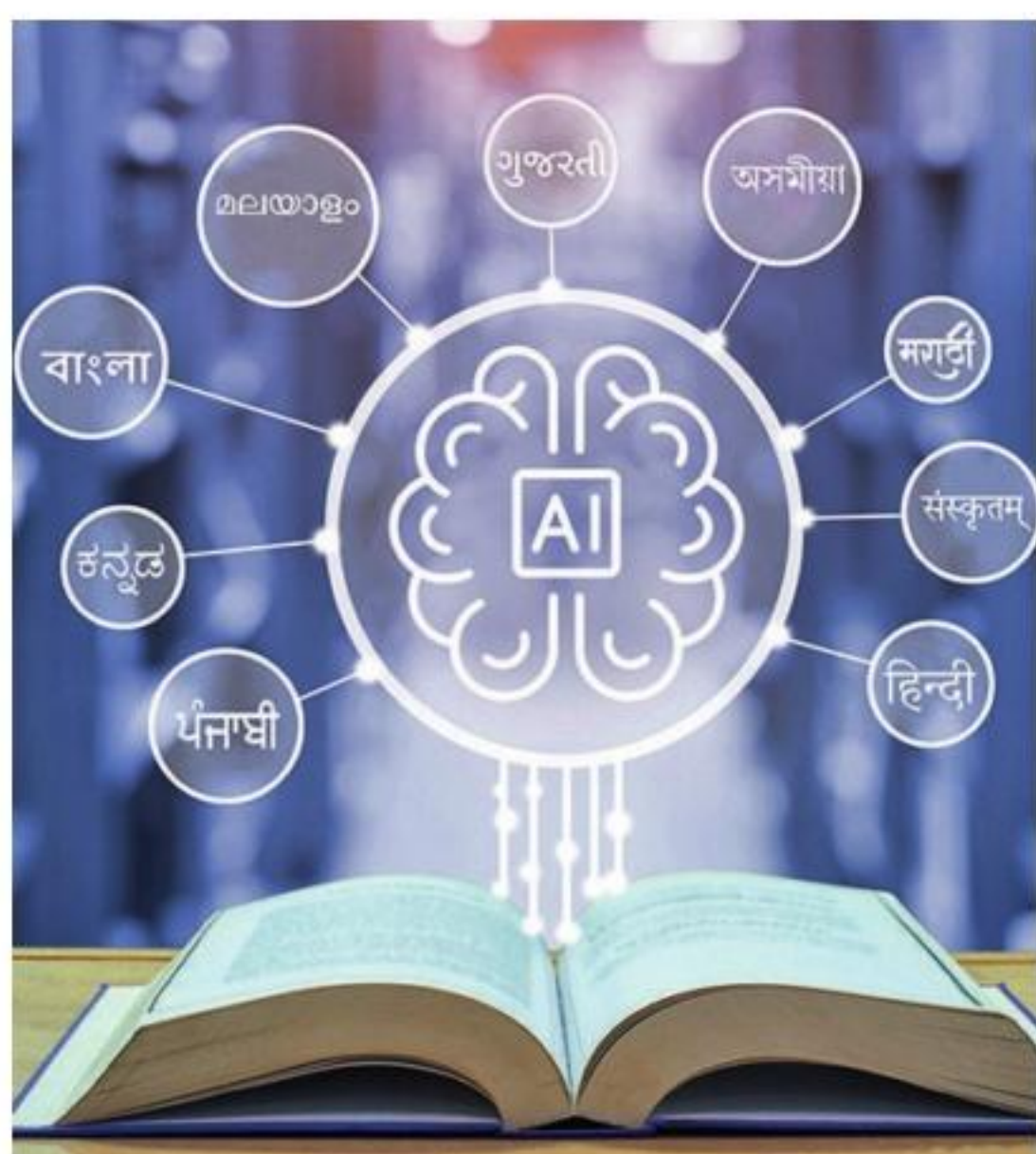
Lack of textbooks in regional languages including Hindi has emerged as the prominent reason for fewer or no takers in courses offered in these languages. Recently, West Bengal, Kerala, and Karnataka discontinued their regional language engineering programmes due to low enrolments. Similarly, MBBS offered in Hindi in Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan is getting a lukewarm response. Identifying the reason for the limited popularity of regional languages, the Ministry of Education (MoE) has introduced several initiatives to popularise it. MoE has urged all ministries, departments, and autonomous bodies under the central government to consider using their capacity-building funds for the promotion of Indian languages.

Speaking to *Education Times*, Chamu Krishna Shastry, chairman, Bharatiya Bhasha Samiti, MoE, said, "The reason for low enrolment in Indian languages may be due to several contextual factors. One prominent reason is the unavailability of quality content materials or textbooks for engineering and medical courses in local languages. The MoE has decided that textbooks and study materials in all the 22 scheduled Indian languages will be offered for all courses. The CBSE school teachers are directed to use any of the Indian languages as the medium of instruction in the classroom. The AICTE has introduced the Anuvadini app for translating engineering and other professional course textbooks in multiple languages. The Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL) Mysore, in collaboration with NCERT, has published primers in 77 languages including tribal languages."

The MoE directed the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) to launch the National Mission for Mentoring (NMM) and the National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST) for pre-primary, primary, secondary, and senior secondary stages in schools, as well as for teachers in non-formal and part-time education, adult education, and distance education. These initiatives will be available in 15

Indian workplaces use local languages and youth proficient in them are equipped to meet workplace demands

languages. Advanced AI translation tools such as Anuvadini, Bhashini, and Bahubhasha Shabdakosh were also launched to facilitate the use of Indian words, phrases, and sentences in emerging domains like IT, industry research, and education.

The MoE emphasised accurate use of funds to promote Indian languages. "Universities are organising various capacity-building workshops to equip NCERT experts and teachers to write books in local languages and promote multilingual teaching-learning. MoE's capacity-building initiatives include developing digital materials in Indian languages for which Augmenting Study Materials in Indian Languages through Translation and Academic Writing (ASMITA) was introduced," Shastry adds.

Increasing acceptance

To enhance the acceptance of professionals who have been trained and educated through regional language courses, the MoE has directed popularisation of Indian languages at school and college levels. "The multilingual ecosystem will generate enough literature, docu-

ments, and various other reading materials in multiple Indian languages, fostering greater appreciation and knowledge among youth. Multilingualism will create demand for subject-specific skills giving rise to translation-based jobs in fields such as administration, law, commerce, information technology, business, healthcare, entertainment, media, and more," adds Shastry.

Linguistic transition is largely driven by demand, policy, profitability, and national aspirations. "It is a misconception that all workplaces function solely in English. Even in English-oriented workplaces, the goal should be to not replace English but to incorporate Indian languages alongside. Around 90% of the population does not use English as a language of communication, so making information accessible to this large segment requires an Indian language-centred ecosystem. Multinational Corporations (MNCs) are increasingly producing content in local languages, with major tech companies investing heavily in AI and Machine Learning (ML) for local language applications. Future workplaces will be Indian language-centric, creating a greater demand for proficiency in Indian languages," he adds.

Many Indian workplaces use local languages, and youth educated in Indian languages will be better equipped to meet workplace demands with better communication and efficiency, says Shastry.

