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The King Who Rewrote Stardom

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At 60, Shah Rukh Khan remains more than a movie star. He is the mirror in which a generation sees its own reflection — restless, romantic, aspiring, bruised by the speed of our own becoming. This month's issue unpacks the myth and the man: the brand that defined ambition, the actor who broke free from stardom's cage, and the last superstar standing in Bollywood's shifting universe.

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Shah Rukh Khan: The living archive of India's ambition

– *Devansh Sharma*

Before Shah Rukh Khan went full throttle looking for love (read: *Koi na koi chahiye pyaar karne wala*) in his 1992 big-screen debut Deewana, he had already entered our homes and hearts with intimate television shows like *Fauji* and *Circus* on DD National. If watching him as Abhimanyu Rai and Shekharan Rai respectively wasn't enough, we also relished quick glimpses of him in blink-and-miss commercials in between.

Back in 1998, we saw a 24-year-old Shah Rukh adjust his headband and give a hat tip to Sylvester Stallone's ultimate underdog Rocky Balboa as

Survivor's definitive sports anthem "Eye of the Tiger" set the tone for his sprint. But before bolting into his victory lap, Shah Rukh pulled out his Liberty shoes from under the bed. At that point, when he leaps and lands on his feet, we couldn't help but laud the shoes, not knowing then that it was always the man.

The Shah Rukh Khan ad that began it all



Shahrukh Khan's 1st Ever TV Ad from 1988 for Liberty shoes

Shah Rukh Khan is the proverbial "*lambi race ka ghoda*," whether it's on the big screen or small, in features or ad films. Any brand he touched turned to gold. While he remembers his first-ever commercial in Mumbai to be that of Tata (somebody pluck it out of oblivion?), it was that Liberty Shoes commercial that announced the arrival of a whole new era in the following

decade – that of liberalisation, and that of the apex liberator – Shah Rukh Khan.

“I’ve known him since his theatre days in Delhi. And then when he did *Fauji*. There’s always been an innate grace to him,” renowned feature and ad filmmaker Shoojit Sircar tells SCREEN, having worked with Shah Rukh in popular campaigns like Idea and most recently, Daawat Rice. “Over the years, he’s also built an integrity, which, when coupled with that grace, makes him even more loveable. You can’t help not watch the screen when he’s on it. And that love has only grown with time. I can’t put a finger on it,” he adds.



Shah Rukh Khan on a most recent advertisement of Daawat Rice

On the cusp of liberalisation and his plunge into superstardom with Abbas-Mustan’s *Baazigar* and Yash Chopra’s *Darr* in 1993, Shah Rukh was seen in a rather eccentric commercial. Ad guru Prahlad Kakkar recalls how right after wrapping up Aziz Mirza’s 1992 romantic comedy *Raju*

Ban Gaya Gentleman, Shah Rukh came to an Assam tea garden to shoot a commercial for the Brahmaputra Tea. “A game was happening in that ad, in which the one who answers incorrectly turns into a laddoo. So, Shah Rukh gives the right answer and the other one turns into a laddoo,” Kakkar recalls.

SRK’s ‘dark days’

However, Shah Rukh’s image took a dark turn after the success of *Baazigar* and *Darr*, in which he played an anti-hero. Sure, there was Kundan Shah’s gentle unrequited romance *Kabhi Haan Kabhi Naa* right after in 1994, but it was quickly followed by another villainous portrayal in Rahul Rawail’s psychological crime thriller *Anjaam*. As India opened its gates to MNCs and homegrown brands pulled up their socks. Unlike the fearless Shah Rukh, they didn’t want to risk aligning their products with anything remotely sinful.

Thus, despite Shah Rukh’s best efforts to lobby for Pepsi, Kakkar chose the good two shoes in Aamir Khan. Fresh off films brimming with youthful fervour, like Mansoor Khan’s *Jo Jeeta Wohi Sikandar* (1992) and *Hum Hain Rahi Pyar Ke* (1993), Aamir enjoyed a clean image, sans any blemishes. Even though he charged a relatively far lower fee, Kakkar insisted on Aamir as the face of the Pepsi commercial, also featuring Mahima Chaudhary and Aishwarya Rai.

It was Aditya Chopra's 1995 seminal romantic drama *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* that reconsolidated Shah Rukh as the go-to guy for both films and brands. The film, which completed 30 years since release just last month, positioned Shah Rukh as Raj, the young man of a liberalised India who's modern enough to steal beers from an old NRI's store in London, but also traditional enough to not elope with the woman of his dreams without her father's approval. Similarly, in Karan Johar's *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), he was 'COOL' (remember the chain?) enough to wear tight Polo t-shirts to college, but also sanskari enough to visit the temple every Tuesday. Or in Johar's *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001), when he chooses London for his higher education, but only because it's his family's parampara.

SRK: The living archive of India's ambition

Shah Rukh served as the bridge between an old India and a new, thus emerging as the advertising industry's go-to poster boy for introducing Western products to the heartland audience. His mind was capitalistic, but he was a socialist at heart. He got on the train departing towards an aspirational India, but not without extending his hand to the traditional India. All the country had to do was get rid of its age-old shackles, sprint and grab hold of the hand stretched out. He didn't miss a chance to let his aspirations get heard loud and clear, as in "*Chaand Taare*"

from Mirza's 1997 rom-com *Yes Boss* – “*Saari daulat, saari taakat, saari duniya par huqoomat, bas itna sa khwab hai.*”

“He can sell a luxury watch and a soft drink in the same breath – because the audience doesn't see contradiction, they see aspiration,” says Shakun Batra, who's shot for a few commercials with Shah Rukh. “He's a living archive of Indian ambition: from middle-class boy to global icon. He's not playing a character – he's the narrative,” adds Batra. Going into the new millennium, every brand wanted to sign Shah Rukh. Till date, he's been the face of over 30 brands across industries. He charges Rs 5 to 10 crore for each endorsement, higher than that of Salman Khan and Aamir Khan. “First of all, Shah Rukh wasn't controversial, unlike Salman. And he appealed to all demographics, including women and children and not just men, again unlike Salman,” argued Kakkar.

SRK's iconic Pepsi ads

Even after turning down Shah Rukh for the 1995 commercial, Kakkar went on to work with him extensively after he ultimately became the face of Pepsi. “What I loved about him was that he didn't mind playing the fall guy. There's a Pepsi ad I shot with him in which he and his girlfriend have to get the can from a store, but there's a ferocious dog outside their car. Even after Shah Rukh manipulates the dog and gets that can,

he realises that the car keys are with the dog. So, he didn't even mind giving the dog the last laugh," recalled Kakkar.



