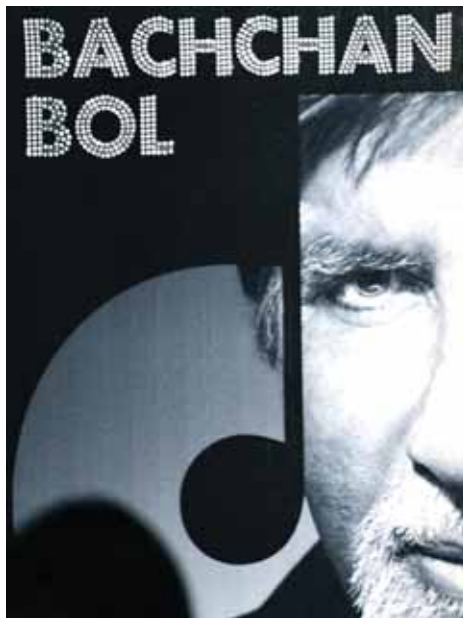


Lifestyle | Features

NAMASTE ALEXA: AMAZON SIGNS UP
BOLLYWOOD SUPERSTAR BACHCHAN

Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan will be the first Indian celebrity to lend his voice to Amazon's Alexa digital assistant starting next year, as the Silicon Valley giant expands its presence in the massive market. The 77-year-old actor has been a household name in India for nearly half a century, and his deep baritone is instantly recognizable to listeners in the country of 1.3 billion. Foreign firms such as Amazon have spent tens of billions of dollars in India in recent years as they fight for a piece of the Asian giant's burgeoning digital economy.

In a blog post on Monday, Amazon India said Bachchan's "voice experience" feature will become available for purchase on Alexa next year. "It will include popular offerings like jokes, weather, shayaris (poetry), motivational quotes, advice and more," the firm said. Alexa first rolled out celebrity voice option last year with actor Samuel L. Jackson, following a similar move by Google the year before, which gave users the option of hearing singer John Legend on the Google Assistant. "I am excited to create this voice experience," the Bollywood megastar said on Amazon's blog. "With voice technology, we are building something to engage



In this file photo Bollywood film actor Amitabh Bachchan launches 'Bachchan Bol-Bachchan Speak' his vlogging or vocal blogging service in Mumbai. — AFP

more effectively with my audience and well-wishers."

His earlier foray into vocal blogging in 2010, "Bachchan Bol-Bachchan Speak", allowed fans to listen to pre-recorded messages by the star at the push of a



button. In addition to competing with voice-activated devices such as Apple's Siri and Google Assistant for consumers, Amazon is battling Walmart-backed Flipkart and JioMart, owned by Asia's richest man Mukesh Ambani, for a share

of the online retail market. The tech giant, which is owned by Jeff Bezos, the world's richest person, is also trying to win eyeballs with its streaming service that competes with Netflix and Disney+ Hotstar. Bachchan and his family have been among India's highest-profile coronavirus patients.

The superstar, his actor son Abhishek, actress daughter-in-law Aishwarya Rai, and granddaughter Aaradhya were all admitted to hospital in July. All four have since been released. The veteran star returned to work last month filming India's version of "Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?" after authorities eased coronavirus curbs on movie and TV shoots. Nevertheless, with cases in India nearing five million, authorities in Mumbai—the home of Bollywood—have asked production houses to ensure that common facilities are regularly sanitised, masks worn and social distancing "followed as far as possible". Bachchan's last film, comedy-drama "Gulabo Sitabo", went straight to Amazon's streaming service in June, after theatres in India shut down in March due to pandemic fears. — AFP

WAHLBERG PROBES
MASCULINITY IN
'GOOD JOE BELL',
SAYS DIRECTOR

Mark Wahlberg interrupted his famously punishing daily workout regimen to hone his heartfelt new anti-bullying movie, its director told AFP as the film premiered in Toronto Monday. "Good Joe Bell" stars Wahlberg as a father attempting to walk coast-to-coast across the United States to raise awareness about the tragic perils of the homophobic taunting his son has suffered. Based on a real story, Joe's odyssey through rural America uncovers how prejudices are handed down from generation to generation, and poses the question of what it means to be a man in today's world. "Does it mean going camping, or fighting? What does toughness mean?" said director Reinaldo Marcus Green, a former athlete himself who tried out for major league baseball.



In this file photo US actor Mark Wahlberg arrives for the premiere of Netflix's "Spenser Confidential" at Regency Village Theatre in Westwood, California. — AFP

Wahlberg's own alpha male reputation was tarnished in 2018 when his schedule-including a 2:30 am wake-up, ahead of twice-daily gym sessions and cryotherapy—became a social media sensation after he shared it on Instagram. But Wahlberg brought that same regimented focus to his preparation for "Good Joe Bell," a film penned by the writers of "Brokeback Mountain" that preaches a manliness that is about "sensitivity, it's about being open, it's about learning to love," said Green. "Mark described it to me as it was going to be the most important role of his career," Green told AFP, ahead of its Toronto film festival premiere.