New regulations to deal with tie-breaking situation in JEE Main

Rankings for candidates with identical scores will now depend solely on exam performance, instead of the earlier 'older in age' and 'application number in ascending order' criteria to simplify the admission process

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The NTA has introduced some key reforms in JEE Main 2025 in which it has updated the tie-breaking rules. Academics claim that new rules will standardise the evaluation system and create a more equitable exam landscape.

Performance holds key

As per the recent mandate, rankings for candidates with identical scores will now depend solely on exam performance. Age and application number will no longer be used as eliminating criteria. Previously, if aspirants scored the same total NTA score on the BE/BTech paper, the older applicant or the one with the smaller application number would be ranked higher to break the tie. With the criteria of 'older in age' and 'application number in ascending order' being removed, if applicants remain tied even after the other rules are applied (see box), they will be given the same rank. The new

The rules will ensure objectivity since only subjective knowledge is being used as a criterion to give ranks

tie-breaking process is expected to make the ranking system simpler, ensuring applicants with equal scores are assessed fairly. "The recent tie-breaking formula is both scientific and rational," says Prof V Ramgopal Rao, vice-chancellor, BITS Pilani Group and former director, IIT Delhi, adding that it will not have a major impact on the JEE Main results as the number of such candidates are likely to be very few.

Two years ago, during a tiebreaker in NEET, out of the two candidates with 720 marks, the one who was older and a male, was ranked higher than the female candidate. This led to questions being raised about a possible gender bias and the older

candidate being prioritised. "The NTA since then decided that the older-in-age criteria will be removed, and in NEET 2023, this was successfully

implemented. However, since the number of candidates in NEET is large, deciding the rank of candidates with the same score using application numbers in ascending order seemed a viable option.

Reportedly, the application number of candidates does not follow a first-come-first-serve basis formula and is allotted randomly by the computer. But even then, doubts persisted. Hence in JEE Main 2024, the NTA decided to do away with both criteria, to streamline the assessment process and bring uniformity in the exam system," says a senior IIT Delhi faculty on condition of anonymity.

In JEE Main, where results are calculated based on the percentile score up to se-

ven decimal places, the possibility of students securing the same score is almost negligible, adds the faculty.

"The new tie-breaking rules will ensure objectivity considering only the subjective knowledge is being used as a criterion to give ranks," says NV Ramana Rao, director, NIT Raipur. The older persons were earlier given the benefit despite them being less knowledgeable as they might have attempted the exam several times compared to freshers, he adds.

Several academics are of the view that ranking in an exam should be based only on performance. "There were some valid reasons why the 'priority ranking' system was introduced in the first place. Now that the preferential ranking system is removed, policymakers should examine the relevance of those reasons and if found to be necessary, incorporate it in a different form in the admission process rather than impacting the ranks," says Prof Chandrashekar Ramanathan, dean (Academics), IIIT-Bangalore. "Other factors such as attempt number, etc can be used at the discretion of the institutions," he adds.

While the new rules are expected to help eliminate rank ties, certain ground realities need to be considered. "There are generally very few scorers on either end of the spectrum range of 1-360 marks thus having lesser possibility of a tie at scores below 50 or scores higher than 300. But since many people score in the range of 160-250, there is a greater likelihood of a tie in the marks obtained in the middle range," Prof Ramanathan adds.

Going by the rules

The updated tie-breaking process will work along the following lines:

1 Applicants with a higher NTA score in Mathematics will be given priority.

2 If the tie persists, applicants with a higher NTA score in Physics will be ranked higher.

3 If there is still a tie, the NTA score in Chemistry will be used to decide the ranks.

4 If the applicants still remain tied, the one with a lower ratio of incorrect to correct answers across all subjects will get priority.

5 Thereafter, the applicant with a lower proportion of incorrect to correct answers in Mathematics will be preferred.

6 If required, the applicant with a lower ratio of incorrect to correct answers in Physics will be prioritised.

7 As a final move, the applicant with a lower ratio of incorrect to correct answers in Chemistry will be prioritised.

If a tie still persists despite these steps, candidates will be assigned the same rank.

Photo for representation

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5 Indian students for Rhodes Scholarship

Five Rhodes Scholars-Elect for India 2025 have been selected after a competitive application process and two rounds of preliminary interviews. The five students will be heading to the University of Oxford in October 2025 to join a cohort of more than a hundred scholars from around the world to undertake fully funded PG studies. The selected students include Rayan Chakrabarti, Vibha Swaminathan, Avanish Vats, Shubham Narwal and Pal Aggarwal.

Ayurveda-Biology to create space for evidence-based research

Candidates in interdisciplinary PhD programmes can bridge the gap between tradition and modernity

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To increase the credibility of Ayurveda, encourage interdisciplinary studies, create a holistic and sustainable model for study and research in contemporary biological sciences, and develop teachers/researchers with deep knowledge of traditional and modern biological sciences, the UGC has introduced Ayurveda-Biology in the list of subjects that candidates can opt for in the UGC NET exam from December 2024 onwards. After candidates complete their PhD programme in Ayurveda-Biology, they can join universities to research and train future genera-

Gathering data and understanding the trend may take 2-3 years of NET exam cycles

tions of students. The UGC, based on the expert committee's recommendations, in its 581st meeting held on June 25, 2024, decided to add Ayurveda-Biology as an additional subject from December 2024 onwards to the existing list of subjects of UGC NET.

"Ayurveda is increasingly being integrated with modern healthcare systems. Therefore, we must understand Ayurveda from the perspective of contemporary science. Ayurveda-Biology is a discipline that aims to study India's vast expanse of traditional knowledge in the field of ayurvedic and related sciences from the perspective of mainstream contemporary studies in biological sciences," says M Jagadesh Kumar, chairman, UGC. The syllabus has 10 com-

ponents, including the history and development of Ayurveda, philosophy and fundamental principles of Ayurveda, sharira rachna and kriya, padartha vijnana and dravya vijnana, rasa shastra, bheshajya kalpana and ayurvedic pharmacopoeia, disease biology, microbiology and immunology, genetics, ayurgenomics, cell and molecular biology, physiology, biochemistry and nanotechnology, biodiversity and environmental health, IPR and entrepreneurship, research methodology, biostatistics and ayurveda-informatics.

"While a solid background in Ayurveda and Biology will be helpful, learners with diverse educational experiences are also encouraged to pursue UGC NET in Ayurveda Biology as a subject. Institutions can also offer bridge courses, and targeted learning modules can help add-

ress any knowledge gaps," explains Professor Kumar. Talking about the career possibilities in the field, he says aspirants can conduct clinical trials to investigate the efficacy of ayurvedic treatments and formulations. Studying the effects of ayurvedic herbs on various physiological systems is also possible. Collaborating with researchers from other fields, such as biochemistry, genetics, and microbiology, can help explore ayurvedic principles. "This will promote interdisciplinary research," says Professor Kumar.

Specialised departments

"Institutions will benefit from establishing specialised departments or expanding existing ones to provide comprehensive education and research opportunities. With its rich integration of traditional knowledge and modern science, Ayurveda-Biology offers immense potential for interdisciplinary research. Candidates will be encouraged to explore areas that combine Ayurveda with biology, biotechnology, pharmacology, and other related fields to contribute to holistic healthcare solutions," he adds.

The UGC plans to monitor the popularity and acceptance of Ayurveda Biology by tracking the number of students selecting it in the UGC NET exams. "This data will help understand the trend and the impact of the subjects," he says.