Sachin Tendulkar and Shah Rukh Khan in an old Pepsi commercial

Another popular campaign he remembers is the one where Shah Rukh pretends to be Sachin Tendulkar to enter the Indian cricket team's locker room only to get Pepsi. "Azharuddin then asks him to bat. When he hesitantly makes his way to the stadium, Sachin shows up and takes that Pepsi away from him. That was Sachin's idea, but again, Shah Rukh didn't mind it because he was also a Sachin fan," said Kakkar. In another Pepsi ad years later, that he did with John Abraham, a young man calls him "uncle" and asks him to step aside. Or in a collaboration between his Indian Premier League team, Kolkata Knight Riders, and Nokia, a campaign titled "*Sabki Jeet Pakki*," he takes it to the chin like a true-blue sportsman when a senile Bengali man consoles him and captain Sourav Ganguly, "*Shona, iss*

bar tum bhi jeetoge,” taking a dig at KKR’s losing streak.

When SRK’s ads crossover into his films

In fact, Shah Rukh’s personal brands and the ones he’s endorsed have often had interesting crossovers. For instance, when he assures potential customers of LML with “*Main Hoon Na*” or recreates the Metro hostage scene from Atlee’s 2023 blockbuster *Jawan* with Ranbir Kapoor and Alia Bhatt in the Rungta Steels ad. But Shah Rukh is that rare actor who’s also allowed his ads to seep into his films. The most prominent example of that is the Tata Tea commercial he did back in 2013. Filmmaker R Balki reached out to him for a revolutionary impact-driven idea for the “*Jaago Re*” campaign on Women’s Day in the year that marked 100 years of Hindi cinema.

“He wasn’t even a brand ambassador. It was just a one-off gig. But when I proposed the idea to Shah Rukh, he really lapped it up,” Balki tells SCREEN. The ad saw a woman reporter ask Shah Rukh that despite his self-proclaimed love for women, his name always precedes that of his female co-star in all his films. Shah Rukh gives it a thought and then vows that’d not be the case going forward. “Next came *Chennai Express*, and voila! Deepika Padukone’s name came before Shah Rukh’s. And to the best of his abilities, he’s

made sure that's the norm till date. It's rare that an actor takes a one-gig commitment and sees it through for the rest of his life. That's what makes him special," says Balki.



Shah Rukh Khan on Tata Tea's 'Jaago Re' campaign on Women's Day in 2013 that marked 100 years of Hindi Cinema

Either it's a grand gesture or one of Indian advertising's longest gimmicks. But ad filmmakers who have collaborated with him for years attest to the fact that it can't be all strategy and no intent. Atul Kasbekar, a celebrity photographer who has done print campaigns for multiple brands like Omega and Airtel with him, claims that as much as it's "great for his ego" to see an Indian star on billboards in the US and Europe, his abiding affinity for Shah Rukh comes from the small gestures. "We were shooting in Sydney. He had a crazy film schedule going on. He did a commercial and stills within 24 hours and flew right back to India. But he also took the time out to thank the client with a handwritten note before he checked out," recalls Kasbekar.

When SRK told Shakun Batra to ‘trust his skillset’

Batra also recalls working with Shah Rukh in his first-ever ad film, thus naturally “over-prepping and spiralling a little.” “He clocked it instantly, smiled, and said, ‘Trust your skillset. It’s easy when you don’t overthink it. Just do your bit.’ That line has stayed with me ever since,” says Batra. It shouldn’t have come as a surprise to him because earlier on his first film job as an Assistant Director on Farhan Akhtar’s *Don* (2006), Shah Rukh gifted every crew member a book “quietly, thoughtfully, no fanfare – just a small gesture that said: I see you.” Batra underlines Shah Rukh’s USP in the age of “narrative and engagement,” he’s “never let the brand replace the human.”

“There’s an unpractised ease with which he makes everyone feel special on set. Very few stars will greet the assistants and thank them post shoot. I read somewhere that true character is when you are nice to people who can be of no real use or benefit to you. He embodies that as a matter of routine,” says Kasbekar. Prakash Varma, who has shot memorable campaigns like Santro, Colgate, and Dubai Tourism with him, also seconds the same. “I don’t know any other actor who remembers, recognises, and acknowledges spotboys across years,” he says. Varma feels the innate decency is not limited

to film sets, but extends to how he lives his life on a daily basis.

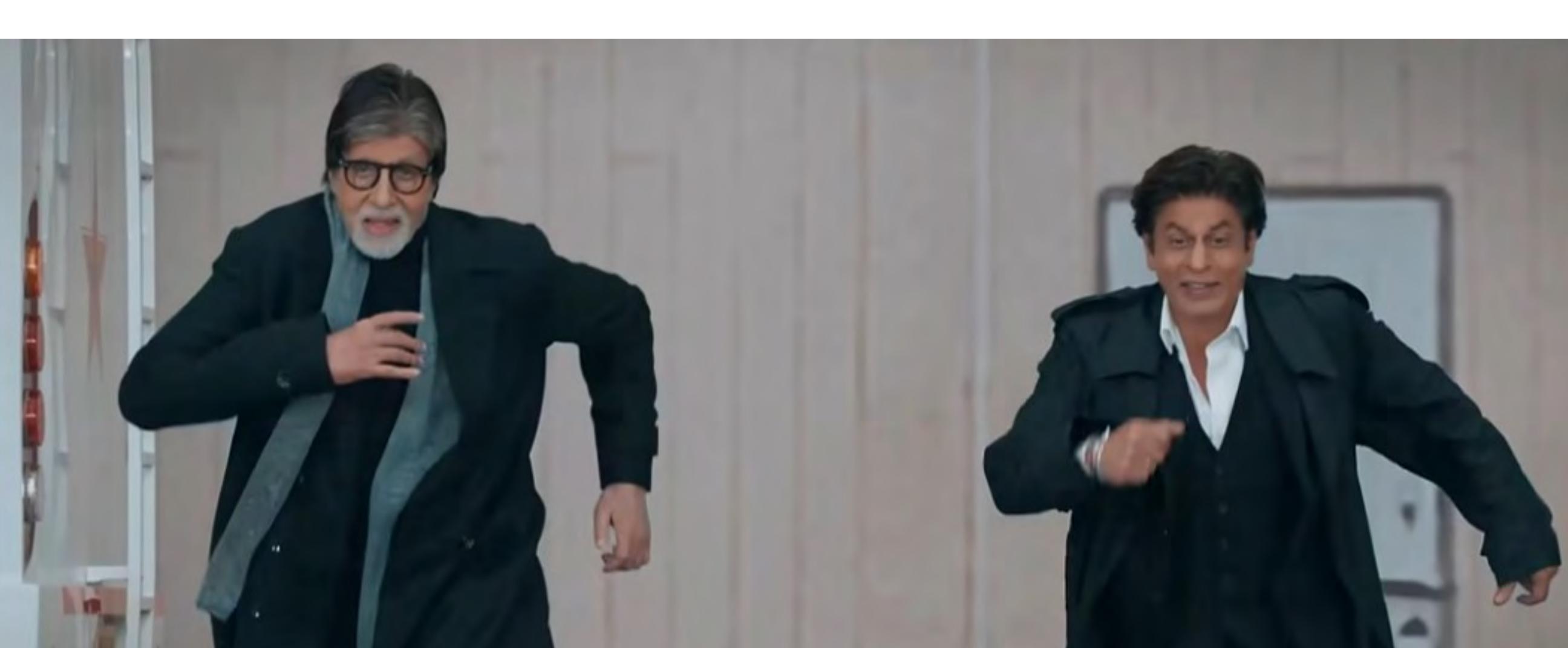


Shah Rukh Khan in Santro Xing launch commercial

“When we were doing a Santro ad years ago, I wanted us to shoot near an airstrip in Bengaluru. Mumbai is very crowded for such commercials and shooting overseas wasn’t logistically feasible. So, I requested Shah Rukh if he could fly to Bengaluru for this commercial. His jet landed on the airstrip, he completed the shoot within 24 hours, and flew back to Mumbai, but not without meeting his sister, who lived in Bengaluru,” says Verma, underscoring how Shah Rukh could pull off both superstar-sized scale and common man-like intimacy within a day. He also lauds the actor for striking a balance between getting involved and not interfering. For instance, he didn’t mind visiting the most frequented spots of Dubai for its tourism ad despite the presence of his frantic fandom there.