'Machismo is prevalent'

"We FaceTimed pretty much every day, from the moment I met him in December 2018... in the plane, whether he was in a cryo chamber, Mark would answer anywhere." "He'd be in the dentist's chair and answer and I'd be like 'Mark, you're getting work done on your teeth and you're FaceTiming!' It's unreal." Wahlberg, the youngest of nine Boston siblings whose parents divorced when he was 11, became embroiled in drugs and street violence as a minor. He served time for assault before finding fame as a rapper, model, actor and Hollywood producer. "When I met Mark, we definitely talked about our dads," said Green. "It was just kind of two guys looking at each other, and knowing that we kind of came from certain communities where a lot of that machismo is prevalent."

Green, whose young sporting ambitions were encouraged by his loving but "tough" father, is now directing a biopic of Richard Williams—father to tennis legends Serena and Venus—starring Will Smith. "It's truly an inspirational story, the Venus, Serena Williams, Richard Williams stories—it's so incredible," he said. "I think it can really help." — AFP



Photo shows apartments with balconies covered with plants at a residential community in Chengdu in China's southwestern Sichuan province. — AFP photos

WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE:
PLANTS OVERRUN CHINESE
APARTMENT BLOCKS

An experimental green housing project in a Chinese megacity promised prospective residents life in a "vertical forest", with manicured gardens on every balcony. All 826 apartments were sold out by April this year, according to the project's estate agent, but instead of a modern eco-paradise, the towers look like the set of a desolate, post-apocalyptic film. The problem? The mosquitoes love the plants too. Only a handful of families have moved into Chengdu's Qiyi City Forest Garden because of an infestation, state media have reported. The project in the southwestern city was built in 2018, with every private balcony designed to provide space for plants to grow, according to local media reports. Without any tenants

to care for them, the eight towers have been overrun by their own plants—and invaded by mosquitoes.

Plants have almost entirely swallowed up some neglected balconies, with branches hanging over railings all over the towers, footage shot this month showed. Paper was seen taped over some of the windows that were still visible behind the overgrown plants. But some residents appeared to have braved the mosquitoes—a handful of balconies had pruned plants and outdoor furniture, and lights turned on inside the apartments. Only about 10 families have moved in, according to the state-run Global Times newspaper. — AFP



This photo shows residents looking on from a balcony covered with plants in their apartment at a residential community in Chengdu in China's southwestern Sichuan province.

Young Chinese escape reality to ask: 'Whodunnit?'

A scream echoes from behind a black door, while inside a young woman cowers as she hides from an attacker. But Zeng Tian is not in real danger—this is an elaborate role-playing game. The 26-year-old and her seven friends are spending their afternoon locked away in a basement in Shanghai taking part in murder mystery game "The Haunted Mansion". "Every time I join a new play and read the script, I get to live a new life," says Zeng, who is unemployed but hopes to work in the live action

role-play (LARP) industry. "I can spend his or her entire life within four hours and have a taste of their love and hatred," added Zeng, sporting a frilly hooded cloak that is part European medieval, part Red Riding Hood.

The friends sometimes use their mobile phones to help them with clues but they are mainly reading from scripts and debating who could be the killer on the loose. Prices vary around the country, but in Shanghai players pay from about 300 to 800 yuan (\$45-\$120) each to take part.

Prior to the COVID19 pandemic, the live action murder mystery market appeared to have captured the imagination of China's urban youths. The online shopping platform Meituan-Dianping estimated the industry was worth more than 10 billion yuan in 2019 — double the previous year's figure. There are no official figures for 2020, but as virus restrictions ease, young people are returning to these fantasy games, experts say. State media has in recent months run a series of stories about the popularity of role-playing.

China National Radio last month ran a report voicing fears that too many of the scripts rely on murders, violent plots and sexual content, but others see the games as a way to get young people off their smartphones and back interacting with each other in real life. Xinhua News Agency quoted Yuan Hang, an owner of a LARP game studio in the city of Luoyang, central China's Henan Province in a report on the trend. "This type of game, bringing people back to real life from cyberspace, meets the need of young people to have

offline social contact and face-to-face communication," Yuan Hang tells the news outlet. Zhao Qingsong, who works in e-commerce, agrees: "Nowadays people tend to talk to each other on smartphones. But I feel something is missing during that communication compared to the old days when we could sit together and talk face to face. The 25-year-old tells AFP: "This gathering really makes me feel no longer lonely." — AFP



Players preparing to take part in the live action role-play (LARP) murder mystery game "The Haunted Mansion" at a role play studio in Shanghai. — AFP Photos



This photo shows a player taking part in the live action role-play (LARP) murder mystery game "The Haunted Mansion" at a role play studio in Shanghai.