TVET Mechatronics Project developed by Korea and NCERT is focused on Industry 4.0

Korea is eager to share its experience in educational reform, particularly for the growth of young technicians, by transferring these practices to India

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Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), established in 1991, is a grant provider under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea. Contributing to prosperity and the promotion of world peace through inclusive, mutual development cooperation, KOICA operates in 48 country offices around the globe namely in Asia, Eurasia, Africa, Middle East and Central and South America. Woochan Chang, country director, KOICA India, speaks about partnerships with Indian stakeholders and policymakers to promote youth entrepreneurship and job creation. Excerpts from the interview:

What was the outcome of the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) and International Labour Organization (ILO) projects, carried out between 2020 and 2024 that focused on strengthening MSMEs in the textile and food processing sectors in Odisha and Andhra Pradesh? Do you plan to extend this project to other states?
The project focused on creating a policy environment, skill development, and productivity improvements in Odisha and AP. Notable outcomes include enhanced capacity for MSME policy implementation, with over 40 policymakers and stakehol-

> **The Capacity Strengthening for Women Social Entrepreneurs program is the first joint endeavour under the KOICA-USAID partnership tailored for women in India**

ders trained from relevant central and state ministries. The Department of Industries, Andhra Pradesh MSME Development Corporation, Andhra Pradesh Sector Skill Development Corporation, the Institute of Entrepreneurship Development (IED), and state-level MSME associations including Association of Lady Entrepreneurs of Andhra Pradesh (ALEAP), OASME and FAPCCI were involved, alongside central ministries such as the Ministry of Textiles and the Ministry of Food Processing Industries (MOFPI) collaborating with us. Additionally, the Ministries of Labour & Employment and Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises (MoSME) were joint collaborators in this initiative. The projects focus on youth entrepreneurship and job creation, especially among vulnerable groups. Approximately, 814 jobs were created by MSMEs, with 100 young entrepreneurs (70 of whom were women) starting businesses and employing 257

people in the food processing and garment sectors.

What is the Korean government's strategy to create job opportunities for women and youth in India?
The Korean government is focusing on skill development, entrepreneurship support, and leveraging technology. The 17th Seoul ODA International Conference hosted by KOICA HQ in September highlighted the role of youth as drivers of growth and agents of change. Korea's strategy incorporates youth into the development cooperation process by ensuring their voices are heard in decision-making and implementation. KOICA is working on initiatives like Technical and Vocational Edu-

cation and Training (TVET) Mechatronics Project (Mechanical Engineering + Electronics + ICT) that provides advanced manufacturing skills. This will train youth technicians to develop skills having industrial demands. Korea is eager to share its experience in educational reform, particularly in the development of young technicians, by transferring these successful practices. The Capacity Strengthening for Women Social Entrepreneurs program is the first joint endeavour under the KOICA-USAID partnership,

which focuses on four strategic goals: women's economic empowerment, disaster and climate resilience, digital literacy, and trilateral cooperation. This programme, specifically tailored for women in India, aims to enhance their entrepreneurial capabilities by sharing successful practices from Korea's robust social economy and facilitating cross-border networking. These efforts are aimed at preparing women for Industry 4.0 and fostering innovation to create new employment opportunities.

> Korea's strategy incorporates youth into the development cooperation process by ensuring their voices are heard in decision-making and implementation.
> – Woochan Chang

What advice would you give to students aspiring to study in South Korea?
Students aspiring to study in South Korea should focus on acquiring skills in emerging sectors, such as AI, advanced manufacturing, and healthcare–areas in which South Korea excels. It is also beneficial to explore opportunities for internships and collaborations that South Korea offers, which can provide valuable international exposure.

What are the initiatives introduced for educated youth? Is KOICA also collaborating with academic institutes?
KOICA has introduced several initiatives for educated youth, significantly enhancing their skills for the evolving job market. One notable program is the TVET Mechatronics Project, developed in collaboration with NCERT, which prepares students for Industry 4.0. KOICA also emphasizes the integration of artificial intelligence in education and healthcare, enabling youth to acquire valuable technology skills that are increasingly in demand. Furthermore, KOICA's WE-KON (We are KOICA in India) network actively engages youth in development efforts by helping them collaborate, share ideas, and co-create projects. The workshops and digital campaigns help the youth remain at the forefront of KOICA's mission for sustainable development.

Post NEP 2020, rise in diversity of scholarship winners

Elizabeth Kiss, CEO of the Rhodes Trust, talks about the significance of the new Sixth Rhodes Scholarship for India and the thrust towards a holistic selection criteria

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The road to Rhodes Scholarship can be tough, and in the not-too-distant past, five Rhodes Scholars-elect for India were chosen after the culmination of a rigorous national selection process. Presently, the Sixth Rhodes Scholarship for India has been announced, the first selection of which will take place next year, with the successful candidate arriving in Oxford in Autumn 2026. During her India-visit, Elizabeth Kiss, CEO of the Rhodes Trust, tells *Education Times*, that the new Scholarship would give one more student every year the opportunity to join in the Trust's global network to change the world for the better.

> We have worked on outreach initiatives, especially through digital platforms and alumni ambassadors, to reach more students from underrepresented areas. For example, we have seen more applicants and winners from places like Kashmir and Nagaland.
> – Elizabeth Kiss

The legacy of the Scholarship seems to make it the world's oldest, with over 100 students awarded every year from all over the globe. From India, the first Rhodes Scholars took up residence in Oxford in 1947, and since that time 200 + Indians have been awarded the scholarship to access top-tier education and connect with global networks. Elizabeth elaborates, "We celebrated our 120th anniversary last year and a lot has changed since the Scholarship's inception in 1902. India was added in 1947, Pakistan in 1948, and more recently China, Israel, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine were added to the long list of countries. Women became eligible in 1977, which was another significant milestone, and currently, the gender balance globally is about 50-50. For India specifically, we recently announced a sixth Indian Rhodes Scholarship, thanks to contributions from alumni like Mukund Rajan and his wife Soumya, in honour of her great-grandfather, Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the second President of India."

With women now making up 50% of the awardees, gender parity, it would seem, can be a given. "But then, if women have managed to secure many scholarships, it is not as if the slots are gender specific. The selection committee is instructed to choose the best candidates based on the holistic selection criteria. Over time, we have seen that excellence is distributed equally across genders, and globally, it is about 50-50. This reflects the fact that women in India are excelling in universities and that our committees are unbiased, selecting candidates based purely on merit," Elizabeth adds.