SRK can be a fanboy too

While Shah Rukh is respectful and encouraging of his juniors, he also turns into an enthusiastic fanboy when working with his seniors. Sircar recalls how he didn't leave the set for eight hours even though he had only a few shots to can on the recent Daawat Rice commercial because he played host to veteran actor Zeenat Aman. Similarly, Balki recalls how Shah Rukh, infamous for arriving late on set, arrived even before Amitabh Bachchan, known for his punctuality, on the sets of the Everest Masala ad shoot. "While most actors run away after pack-up, they spent a good time chatting long after the shoot was over. But when it came to the two sharing screen space, Shah Rukh held his own," says Balki. Also, as far as otherwise reaching late on set is concerned, Verma slides in a disclaimer: "He's the only one who informs you when he's late. Nobody else does that."



Shah Rukh Khan & Amitabh Bachchan in Everest Masala ad

Some would argue that reaching late on set is the least of concerns for Shah Rukh. Recently,

YouTuber Dhruv Rathee asserted his only grouse with the star – despite turning a billionaire, he continues to endorse a pan masala brand. While fellow superstars like Amitabh Bachchan and Akshay Kumar returned their signing amounts and even apologised for lending their faces to surrogate advertising, Shah Rukh has remained conveniently quiet on the issue. When asked, the ad filmmakers who've worked with him echo what he put across years ago when asked why he should not identify with soft drinks – “I would appeal to any authority to ban it. Don’t sell it. If you think soft drinks are poisoning people, don’t let them be made in our country. You’re not stopping it because it gives you a revenue. Don’t stop my revenue. I’m an actor. I’m supposed to get a revenue out of it.”

Why does SRK endorse pan masala, fairness creams?

“The government makes ample revenue on pan masala and soft drinks. We cannot hold individuals to higher standards than the state,” says Kasbekar. Sircar also seconds that, imploring one must address the “root cause” instead. Balki and Verma argue that it’s a free world and a free market. And Kakkar claims it boils down to the individual’s moral compass. “Mr. Bachchan stopped endorsing soft drinks long ago. So, it’s really an individual call,” he says. Kakkar recounts shooting Pepsi campaigns after there were rumours that soft drinks contain

pesticides. “In one of those ads, we actually introduced Varun Dhawan, alongside Shah Rukh. In another one, Shah Rukh tells the audience, “Pepsi is not safe,” and then it’s revealed he says so because somebody is trying to steal his Pepsi,” says Kakkar, laughing.

It’s not just Pepsi and pan masala that Shah Rukh got brickbats for. It’s also the Fair & Handsome cream that he dubbed as “mardon wali cream” a few years ago. That’s him coming a long way from his Lux ad in which he’s in a bathtub surrounded by leading ladies of four generations. After passing on Pepsi to Ranbir Kapoor of ‘Youngistaan,’ he’s now the face of Thums Up because he’s tasted the thunder. “He did that one around *Pathaan*. He’s trying to reinvent his image, pumping iron, and becoming an action star. But to a generation, he’d always remain that lover boy,” says Kakkar. That generation still believes Shah Rukh isn’t choosing one at the sake of the other. Once again, he’s bridging the gap between two generations, two Indias. Shakun Batra sums it up well: “In times where most people chase virality, SRK shows us that he understands legacy.”





Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi and Fan reveal an actor freed from the bonds of superstardom

– Anas Arif

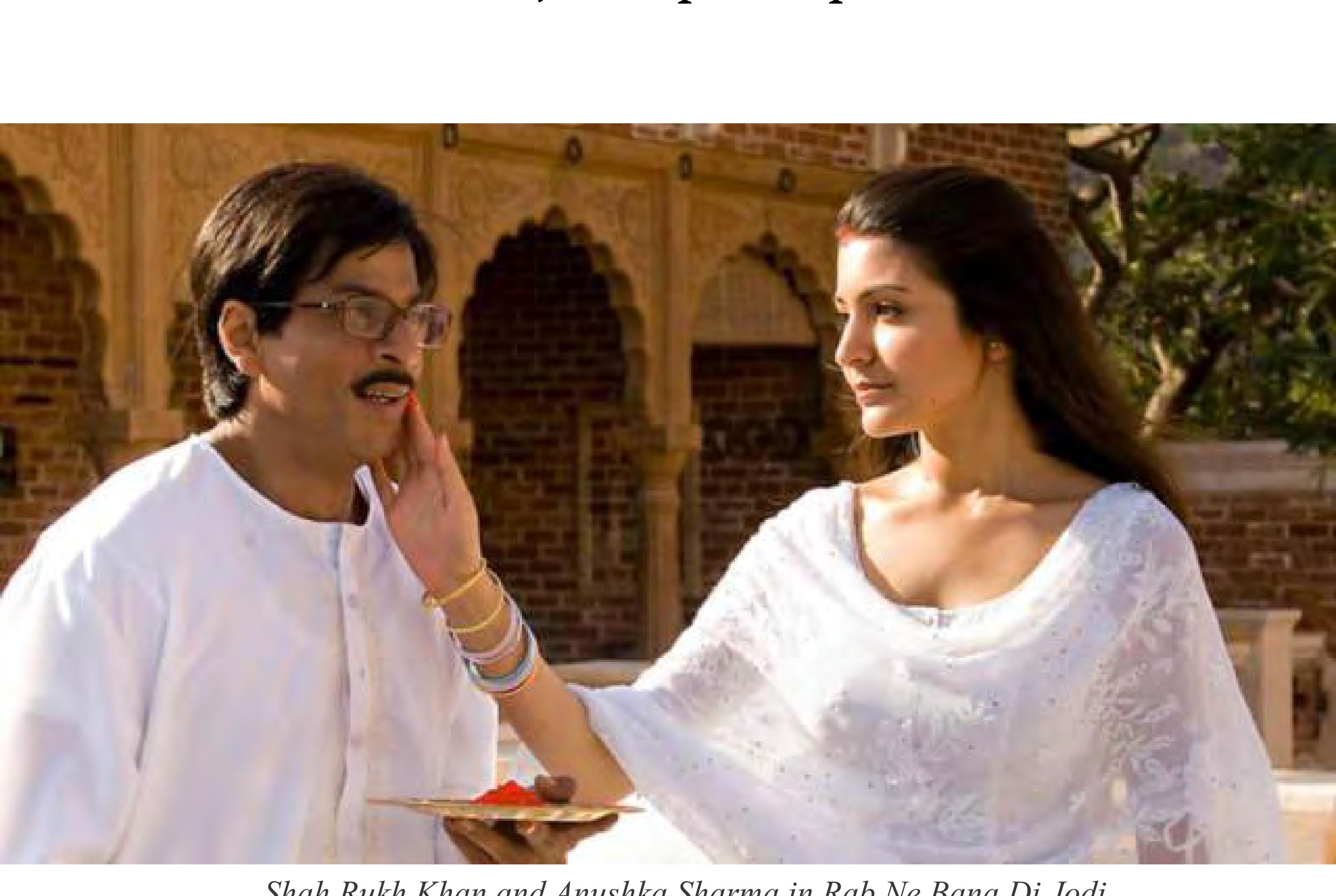
A great performance never announces itself through the obvious. It shakes the imagination instead. It withholds, resists easy meaning, and moves against convention. It leaves threads untied so that you are drawn to look closer, to sense what cannot be stated. It is as tender as it is troubling, as haunting as it is human. Such a performance resembles a puzzle that resists solution. Say, like a Rubik's Cube, it draws both performer and spectator into the same struggle for understanding. Or a hall of mirrors, where each reflection reveals something the other did not intend to show, and both are changed by what they see. Shah Rukh Khan has attempted such performances more than once. Each time, he reminds us what an

actor he becomes when freed to explore. Each time, he reminds us what a rare kind of star he is whose light does not blind, but illuminates new ways of seeing.

Maneesh Sharma captures the essence of such paradoxes in his 2016 film *Fan*, where Khan's twin selves collapse the distance between illusion and identity. He becomes both the deity and his worshipper. Aryan Khanna, the superstar, and Gaurav Chandna, the lookalike fan. And around the twenty-seventh minute, Gaurav catches a glimpse of Aryan. The star steps out to wave from his mansion, a ritual gesture to his believers, but for Gaurav, it's revelation. He stops moving. The crowd roars around him, but he is still. His mouth is half-open, his eyes wet. A small, trembling smile forms, the same one he learned from Aryan's films. In that breath of time, Gaurav is not watching a man; he is watching belief take form. It is not, in fact, fandom; it is really a vision. He is not, in fact, simply watching Aryan, he is really seeing him.

Khan seeing his beloved for the first time, and falling, utterly and without defence, is the oldest, most tender trick in his mythology. Yet it has never felt as piercing, as devastating, as in *Fan*. Or perhaps in its strange companion piece, Aditya Chopra's *Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi*, a film as

divisive as it is devoted to the same longing. In *Rab Ne*, the moment comes early: Surinder Sahni, played again by Khan, looks upon Taani (Anushka Sharma) for the first time. The scene is simpler than anything in *Fan*, modest in craft, bare in staging, yet it reveals as much. Watch how awe stops Surinder mid-breath, just as it does with Gaurav. Watch how Surinder smiles, just as Gaurav does, trying hard to hide the infamous Khan dimples that made him the nation's heartthrob. Watch how, unlike Gaurav, he cannot part his mouth in wonder; he hides behind a straw, struggling to sip his Coca-Cola. His eyes, though, glisten the same. It's no accident that the voiceover calls the moment both joyous and heart-breaking, for in that gaze lies the essence of Khan: a man who has seen love so many times that it still undoes him, as if each look were the first, and perhaps the last.



Shah Rukh Khan and Anushka Sharma in Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi

What makes these two films so monumental, and among Khan's most definitive performances is that in both, the unreturned gaze he casts towards love is finally returned, but by himself. Take the interval point in *Rab Ne*. Here, Khan again shows his naysayers what it means to be an actor: to inhabit two souls at once, to feel for both, and to make us feel for both. As Raj, the flamboyant alter ego he creates to win Taani's affection, he celebrates a small victory: the right to be her friend, a gift denied to the shy Surinder. Drunk on joy, Raj dances, until his eyes catch a mannequin dressed in Suri's clothes. He mocks it, calls it dull, lifeless. Then he is hit by a sudden realisation. He sees what he has abandoned. If Raj wins, Suri dies. And so, Raj rests his head on the mannequin's shoulder and weeps. For a moment, the mask grieves the man beneath it. For a moment, someone sees Suri, and it is Suri himself.

A similar moment occurs in *Fan*, again a bit before the interval, when Gaurav and Aryan finally meet. They sit opposite each other in a room framed by mirrors, reflections nested within reflections. No wonder then that up until this moment, the differences between the two have been made glaringly obvious, but from here on, you begin to sense similarities between them, the thread that ties one to the other. Khan

delivers what may be the apex of his craft here, again conjuring empathy for two figures who are, in truth, one, played by one. Sharma's direction, like Chopra's in *Rab Ne*, makes us feel for both, yet this time the feeling carries a sharper edge: each sees the other, each wants the best for the other, but being reflections, they cannot merge, cannot reconcile into a whole. So, unlike in *Rab Ne*, where mask and man ultimately meet in mutual recognition, the divide in *Fan* endures: between lover and beloved.



Shah Rukh Khan in *Fan*

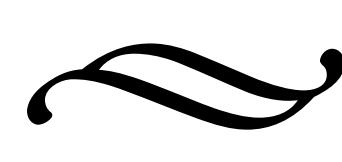
This comparison also brings us back to *Rab Ne*, a film similarly engaged with devotion and, to a degree, unrequited love. In that sense, the obsession Gaurav carries for Aryan mirrors the devotion Surinder feels for Taani. In both cases, the lover elevates their beloved to the divine, perceives divinity within them, and feels a connection that is almost sacred. In both cases,

the affection is not only deep and selfless but also compels the lovers to act beyond themselves, going out of their way for the objects of their devotion. In both cases, there's an examination of the conceptual boundary between love and possession, interrogating the impulse to claim the beloved as an object of one's desire. So Aryan instructing Gaurav to withdraw, to cease collapsing his identity into that of the star he worships, is very similar to Taani restraining Surinder, ensuring that his devotion does not become burdensome.

Above all, Khan dismantles his own image, the one often said to define and burden many of his films. In *Rab Ne*, the persona of Raj, the carefully constructed charm that he and Chopra built brick by brick over a decade, is laid bare, abandoned, even gently mocked. The film does not hesitate to let the ordinary, awkward Surinder triumph over the dazzling mask of Raj. Similarly, in *Fan*, Khan and Sharma strip both fandom and stardom of their illusions. They demystify Aryan and Gaurav, laying bare their vanity, desire, and insecurities. Yet the films also reveal their essential kinship: they mirror each other, wound each other, grieve for each other. So, that moment in *Fan*'s climax, when Aryan imitates Gaurav, who has made a life out of imitating Aryan, who himself is a cinematic equivalent of Khan, is metaness at its

peak. Likewise, in the climax of *Rab Ne*, when Raj is told he has lost to Surinder, and he sheds tears of happiness, duality, again, reaches its summit.