Emphatic about the far-reaching impact of the National Educa-

tion Policy (NEP) 2020, she observes that there has been an increase in the diversity both in applicants and winners. "We have also worked on outreach initiatives, especially through digital platforms and alumni ambassadors, to reach more students from underrepresented areas. For example, we have seen more applicants and winners from places like Kashmir and Nagaland," Elizabeth says. If Sameer Rashid Bhat was the first Rhodes scholar selected from Kashmir, Akumjung Pongen, was the first Rhodes Scholar from the Northeast. What has remained constant however, is the selection criteria and the depth of the talent pool. "Our selection criteria have remained fairly consistent over the last 121 years. Academic excellence is crucial since candidates must be accepted into Oxford University. However, we also prioritise qualities such as kindness, empathy, truthfulness and leadership where people come together to think and act to solve the world's pressing problems. The process is holistic, and we look for candidates who demonstrate these traits in addition to academic success," Elizabeth says. This year, the Trust had around 700 applicants competing for five spots with the number increasing by about 10% each year. Discussing the benefits of the endowments across a wide spectrum, specially those from marginalised backgrounds, Elizabeth says, "We fully cover all costs for scholars, including tuition, travel, visas, and living expenses. We also provide additional support through hardship funds, research grants, and mini-grants to ensure scholars thrive. There are opportunities for personal growth as well, such as trips and retreats, and we are committed to making sure that all scholars, regardless of their background, have an excellent all-round experience." While the endowment for a scholarship is £5 million, which supports up to four scholars at a time, the cost per scholar, including everything from tuition to living expenses, is around £75,000-80,000 per year. "Our strategy has young people at its core, and we are determined to redouble our efforts to create further scholarships for India as part of our drive to make Rhodes Scholarship truly global," Elizabeth adds.
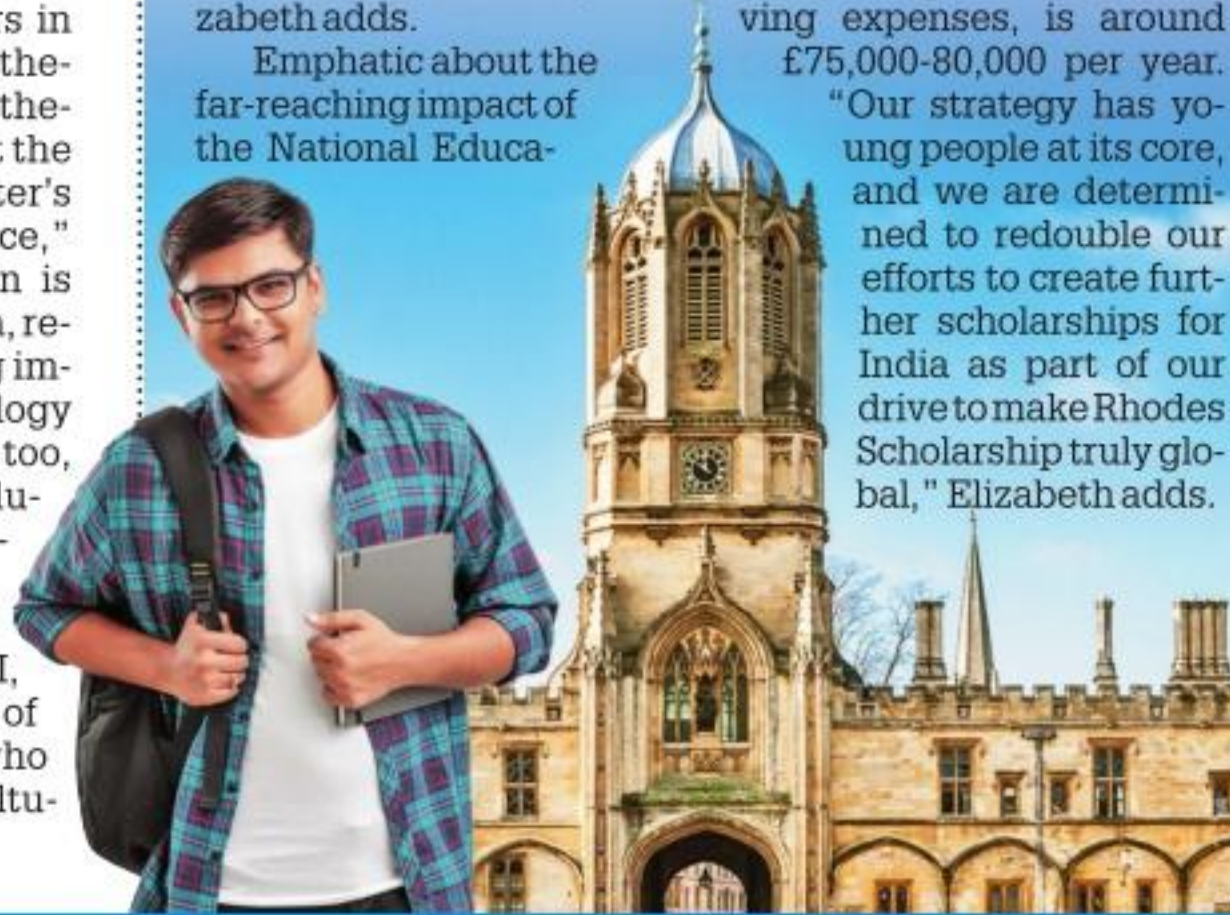
STEM fields must support women finding their feet

The MoUs between France's École Polytechnique and the IITs will facilitate student exchanges and collaboration in cutting-edge research and diverse academic programmes

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To foster global scientific leadership, Ecole Polytechnique, a prestigious technical institution in France, is strengthening its academic and research ties with India. On her recent visit to India, Ms Laura Chaubard, president and director general, École Polytechnique, highlighted the need to collaborate with top Indian institutions, particularly the IITs which works on similar research ideologies and teaching pedagogies.

Ms Chaubard's visit to India follows the groundwork laid by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who during his official visit to France in July 2023 emphasised stronger academic partnership between the educational institutes in both countries. During Modi's visit, French President Emmanuel Macron reiterated France's goal to have an intake of 30,000 Indian students by 2030. Chaubard aims to have a stronger collaboration to exchange ideas and expertise between Polytechnique de Paris, (of which École Polytechnique is a part) and IIT Delhi and IIT Madras. These new collaborations mark a critical phase in Ecole Polytechnique's expansion into India. "We have a lot in common with Indian institutions such as IIT Bombay and IISc Bangalore, and we are actively exploring opportunities for research and student exchange," she says.

Forging new collaborations
During Chaubard's visit to India, École Polytechnique signed precise agreements with IIT Delhi and IIT Bombay, facilitating student exchange programmes and enhancing research collaboration. Discussions are also underway with IISc Bangalore, focusing on areas of common interest, including AI, Physics, and Envi-

> Our top programmes among Indian students include the double majors in Mathematics and Physics, Mathematics and Economics, and Mathematics and Computer Science at the bachelor's level, as well as master's programmes in AI and finance.
> – Laura Chaubard

ronmental Sciences. "During our encounter with IISc we realised we already have many ongoing collaborations. We see a huge potential for further cooperation," she says.

The agreements will allow French students to spend semesters at IITs and IISc, giving them first-hand exposure to India's education system and technological advancements. At the same time, Indian students will have greater access to École Polytechnique's cutting-edge research facilities and diverse academic programmes.

"We have been welcoming Indian students for a long time, but we want to strengthen these links," she says. Currently, the institution hosts over 80 Indian students, but there is potential for much growth.

Gender equality
École Polytechnique is committed to promoting diversity and gender equality, particularly in the STEM fields, where women have historically been underrepresented. "This is a global concern, not just in France," Chaubard says. The institution has developed several programmes aimed at encouraging young women to pursue careers in science and engineering, including summer schools and mentorship initiatives that provide female students

with role models and support networks for career advancement.
"We are making progress, especially when it comes to our international recruitments. In fact, over 55% of our Bachelor of Science students and more than 60% of our master's students are women," Chaubard adds. However, the gender gap remains more pronounced in the national recruitment pool. The institution is focused on making science and engineering more appealing to women by highlighting the vast opportunities available in these fields.