In such moments, you watch a star, surrendering fully, folding himself into multiple selves, defying every doubt of limitation. In such moments, you watch a star, whose life was built on being adored, now inhabiting the unlovable, the ungrateful. In such moments, you watch a star, who can be anybody he wants, who can be the king of extravagance, yet subtlety remains his real forte. In such moments, you watch a star, who craves recognition but might sometimes falter in pursuit, revealing his insecurities. And beyond everything, in such moments, you watch a star, reminding us that he was always an actor first, and only if we pay attention, only if we are present, do we truly see.





Why SRK is Bollywood's last, and only, superstar

– *Pooja Pillai*

Boomers have their work ethic and thrift, Gen Z has its unshakeable sense of self and a healthy irreverence for authority. And millennials? What do the overworked, underpaid, emotionally overextended children of liberalisation have that the generations before and after us don't? *Bhaiyon aur behenon*, we have Shah Rukh Khan – the dimple-cheeked, floppy-haired Delhi boy who conquered Mumbai, the striver who made yearning a national emotion, the lover whose kisses awakened a thousand unconscious desires and taught us to confess our hearts without

irony. He could belong to no one but us. Does he know this? SRK, *tum hamare ho*.

There's no doubt that Shah Rukh's appeal is cross-generational. Everyone loves him, from the *daadis* and mummies who once worshipped at the altar of Dev Anand, Rajesh Khanna and Amitabh Bachchan to the toddlers of today who make reels about Vicky Kaushal. Yet, that moment when he burst onto our consciousness, zooming across Mumbai on a motorbike while singing about looking for love in *Deewana* (1992), was the moment he became, irrevocably and exclusively, a millennial icon. For the youth of a nation that was discovering its appetite for risk and invention, the idols of old — trapped in their own ideas of modesty — just wouldn't have done.

This is why, since *Deewana*, since *Baazigar* (1993) and *Kabhi Haan Kabhi Na* (1994) and *Yes Boss* (1997), we have projected our hopes and dreams, our fears and uncertainties onto SRK's image. In film after film of that youthful decade, as he danced about in oversized suits and spoke the language of ambition — looking like a boy playacting at grown-up life by dressing in his father's clothes — SRK represented a peculiar contradiction. He mirrored the unease of a generation that longed to grow up quickly and sample the delights of a

bewildering new age, but still carried the ache of middle-class morality. That he combined these qualities with vulnerability, speaking often of the mother he lost before his big-screen debut, brought him closer to us, his wounds matching many of our own.



Shah Rukh Khan greets fans who had gathered below his bungalow, Mannat, at Bandra in Mumbai. (File Photo/Prashant Nadkar)

In time, of course, it became clear that if Shah Rukh had no true predecessor, he has no true successor either. He is, to put it bluntly, the last – and the only – Bollywood superstar. Before him, the fan followings of even the most popular actors of the day were limited by their essential unknowability; audiences encountered them almost exclusively on the big screen while magazines could offer only tantalising glimpses into their private thoughts and lives. Their fans never really got anything close to the full picture. On the other hand, the actors of today suffer from

a problem of over-exposure and over-curation, not just from their own personal Instagram reels and stories but also the punishing publicity tours, with non-stop digital coverage, of their latest films and endorsements.

Shah Rukh, however, benefited hugely from coming to us during that sweet spot in Indian entertainment history dominated by television. If we were the MTV generation of India, growing up amidst a deluge of private television channels with an ever-sharpening hunger for more than just news and films, SRK was the perfect star for the age.

From the start, his story was fatefully tied to that of television, beginning as he did on the small screen with shows like *Fauji* and *Circus*, before being noticed by Bollywood and invited to act in Mumbai. Could he have become what he did if not for TV, even when his films became hits? There is little doubt that TV was, in more than one way, the right medium for SRK: His intelligence and wicked wit — which the big screen could never possibly have allowed full play to — shone through in the many televised interviews of the era. They fed into and sharpened his image. When industry magazines reported on rumours about his arrogance on film sets, his insistence that he would work only a single shift

or take on only 4-5 projects a year, he told us on *Aap ki Adalat* that his self-respect was misread as an overinflated ego, that he wanted to work and spend time with his wife at home and that he if he did only a few films in a year, it was so that he could give them his best. He came to us unfiltered, yet with enough of his mystique intact that we both related to and idolised him. Love is complicated, but SRK somehow has always made it less so. It has never really mattered that he is neither the best-looking nor the most skilled actor in Hindi cinema – not back then, and certainly not today. But that is what happens when an actor becomes the embodiment of a generation's aspirations and anxieties. He is the mirror in which a generation sees its own reflection – restless, romantic, aspiring, bruised by the speed of our own becoming. In loving SRK, we learned to accept our contradictions and find poetry in striving.





When SRK debunked the dream man myth built by Shah Rukh Khan

– *Avinash Ramachandran*

For any Hindi cinema audience growing up in the 90s and 2000s, the question to ‘Who is your dream man’ often had very similar answers. And this answer stemmed from Bollywood cultivating a faithful audience for its unique brand of films. A brand that sold romance as the most potent drug of them all, and who was the face of those deals? Shah Rukh Khan.

You want candy floss college romance that culminates in an understanding of second chances? He gave us *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*. You want candy floss romance with a stalker-ish vibe that culminates in a happy union with the blessings of parents? He gave us *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jaayenge*. You want a slightly more mature

romance that culminates in a not-so-happy union without the blessings of the parents, but they finally come through? He gave us *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*.

You want a timeless romance that doesn't fade even in the absence of your loved one, and proves to the world that love can happen anytime, and even the grandest of all daddies can't do anything about it. He gave us *Mohabbatein*. You want an all-encompassing romance that burns you down from within, but leaves you with an epic feeling of having done the biggest sacrifice of them all? He gave us *Devdas*.

And if you wanted to top that sacrifice with a beautiful romance that is focused on keeping the love of his life happy even if he isn't there to see that happiness? He gave us *Kal Ho Naa Ho*. You wanted an old school romance that allows you to be in solitude even when pining from the bottom of your heart, waiting for the proverbial light at the end of a really dark tunnel? He gave us *Veer Zaara*. You wanted a practical romance that questions the idea of fidelity, and places personal happiness as an important part of romance even if it breaks marriages. He gave us *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna*.

Basically, throughout the 90s and 00s, Shah Rukh Khan sold 50 shades of romance to an easily

influenced audience, who grew up wanting their partner to be like Rahul, Amarkant, Aryan, Aman, Veer, and Dev, among others. They wanted the men in their lives to be like Shah Rukh Khan. The man who could charm his way through any crowd, smile his way through any heart, and talk his way through any mind.

Shah Rukh Khan is someone who not just sold the drug of romance, but also reminded people of the side effects. However, who even reads the fine print? So, here's drawing parallels between two of his most blatant advertisements about how being the dream man is actually taxing, and the concept is more often than not, just a farce, an act... a myth.