"Our goal is to show young women that careers in engineering and Mathematics are not only viable but essential for the future," she says. The job market in France is increasingly open to women in STEM, and Ecole Polytechnique is at the forefront of efforts to ensure that women have equal access to these opportunities.

Expanding opportunities
Indian students have historically shown a strong preference for programmes at Ecole Polytechnique that focus on data science, Artificial Intelligence, and economics. "Our top programmes among Indian students include the double majors in Mathematics and Physics, Mathematics and Economics, and Mathematics and Computer Science at the bachelor's level, as well as master's programmes in AI and finance," Chaubard adds. The institution is eager to expand its reach in India, recognising the country's growing importance in the global technology landscape. French companies, too, are increasingly looking for graduates who have a strong understanding of both Indian and French cultures, particularly in fields such as data science, AI, and engineering. "We see a lot of potential for Indian students who have the skills to navigate a bicultural environment," she says.

Combining future-ready education in a traditional environment

With an eye towards the future, ancient traditions are integrated with innovation, to provide the true essence of college experience in Italy, writes Ambassador Antonio Bartoli

Italy has a long tradition of excellence in education and is home to some of the oldest educational institutions such as the University of Bologna, founded in the early 11th century. With an eye always towards the future, ancient traditions combine with innovation, providing diverse academic programmes and top-tier education in cutting-edge fields such as architecture, economics, space science, engineering, agriculture, and mathematics. Italian universities are ranked among the Top 150 in Europe and globally, in the QS World University Rankings 2025.

La Sapienza-University of Rome leads in Classical Studies and Ancient History for the 4th consecutive year (QS Rankings by Subject 2024). The Politecnico of Milan–a public scientific-technological university, stands out at 7th place in Architecture and in Art and Design, as well as 9th in Mechanical and Aeronautical engineering. Bocconi Uni-

> To study in Italy, Indian youth will need a visa. The Uni-Italia Agency which promotes the Italian higher education system with its offices in Mumbai and Delhi, will guide students with relevant information.
> – Ambassador Antonio Bartoli

versity ranks 2nd in the world in Marketing, while also securing 9th place in Management Economics. These results underscore the excellence and reputation of these academic institutions on an international level.

With 67 public universities, 19 private universities and 25 fine arts academies, the Italian education system offers more than 700 courses in English. The internationalisation of academic programmes and the consolidated international rela-

tions between Italian and foreign institutions promote intercultural exchanges, making Italy an attractive destination for students from all over the world.

One of the reasons Italy has become a preferred destination for many international students is its high-quality education at an affordable cost. Studying in Italy can be less expensive than in other European countries. Besides Rome and Milan, smaller cities such as Padua, Pisa, Turin and Naples are popular as ideal locations for students. In addition, the International Student Card, valid in Italy and recognised by UNESCO, allows students to get benefits and discounts on accommodation, shopping, food, sport and travel. Italian cities enchant everyone with their pleasant climate, delicious cuisine and lively social life. The wonderful structures of ancient Rome, fascinating Renaissance palaces and contemporary innovations have made Italy popular all over the

world; studying here means living in an environment rich in art, history and culture, with access to 59 UNESCO World Heritage sites. Every year, the Italian Government offers scholarships to foreign citizens to complete formal studies and/or to follow study or research programmes in Italy, and this is applicable to also the framework of joint and double degrees. To study in Italy, Indian youth will need a visa. The Uni-Italia Agency which promotes the Italian higher education system with its offices in Mumbai and Delhi, will guide students with relevant information.

The Indian community in Italy is quite significant, with around 1,64,000 Indians residing there, many of whom are young adults. In Italy, Indian students will not only find rigorous academic training but also a welcoming place where they can make lifelong friendships.
(The author is Ambassador of Italy to India)

Short AI module for ITI students to unlock better career opportunities

This will equip graduates to acquire AI vocabulary, and basic technical skills to enter the job market

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As the demand for tech skills continues to reshape the job market, Industrial Training Institutes (ITI) will soon offer new curricula to explore careers in Artificial Intelligence (AI). A short-term foundational AI module, 'Introduction to Artificial Intelligence' will be introduced this month to equip students with key knowledge and skills in AI. The aim is to introduce ITI students to AI and expand job opportunities in various domains.

The new 7.5-hour foundational module, developed by the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE) in collaboration with the Future Right Skills Network (FRSN), is an addition to the already existing 120-hour employability module, introduced in over 14,681 ITIs across India. The ITI teachers are being trained to take lessons in AI.

Atul Kumar Tiwari, secretary, Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, told *Education Times* that the initiative will not just familiarise students with AI but also give them a level playing field. This will open the floodgate of opportunities for underprivileged and under-resourced institutions.

"We are ensuring that all ITIs, including those in remote areas, have the resources to implement this module effectively," says Tiwari. The Ministry has been working on increasing the trainer capacity building, resource allocation, and a flexible curriculum that can adapt to to local needs, making AI education accessible to a wide range of students. The course will also help students learn about basic concepts of Machine Learning (ML), Robotics, Blockchain and data analysis and offer practical training to find careers related to emerging technologies.

Future workforce

The module does not guarantee immediate job placements, but the students will get a competitive edge with foundational AI skills. By the end of the course, students will acquire AI vocabulary, analytical skills, and the ability to evaluate AI's impact on society and their careers. "With free AI tools, they can explore career options, make informed decisions, and build skills that boost employability," adds Tiwari. The module also includes a strong focus on ethical AI usage, fostering responsible digital citizens prepared to tackle challenges in the tech-driven job market.

The curriculum's design posed unique challenges as many ITI students lacked advanced digital literacy or exposure to AI concepts. Addressing these gaps required simplifying complex AI topics and using relatable analogies to ensure comprehension. "For

Implementation challenges

Limited digital literacy: Many ITI students may lack foundational digital skills, hindering their understanding of AI concepts.
Complexity of AI topics: AI concepts can be intricate and challenging to grasp for students without prior exposure.
**Resource constraints:** Under-resourced institutions may struggle to implement the new curriculum effectively.
Trainer preparedness: Ensuring that trainers have the necessary skills and knowledge to teach the AI module is critical for success.
Curriculum adaptability: The need for a flexible curriculum that can adjust to local needs and context presents additional challenges.

How it will benefit students

- Students will gain foundational AI knowledge
- AI-driven career-matching tools will help students identify suitable career paths
- Foundational AI skills will help students improve their employability
- Curriculum emphasises skills like logical reasoning and critical thinking
- Ethical AI awareness
- Inclusive learning environment
- Emerging technologies such as Robotics and Blockchain will prepare students for future jobs in the job market
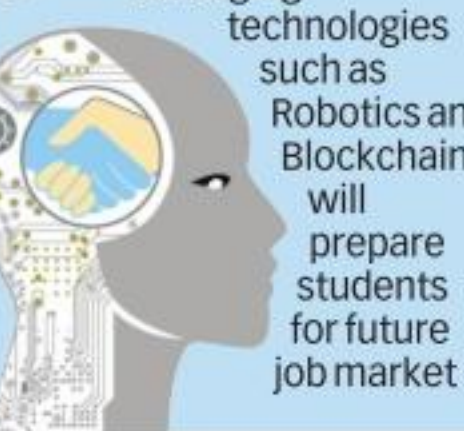
example, we used metaphors like comparing data processing to sort items in a factory," explains Nikita Bengani, director, youth programme, Quest Alliance, the not-for-profit organisation facilitating FRSN. This approach has made AI more accessible, providing students with a strong foundation in critical thinking, logical reasoning, and problem-solving—skills that transcend technical disciplines.