SRK – Surinder, Raj and Kishanlal – take centrestage

In *Paheli*, when Lachchi (Rani Mukerji) enters wedlock, she is young with eyes full of dreams. She wants to have a marriage that would be everlasting and perennially happy. But there is a ghost who has fallen in love with her. When Kishanlal (Shah Rukh Khan) leaves home to take care of his family business, leaving her alone in a new world, the ghost comes and takes over the place of her husband and becomes the man of her dreams.

In *Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi*, when Taani (Anushka Sharma) enters wedlock, she is young with eyes devoid of any dreams. She is in the marriage because the love of her life was snatched from her due to a cruel twist of fate. But Surinder (Shah Rukh Khan), her husband, has fallen in love with her right from the time he sets eyes on her. However, when Taani enters a dance competition to appease her individual needs and desires, Surinder takes a back seat and allows his alter ego of Raj Kapoor to take over and become the man of her dreams.

Basically, through *Paheli* and *Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi*, Shah Rukh Khan was saying two things – A dream man doesn't exist, and he is either a ghost or a fraud. In fact, in a recent interview, Shah Rukh Khan said, “Paheli is about the right of women to choose what they want, and their right to live their life beautifully and wonderfully as everyone around does. But yeah, for a woman, the perfect man is just an illusion.” So, what if it is a ghost that gives her everything that she deserves and needs? So, what if it is a figment of imagination that manufactures attraction?

In many ways, it was fitting that Shah Rukh Khan was the one who decided to debunk the myth of the dream man. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he was a phenomenon that was built from the ground up. He was the face of the

common man, who wanted to believe that the sky's the limit. People believed that they could be him if they tried. However, in a decade or so, he transformed himself into the dream man that everyone wanted to have and everyone wanted to be. But this time, it wasn't the same.

In *Paheli*, Lachchi is informed by the imposter that she has the right to choose. The paranormal entity gave her the freedom to choose. It was her decision to live the life she wanted with the ghost. But, when Surinder starts the farcical double life, he is actually robbing Taani off that freedom. It was more like the illusion of choice.

We see Taani happily accepting Surinder, but wouldn't it prick her conscience that she wasn't allowed to like him the way he was? Wouldn't she constantly be thinking about how he knew she was ready to leave him? Just because all's well that ends well, do we really not understand that Taani is forever in debt. Yes, Surinder might not hold it over her, but it is impossible for it to not weigh heavily in her mind.

So, once again, Shah Rukh Khan was saying that one can't forever wear a mask, and it is better to be who we are. However, that also puts the onus on people to stop dreaming about having the perfect man in their lives.

For many, all that is left in their lives is the illusion of being with the perfect partner. Of course, they know reality paints a different picture, and are ready to live their lives with the Surinders, Raj Kapoors, and Kishanlals. But even if Shah Rukh Khan descends into each of their dreams and lets them know that the idea of the dream man is a myth, they would just look him straight in the eye, and say... “We know... But let us dream. Don’t take that away from us.”

(This story was first published on November 2, 2024)





Renuka Shahane says SRK didn't want to enter films: 'He was happy doing television'

– Navya Kharbanda

After making a smashing debut with the television series *Fauji*, Shah Rukh Khan gained further recognition with the 1989 serial *Circus*. On the occasion of SRK's 60th birthday, his *Circus* co-star and first on-screen heroine Renuka Shahane spoke to SCREEN about his work ethic, charming nature, and love for acting. She revealed that Shah Rukh initially had no desire to become a film star, and it was his mother who wanted to see him on the big screen.

During the conversation, Renuka revealed that although Shah Rukh received a lot of recognition after his debut show, he wasn't interested in joining the film industry. She shared, "He was already a TV star after *Fauji*. I think the kind of

craze I have seen for him after *Fauji* was while we were shooting for *Circus*. We were surprised. He didn't even want to go into the film industry at that time. He was very happy doing television."

The actor added, "People would also say that he should be a film star, but Shah Rukh Khan told them that theatre, television, this is his space. It was only later that he kind of went into the industry. Maybe because his mom was very keen that her son should become a film star. And oh my God, what a film star he has become."

Renuka Shahane also shared that she had a hunch that Shah Rukh Khan would become a huge star one day. "I always knew if he did make it, he would make it big, because he has the right attitude, the greatest talent and he is extremely witty off screen as well. He has that energy and intensity for his work which hasn't reduced till date. He really is the kind of superstar that we all cherish. I am very proud of him," she said.

Recalling SRK's respectful nature on set, the 49-year-old shared, "I can recall one thing which really tells you what a gentleman Shah Rukh is. The way he makes other people feel, even the people who aren't generally higher in the hierarchy. The way he communicates to the spot boy, the costume guy, the light people and everyone. He made them feel comfortable

and happy about meeting him. He would never discriminate.”

She continued, “He was always very protective of his female colleagues. That goes to show how well read you are as a person. So, these two qualities are something I have seen at a very early age. And, I can tell you that nothing has changed even after his success. I have met him on and off, not for a very long time though.”

Renuka Shahane and Shah Rukh Khan’s 1989 television series *Circus* was directed by Aziz Mirza and Kundan Shah. It also featured Makarand Deshpande, Pavan Malhotra, Ashutosh Gowariker, Neeraj Vora, and Hyder Ali. It aired on DD National.





Into the SRK multiverse

– *Sumana Roy*

By now we know that there is not one but at least two Shah Rukh Khans. It's the ethic of our times – the "buy one get one free" and hustle economy – that compels us to always be more than one, to be present in two places simultaneously, often even in different time zones and historical periods. Shah Rukh saw it before others – the need for a double, even a doppelganger, to emphasise one's existence in the world. Saying something once isn't enough, one must do it again – a life dependent on repetition; even America needs to be made great again.

"Continuity" is an expectation from actors, that they appear the same in a scene even if it is shot

many months apart. Shah Rukh moved this from the character to the actor — he repeats a pose or a phrase from an older film in a new one, so that the utterance comes to have the character of a quote. The reasons might range from brand building to the purposive sketching of a lineage, both of which often derive from emphases provided by repetition. The arms thrown out in his signature gesture in film after film are meant to massage our memory, and, through it, calm us with an assurance of constancy. That is the difference between Leonardo DiCaprio's outstretched arms on the bow of the most famous ship in maritime history — his need to declare that he was “the king of the world”, a pose that hasn't been repeated in any film since *Titanic* (1997) — and Shah Rukh's arms opened wide, for the first time in *Deewana* (1992), repeated gently for the next three years until its culmination in *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* (1995), from when it began growing into the equivalent of an autograph.

Other actors have played more double roles than Shah Rukh — Kamal Haasan supposedly 20 times, Mithun Chakraborty 19, Jeetendra 16, Amitabh Bachchan 15. Shah Rukh has played a double role nine times. There's a difference between these actors playing two characters in a film and Shah Rukh's tuning of doubleness — a

repetition of dialogues, poses and music from his older films creates the sense of a different kind of double, someone we've met in his filmography already, who's invisible in the film except as a continuation of the past, made manifest through a nod, a hint, a mudra, even a synecdoche. What we take pleasure in is the creation of a "Shah Rukh, Again" multiverse where generational desire and anxiety can be condensed and addressed in the figure of a recognisable and dependable person. Shah Rukh becomes a candle placed between two parallel mirrors, past and present – the result is an infinite number of Shah Rukhs.

Shah Rukh Khan – or Shah Rukh Khans, to be precise – is a condition of 21st century life. Hugh Behm-Steinberg noticed this, not in SRK, but in Taylor Swift. In his short story 'Taylor Swift', Behm-Steinberg peoples it with Swift clones who do the narrator's chores, sleep in different crates, and party, while waiting for "the real Taylor Swift" to send them a limo to take them to her "tower in New York City". This need to clone oneself in endless instalments to stay alive commercially, as true of Swift as it is of Shah Rukh, is turned into an aesthetic choice – Swift's new album *The Life of a Showgirl* has songs that seem to pay homage to her older albums like, say, *Pathaan* (2023) gathers Shah Rukh filmic memorabilia. It's a version of the

capitalist memory game: One must educate one's audience and a largely amnesiac world about the different “Eras” (the title of Swift’s tour) in one’s career. It’s also part of the fame toolkit – that we praise ourselves so as to compel the world to praise us. “I’m the best, I’m the best, I am the best,” now the anthem of fake-it-till-you-make-it, declared with a kind of red-bullishness by Shah Rukh in the first year of this millennium, has become the marketing strategy of corporations, countries, communities and commen.

We live in this world now – where there’s little to tell the film star from the fan: SRK plays both the worshipper and the worshipped in *Fan* (2016). We’ll have to survive as clones.

Roy, a poet and writer, is associate professor,

Ashoka University. Views are personal





Her grit, Her game, Her glory

– *Vinayakk Mohanarangan and
Shankar Narayan*

The journeys of India's 16 ICC Women's World Cup winners to the pinnacle of their sport are both inspiring and empowering; the barriers they leapt over were of several hues, from gender bias to socio-economic strangle, from cultural clutches to prejudiced perceptions. They have broken new ground and ensured that half the Indian population can never be kept out of the cricketing discourse. Meet the pioneers who ended the Indian women's cricket team's long wait for a senior ICC title.

Inspirational captain: Harmanpreet Kaur

Age: 36

Role: Middle-order batter

Moga, Punjab



One of India's greatest, Harmanpreet Kaur will forever be remembered for that 171* against Australia in the 2017 World Cup semifinal. It wasn't a one-off though, the girl from Moga has always saved her best for the big occasion. Her first ODI century came in the 2013 edition against England; she even scored a T20I century at the 2018 World Cup, the first Indian woman to achieve that feat. Father Harmandar Bhullar wanted one of his kids to take up sport, and when Harmanpreet was born, he bought a T-shirt with 'good batsman' printed on it, which would prove prophetic. Harmanpreet would accompany her father to the stadium opposite their home to play cricket with the local boys. Coach Kamaldeesh Singh Sodhi put her in an academy in Tarapur. Brother Gurjinder Singh would take her to play local matches and Harmanpreet would dominate playing against boys. Memorably, after she hit a six over extra cover in WBBL 2016, Adam Gilchrist tweeted: 'Seriously impressed with Harmanpreet. Classy, skillful.' It's something she cherishes.

Did you know? Harmanpreet Kaur has scored the most runs in the history of Women's ODI World Cup knockout matches.

Little sister, Big star: Smriti Mandhana

Age: 29

Role: Opening batter

Sangli, Maharashtra



Born into a cricket-loving family in Sangli, Smriti Mandhana's interest in the game developed after watching brother Shravan represent Maharashtra at the Under-16 level. The left-hander made her state debut at the age of nine and first played for India as a 16-year-old against Bangladesh in April 2013. After tasting early success in Test cricket, where she was part of the side that beat England at Wormsley in 2014, Mandhana's rise as a reliable white-ball opening batter began in early 2016 when she made her maiden ODI hundred against Australia at Hobart. Over the course of the next decade, Mandhana has scaled several

peaks, including being ranked the No.1 batter in ODIs. She was appointed India's ODI vice-captain in July 2022, and the added responsibility has only bettered her as a player.

Did you know? Smriti Mandhana is just one short (14) of Meg Lanning's record for most women's ODI centuries.

Keeping the faith: Jemimah Rodrigues

Age: 25

Role: Batter

Mumbai, Maharashtra



Growing up with an interest in playing multiple sports in the bylanes of Bandra, Jemimah Rodrigues first came into the spotlight when she was adjudged the Best Woman Cricketer in the Jr. Domestic category at the 2017-18 BCCI awards. Rodrigues made her India debut in ODIs at the age of 17 against Australia in Vadodara. Despite being shunted up and down the batting

order, the 25-year-old has shown an ability to adapt to any given number – from essaying the role of an opener to that of a lower-middle-order batter. One of Rodrigues' great strengths is being able to calculate and pace her innings without putting undue pressure on the team, either batting first or second. Despite her well-known pedigree as a batter, another aspect of her personality is her tremendous mental strength, which she displayed after she came back from being dropped for the England game to make an unbeaten 127 off 134 balls against Australia in the semi-final to help India chase down a world-record score of 339 runs.

Did you know? Before taking up cricket full-time, Jemimah Rodrigues represented Maharashtra at

the Under-17 level in field hockey.

Agra's Wonder Woman: Deepti Sharma

Age: 28

Role: All-rounder

Agra, Uttar Pradesh



Deepti Sharma's journey began with a throw. As a kid eager to follow everywhere her brother Sumit went, in whites with his kit bag, Deepti once picked up the ball that came towards her and threw it back like a bullet. It caught former India player Hemalata Kala's eye. Having made her India debut at 17, Deepti has come a long way as India's most reliable all-rounder for more than a decade. Sumit, who gave up his corporate job a decade back to train Deepti full-time, converted her from a pacer to a spinner so she could remain fit and perform all three disciplines at an optimum level. And she has gone from strength to strength, going past 150 wickets in ODIs, behind only Jhulan Goswami among Indians. Having batted in the top order early in her career, these days she has made a name for herself lower down, her batting having improved over the past year. In the field, she still loves a good throw.

Did you know? Deepti Sharma has a highest ODI score of 188, the best by an Indian woman. It came against Ireland in 2017.

Siliguri six-hitter: Richa Ghosh

Age: 22

Role: Wicketkeeper-batter

Siliguri, West Bengal

Manabendra Ghosh never discouraged his daughter Richa from being a big hitter.

While coaches focused on her fundamentals, Manabendra encouraged Richa to train for hitting fours and sixes, even at the cost of a few broken windows at their home. He wanted her to take up table tennis but Richa insisted on cricket and was the first girl to enroll at Baghajatin Athletic Club, where her journey began taking on male cricketers on the Kolkata circuit. To help Richa's journey, Manabendra closed his business in Siliguri and started accompanying her on the visits to Kolkata. In domestic cricket, Richa had dabbled in all three disciplines, but early in her international career, after a tough night in the field, India decided to hand her the gloves and she's been the designated wicketkeeper since. Her power-hitting has gone up a notch or two since she joined Royal Challengers Bengaluru in the WPL, as she went about training to access all areas of the pitch.