Several institutions located in remote locations face resource constraints and trainer preparedness. "Complexity of AI topics was the major constraint as students found it difficult to adapt to the flexible curriculum based on local industry demand," adds Bengani.

Cisco, a key partner in the initiative, aims to increase workforce and digital inclusivity through the inclusion of AI modules.

Devising a foolproof system to ensure credibility of NEET

Recommendations suggested by a seven-member committee to reform the exam have met with mixed reviews as experts weigh in on the options to check pilferage and other malpractices

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Months after it was constituted, a high-level committee, headed by former ISRO chairman K Radhakrishnan, has proposed major reforms to the National Eligibility Entrance Test (NEET) in the wake of this year's paper leaks and exam irregularities. Experts claim the reforms were much needed to bring back the credibility in the examination system while advocating the need for multistage examination process and restricting the number of attempts and exam centres.

The seven-member panel that submitted its recommendations on November 1, suggested some key recommendations, which include implementing a hybrid examination model where question papers would be transmitted digitally while students can use OMR sheets for answers. This method while strengthening the security will ensure the release of exam questions closer to the start of the exams, thereby reducing the risk of unauthorised access.

The committee further proposed adopting a multiple-stage format similar to JEE to manage the large volume of applicants, along with limiting the number of attempts to create a more equitable examination landscape. Presently, candidates are allowed to take the NEET UG exam an unlimited number of times. The proposed change is also expected to motivate candidates to prepare more competently for their attempts.

Further, to make the examination's security more foolproof, the panel recommended reducing dependency on outsourced services and private test centres. The panel recommended that NTA should instead increase its permanent staff and the number of exam centres under its direct control. Currently, exams are essentially conducted in government-run institutions, with private centres used only when necessary.

A key proposal from the panel involves the development of a 'Digi Exam' platform, which draws inspiration from the successful implementation of the Digi Yatra initiative at Indian airports. This platform is expected to leverage biometrics, including facial recognition technology, to facilitate secure candidate identification and authentication. By adopting this approach, the NTA can move towards a more effective and paperless process for registration, exam access, and remote testing.

Digital measures

"The ecosystem should be developed in a phase-wise manner before implementing such measures as not all class XII students are tech-savvy or computer literate. These initiatives should ideally be started at the NEET PG level," says a senior faculty member from a Delhi-NCR medical college, suggesting further the need to set up high-speed electronic printers at the exam centres to digitally print the question papers and minimise manual intervention. The centres should be owned and manned by NTA's own employees who are adequately trained to manage the exam process.

Further, in a high-stakes exam like NEET UG, a two-stage process, as per the recommendations, will eliminate a large percentage of candidates at the prelims stage, leaving the more serious candidates to compete for the final exam. "This will help improve the quality of candidates enrolling for counselling and college admissions. Additionally, the ratio of the number of seats to students will be reduced. But multiple sessions for a single exam much like JEE does not give students a clear picture about the difficulty level of each session, nor are they convinced about the use of normalisation for calculating the scores which may invite controversy the way NEET PG 2024 did," says the faculty.

Highlighting some of the key outcomes of the hybrid mode of exams, Dr Amit Gupta, professor, Department of Surgery, AIIMS Rishikesh, says, "It will check to some extent pilferage of question papers. At one go, the question papers will be displayed on screens throughout the country. Thereafter, students can write their answers on the OMR sheets if the exam is in pen and paper mode, and online if it is a Computer-Based Test (CBT). A uniform CBT format might be an issue in the remote and rural interiors

Restricting the number of attempts will give candidates a fair chance to crack the exam, considering there is at present no bar on reattempts
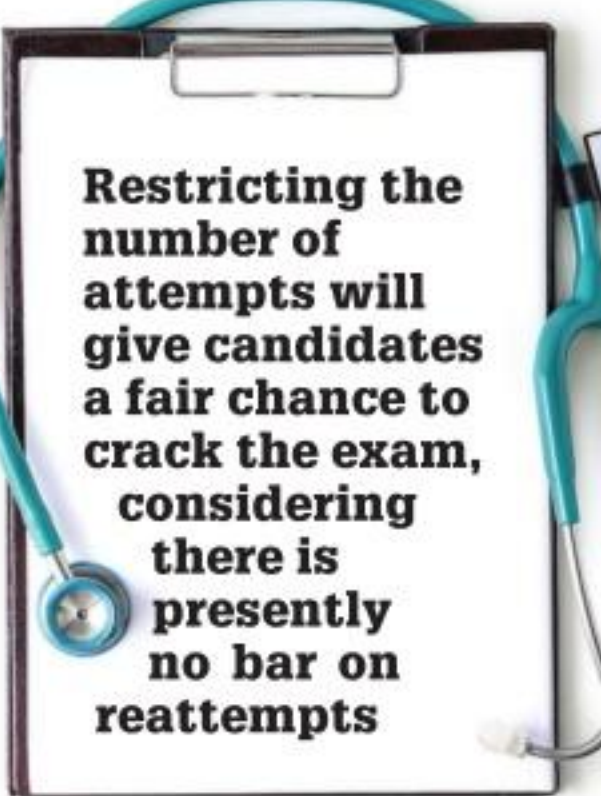
due to uneven internet access, giving rise to technical glitches."

He further adds that the same hybrid format is used in the OSCE exam (Objective Structured Clinical Examination) by National Board of Examinations (NBE) to assess candidates' clinical competencies and knowledge of medical procedures in postgraduate examination.

"The hybrid mode would face some issues like technological failures, insider collusion, or inadequate monitoring of exam conditions, which might persist if not carefully managed. Digitally transmitting question papers should have strong encryption and secure channels," cautions Dr B Unnikrishnan, dean, Kasturba Medical College, Mangalore, Manipal Academy of Higher Education.

Multistage exam

Since the number of candidates appearing for NEET exam far outweigh the number of candidates in any other national-level entrance exam, it would be better to have a multistage exam process, such as a NEET Prelims and NEET Main/Advanced just like JEE, says Dr Gupta, adding it will make the job of NTA easier and eventually lead to the smooth conduct of the examination.

Moreover, restricting the number of attempts will give all candidates a fair chance to crack the exam considering there is presently no bar on the number of attempts, Dr Gupta says. However, Dr Unnikrishnan reasons that limiting attempts might affect candidates from disadvantaged backgrounds. "Students who have access to better resources, coaching, and preparation might fare better, making it harder for those with fewer opportunities to compete effectively," he says.

AICTE targets 1 crore internships by 2025, achieves 54 lakh so far; MSMEs to play key role in expansion

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The AICTE has set an ambitious goal to facilitate 1 crore internships for technical graduates by 2025. To bridge the gap between academia and industry, AICTE has already enabled 54 lakh internships, underscoring its commitment to enhancing employability through experiential learning. There was an increase in internships in AI, Data Science, ML and other emerging technologies. Post-pandemic industry demands pushed the need for internships in healthcare, sustainability, greentech, fintech and biotechnology. In 2024, AICTE involved the MSMEs sector to participate in expanding internship opportunities.

AICTE Internship Portal, launched in 2020 has helped connect engineering and polytechnic students with internship opportunities offered by corporates, industries and startups. With 4.7 crore students registered on the portal, it has partnered with over 76,570 companies, including major industry players including Google, Microsoft, Salesforce, TCS etc along with startups and local businesses. Virtual internships now make up a substantial proportion of the total internships offered through the portal. The pandemic underscored the flexibility and scalability of virtual internships, which allow companies to connect with a nationwide talent pool.

Diversification of internships: Sectors and recent growth

Technology and Digital
Startups and Entrepreneurs
Sustainability and Green Tech
Healthcare and Biotechnology
Finance and Fintech

Speaking to *Education Times*, Buddha Chandrashekhar, chief coordinating officer, AICTE, underlined the transformative potential of internships in improving students' job readiness, especially through expanding virtual and remote internship models. Virtual internships comprise approximately 40-50% of all internships offered, with high participation from students in remote areas. AICTE continues to promote virtual internships due to their accessibility and their capacity to deliver real-world industry experience on a large scale. Companies such as Cisco, Ansys, Midas IT, Wadhwani Foundation and many others are collaborating with AICTE to provide virtual internships to students. Several programmes such as The Urban Learning Internship Programme (TULIP) too have helped students gain virtual internships.

Growing opportunities

Partnership with industries, state-level enterprises and small businesses is crucial to expand internships for students. Large corporations have been supportive but are relatively limited in number, and smaller startups often offer fewer internships. MSMEs comprise 8 crore enterprises and have the potential to offer more internships. If each MSME offered just two internships, it would amount to 16 crore internship opportunities. "The business dynamics of MSMEs are not mature enough to adopt the internship culture. However, MSMEs could significantly widen the network of available internships if they gradually adopt this model," says Chandrashekhar.

Helping students in underserved areas

AICTE internship drive has increased accessibility for students from smaller institutions, particularly in remote areas. Virtual internships, which have grown in popularity since the pandemic, democratised access to quality internships that once might have been geographically out of reach. For students in rural areas or tier-two cities, the chance to intern with a tech firm in urban centres such as Bangalore or Hyderabad is now possible. "Access to virtual internships has levelled the playing field in ways we hadn't anticipated before the pandemic," says Chandrashekhar. Given the ease of access and global reach, virtual internships now make up a significant portion of the total internships offered.

CBSE introduces 50% competency-focused questions in class X, and XII board exams

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The CBSE increased the percentage of competency-focused questions for the class X and XII board exams to 50% from the earlier 40%. Students, who prefer to enrol in dummy schools after to prepare for JEE Main or NEET UG, will have to be thorough with the new format or else they might clear competitive exams and fail in the class XII board exam.

To end the rote learning pattern, the focus is more on making the student understand the concept to be able to answer the competency-focused questions. Sanyam Bhardwaj, controller of examinations, CBSE, says, "Students are asked questions based on periodic tables in competitive exams. Many of them learn the table by rote and attempt questions based on it in competitive exams without fully understanding its application. Some students manage to crack the competitive exam but fail in class XII exam."

"Earlier, direct questions

Questions will be based on daily life situations instead of directly from the book

were asked that had simple answers, which students could learn by rote—for example, 'Which city is the capital of India?' Now, the questions are slightly different. For example, students might be asked, 'There are several metro cities in India where different kinds of industries exist; where is Parliament located?' or 'Which is the capital of India, and why?' They will need to answer both what and why, which will test their knowledge," adds Bhardwaj. The textbooks will be meant to teach concepts and not for assessments. "Questions will be based on daily life situations instead of directly from the book. This will make them application-based. Competency-based questions will be featured in all formats — source-based questions, MCQs, objective-type and subjective-type questions. Students' con-

cepts must be clear," adds Bhardwaj. For class X, one example of a competency-focused question is: which of the following is a necessary condition for all chemical reactions?

- The reactants should be in the same state.
- Energy should be supplied to the reactants.
- The reactants should be at the same temperature.
- There should be physical contact between the reactants.

Increased learning

Another reason to increase the percentage of competency-focused questions is that students do not write as much as they used to earlier, they prefer to communicate on mobile phone and social media. "Competency-focused questions have been included in class unit tests and internal examinations. Students are not as focused on their studies as they were in the past. Often, there is a lack of self-learning, with students relying solely on what is taught in schools," says Indramani Upadhyay, KV CRPF, Lucknow.

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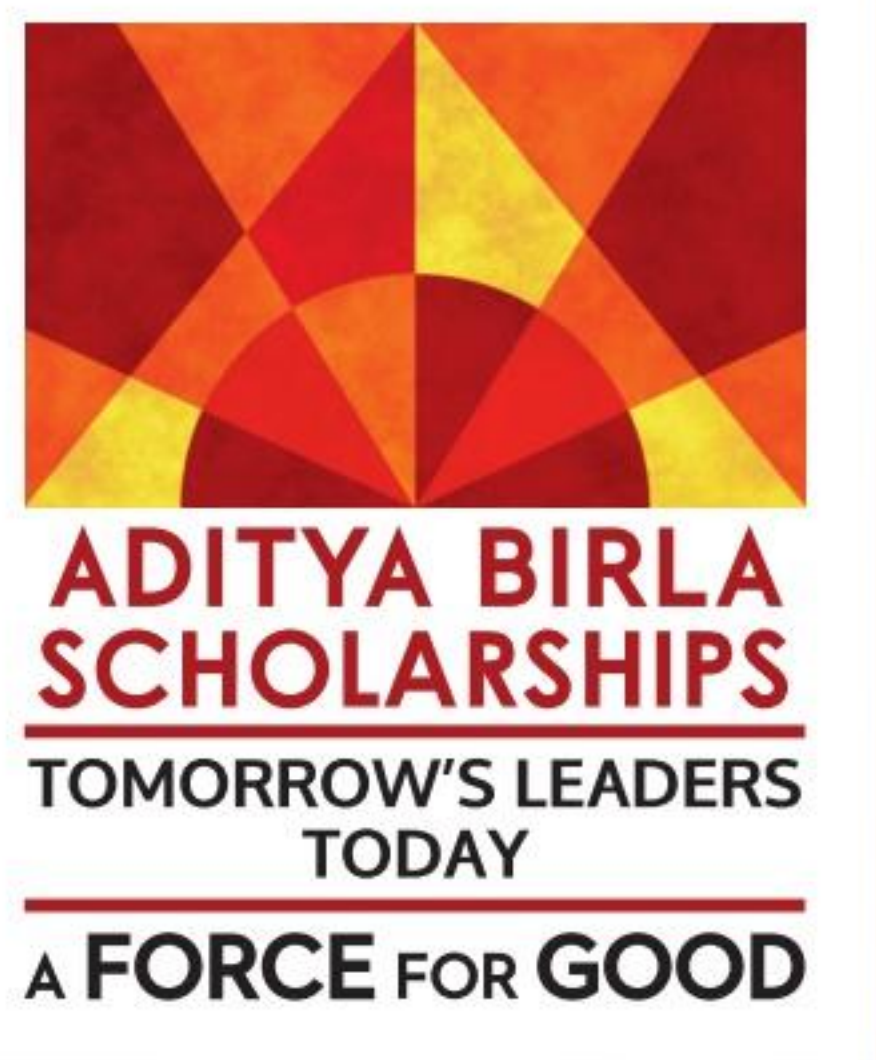## OUR 750+ SCHOLARS CLEARLY, KEEP THE BEST IN THE WORLD.

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Bagless days encourage students to have a relaxed approach to learning

They get an opportunity for cultural visits, learn a craft, and talk about self image, as they walk in without books

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Several schools are rolling out the 'bagless days' initiative, an important part of NEP 2020 that recommends at least 10 such days annually. In 2022, the initiative was introduced as a pilot project by the Ministry of Education and NCERT and it has been recently launched by Delhi's Directorate of Education (DoE). Bagless days aim at taking a break from regular academic routines, providing students with hands-on learning experiences focused on creativity, critical thinking, and vocational skills. Activities often include cultural visits, exposure to local artisans and crafts, and practical life skills, fostering a well-rounded development of students.

Although the initiative ensures hands-on learning experiences and reduces academic stress, a few experts feel that challenges may arise for under-resourced schools due to inadequate facilities, and a shortage of trained instructors. There are also chances that it might disrupt structured learning routines, potentially hindering academic progress.

Pilot project

In July 2024, the Ministry of Education released guidelines for the implementation of bagless days for classes VI to VIII to encourage experiential learning. Saurabh Prakash, a member of Bhopal-based PSS Central Institute of Vocational Education (PSSCIVE), says, "PSSCIVE, the vocational education unit of the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT), ran a pilot in 2022 across Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat. Along with SCERT, feedback from schools was collected to introduce this initiative across India by issuing guidelines and activities on different themes. Many states have modified it according to their local needs. While SCERT Gujarat and Telangana had shown great interest in the initiative, holding online meetings with the PSSCIVE, other states such as Bihar, and Uttarakhand are slowly starting to implement the guidelines in their schools."

While experiential learning is key to the programme, it also promotes a balance between academics and extracurriculars

Positive outcome

Alka Kapur, principal Modern Public School, Shalimar Bagh, Delhi, says, "We started the initiative as pilot project in the last academic session for classes VI to VIII. After the government's recent announcement, the school will implement it from preschool to class VIII. Students have shown physical and mental benefits as they focus on interactive and stress-free learning experiences. Such measures effectively promote skills such as teamwork, communication, and problem-solving. We have also seen signs of increased engagement and reduced absenteeism. Some schools also conduct regular assessments or surveys to assess student satisfaction with various activities."

In Karnataka, the implementation of the bagless days initiative is under way. A state government official says, "The Karnataka education department has been gradually introducing bagless days since 2022, where students can engage in activities beyond regular academics. While many government schools have started implementing this on specific days, the full statewide rollout and integration vary."

Vanitha Lokesh, principal of BMN Public School, Bengaluru, told Education Times, "We have not received any circular so far from the government, and many schools are yet to adopt the initiative in the state. Also, we believe in the concept of bagful days, which helps in consistent learning and fostering discipline. With structured lessons, bagful days can help children build foundational knowledge. Logistical challenges also remain for several schools, including the need for teacher training to facilitate non-academic discussions and aligning bagless day activities with the regular curriculum."

Skilling needs

Praneet Mungali, trustee and secretary, Sanskriti Group Schools, Pune, says, "While experiential learning is central to the programme, it also promotes a balanced approach between academics and extracurriculars, fostering a stress-free learning environment. Throughout the academic year, students in classes VI to VIII engage in hands-on activities like carpentry, pottery, electrical work, and gardening, connecting them with India's diverse cultural and occupational heritage. This exposure aims to prepare young learners for a modern economy by bridging the skills gap in a country where 65% of the population is under 35."

Recent NCERT survey and pilot project outcomes revealed a positive response with 91.86% of students, parents and teachers highlighting that the focus was more on mental growth and enhancement of social skills. In all, 86.63% feel reduced academic stress, and 88.95% feel it bridges classroom knowledge and real-life application, said Mungali. Implementing 'bagless days' in under-resourced schools can pose specific challenges, including limited funds, facilities, and trained instructors. "With nearly 85% of Indian schools lacking vocational courses, bridging this gap requires strategic allocation of funds, partnerships, and effective use of digital technology," he says.

The Maharashtra government also recently announced plans to implement bagless days, which will likely start from the next academic session. Sanjay Patil, Mumbai division president, Maharashtra State Secondary and Higher Secondary School Principals' Association, says, "The initiative might hinder academic progress by disrupting the structured learning routine of students. Schools, especially those with limited resources, may face challenges in providing adequate training for teachers to facilitate these sessions effectively. Without consistent support and guidance, bagless days could become superficial rather than meaningful, risking an educational gap and failing to deliver intended benefits," he adds.

Seeking feedback

Activities have been carefully chosen to incorporate local knowledge and traditional skills, offering students exposure to historical, cultural, and vocational experiences, such as visits to monuments and interactions with local artists. "These activities are not graded; instead, teachers are encouraged to support students' unique capabilities through informal assessments. Students document their learning experiences, and outcomes are communicated to parents and the school community through parent-teacher meetings, school websites, and social media," says Prakash.

History, English Literature, top choices for UGC NET

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In the UGC NET 2024 June cycle, three subjects emerged as the most sought-after. The highest number of students, 94,874, registered in History, and 59,427 appeared in the exam, making it the most sought-after subject in the June cycle. On the second spot is English Literature, in which 94764 registered and 54,002 appeared in the exam, and the third spot was reserved for Commerce.

The growing popularity of History as a subject for UGC NET registrations can be attributed to its rich cultural, academic, and career relevance. "History appeals to students due to its diverse career opportunities in academia, research, archaeology, museums, and heritage management. The subject's interdisciplinary nature, connecting fields like political science, sociology, and international relations, further enhances its appeal for those interested in broader academic exploration," says Bhupendra Bahadur Tiwari, professor and director, CMR University, Bengaluru.

Students choose History due to career avenues it provides

Additionally, India's increasing focus on preserving and promoting its historical and cultural identity has drawn more students towards History. "The subject's relevance extends beyond academia, with graduates finding roles in civil services, archives, and heritage conservation, sectors that are both prestigious and fulfilling. Moreover, History's strong connection to competitive exams like the UPSC Civil Services makes it an attractive option for students aiming for broader career prospects. The rise of digital resources and online archives has also made the study of History more engaging and accessible, further contributing to its growing popularity among UGC NET aspirants," says Tiwari.

English is a highly sought-after subject in undergraduate enrolments, often ranking first or second among humanities disciplines. "Many students pursue English Literature for their master's degree as well. As a result, graduates and postgraduates in English Literature frequently choose teaching as a career path, as it offers solid career opportunities. This trend reflects the popularity and value of the subject. People are drawn to English, are enthusiastic about its prospects, and view it positively. A master's degree in English opens up various career paths—not only in school teaching but also in media, publishing, teaching abroad, and corporate roles. The key takeaway is that more individuals are studying English and seeking careers where English plays a significant role, believing that proficiency in English can enhance their career prospects," says Anil Kumar Aneja, professor and head, Department of English, University of Delhi.

Exposure to diverse cultures and increased internet usage among students are also facilitating the expansion of career avenues for English programme students.

Commerce saw 91,630 students register and 59,282 appear in the exam. "Students find Commerce to be a softer option than Science as their perception is that other social science subjects may not be rewarding career-wise. In a market-led economy, even to invest in the stock market, you need some knowledge of Commerce. It is a vast stream and includes topics such as marketing, finance, and economics. Commerce is a diversified subject that allows students to choose a specific area where they can excel," says TK Mishra, former vice principal, Ramanujan College, University of Delhi.