Did you know? Richa Ghosh made her T20I debut at 16 when she came on as a concussion

substitute in the 2020 Women's World Cup final.

The Viral Catch: Harleen Deol

Age:27

Role: Top-order batter

Chandigarh



Harleen Deol started doing the rounds in junior cricket in Himachal Pradesh as a skilled batter and handy off-break bowler. However, due to sparse facilities and an underdeveloped cricket culture, she had to relocate to Chandigarh, which proved to be a turning point. She first made headlines for her exploits in the Women's T20 Challenge, and those performances earned her a call-up for an ODI series against England in 2019. However, with constant squad rotation to find the right combination, Deol could not become a permanent fixture immediately. Her next moment to remember came in 2021, when she made headlines for her fielding. Playing an

ODI against England at Northampton, she took a smartly-judged catch on the long-off boundary, where she used her presence of mind to flick the ball inside the boundary in time before getting back into the field of play to take the catch. Recently, Deol found some stability in the squad and started the tournament as the designated No.3.

Did you know? Deol's stunning catch in England was featured on ESPN Sportscenter and the post has more than 1 million likes on Instagram.

Scholar, opener: Pratika Rawal

Age: 25

Role: Opening batter

Delhi



When her father Pradeep Rawal took Pratika to Rohtak Road Gymkhana to work with Shravan Kumar, she was the first girl to train there. Today,

the number of female trainees there is close to 30. Pradeep, who harboured his own cricketing ambitions and is a BCCI-certified umpire, had decided that he'd make his first child an athlete. Pratika was proficient in basketball as well in Modern School. But aged 9, it was decided that cricket was the path she'd follow. While the lockdown delayed her progress to the Indian team, she practised with Pradeep on the terrace of their building in makeshift nets. Pratika was a brilliant student as well, scoring more than 92% in her 10th & 12th boards, and completing her graduation in psychology too. After getting her ODI call-up to replace Shafali Verma, she struck a prolific opening partnership with Smriti Mandhana in quick time, before an injury ended her World Cup campaign before the semifinals.

Did you know? Pratika holds the record for being the quickest to reach 1,000 runs in women's ODIs.

Hope for a region: Uma Chetry

Age: 23

Role: Wicketkeeper-batter

At CWC25:

Golaghat, Assam

As an MS Dhoni fan growing up and later idolising Harmanpreet Kaur, Uma Chetry is experiencing the best of both worlds. The influence of watching Dhoni is bound to have played a role in her

taking up wicketkeeping, and when she became consistent enough in the skill as well as with the bat, she got a chance to share the same dressing room with Harmanpreet. Chetry is the only player from India's North-East in the 2025 Women's World Cup squad and represents the hopes of an entire region, as far as the future of the women's game in that part of the country is concerned. Originally picked as a reserve, Chetry was drafted into India's squad after an injury to Yastika Bhatia ruled her out of the tournament. Indeed, it was another injury, this time to first-choice wicketkeeper-batter Richa Ghosh, which paved the way for Chetry to make her ODI debut against Bangladesh in this World Cup.



Did you know? Chetry became the first woman cricketer from the North-East to play for India when she made her T20I debut against South Africa in Chennai in July 2024.

Tribal star: Kranti Gaud

Age: 22

Role: Fast bowler

Ghuwara, Madhya Pradesh



Ghuwara, a two-hour drive from district headquarters Chhatarpur in Madhya Pradesh, has no cricket training facility to talk about. But Kranti Gaud, the daughter of an ex-police constable, wanted to emulate the bhaiyyas who played tennis-ball cricket in the only ground there. A natural athlete, Kranti, the youngest of six siblings in a scheduled tribe family, first made a name for herself as a six-hitting batter in tennis-ball matches before coming under the wings of Chhatarpur-based coach Rajiv Bilthare, a promoter of women's cricket in the region.

The family didn't allow disparaging, prejudiced remarks about a girl playing cricket with boys to come in the way of Kranti's cricketing dreams. Her mother pawned her jewellery when the family fell on hard times. After winning the player-of-the-match award against Pakistan at this World Cup, Kranti – who stays in a two-room police quarters along with her family – revealed that those back in her village had installed an LED screen to watch her play.

Did you know? Kranti's figures of 6-52 against England this year are the best figures for an Indian in women's ODIs against that team.

Comeback queen: Sneh Rana

Age: 31

Role: Spin-all rounder

At CWC 25: 99 runs, 7 wickets

Dehradun, Uttarakhand



Sneh Rana's name has almost become synonymous with comebacks. She made her debut in 2014, and was left out around 2016. It took her five years to return, donning the whites in 2021 for a one-off Test in England. That happened shortly after the death of her father, Bhagwan Singh, who was crucial in supporting Sneh's cricket career. Growing up, Sneh was the outdoorsy kind who played multiple sports with boys. Recognizing her talent at age nine, her father enrolled her at a cricket academy. Sneh was in and out of the Indian team, so she worked on her variations on the domestic circuit and also focused on power-hitting to improve her batting. After standing in as skipper for Gujarat Giants in the Women's Premier League, she was released before the 2025 season and went unpicked in the auction too. But she was picked by RCB as a late replacement and went on to impress enough with bat and ball to earn her place back in India's squad too.

Did you know? Her 80* in Bristol to save a Test match is the highest-ever by an Indian batting at No.8.

Doing it for late dad: Renuka Singh Thakur

Age: 29

Role: Pacer

Shimla, Himachal Pradesh

After her father's death when Renuka was just 3, her journey has been moulded by mother

Sunita and her brother Vinod. After receiving her India call-up in 2021, Renuka recalled how much her father loved cricket, so much that he had named her brother after his favourite cricketer Vinod Kambli. Renuka's father worked at the Irrigation and Public health department, where Sunita would join after his death. Renuka would accompany Vinod to the village ground, and play in the boys' teams. She would pick up wooden sticks or plastic bats from home or the neighbourhood to play alongside boys. Renuka's uncle Bhupinder Singh Thakur advised her to attend trials at the HPCA Women's residential academy in Dharamshala, a brainchild of former BCCI president Anurag Singh Thakur. There she worked on improving her fitness and control. Renuka quickly became a fixture in the Indian squad after her debut as she had the ability to prodigiously swing the ball into right-handers, but has also worked on getting them to straighten past the outside edge.



Did you know? Renuka was the leading wicket-taker at the 2022 Commonwealth Games with 11 scalps.

Bold move: Arundhati Reddy

Age: 28

Role: Pace-all rounder

Hyderabad



Arundhati Reddy made her T20I debut in 2018 but had to wait a long time for her chance to play ODIs. It was only in 2024 against South Africa in Bengaluru that she got her 50-over bow and a year later, she made the cut for the World Cup. Having started her journey with Hyderabad in domestic cricket and impressing with her natural athleticism, Arundhati moved to Railways. Presenting her ODI cap, Smriti Mandhana applauded Arundhati's bold call, calling it a 'big decision that I don't think many of us would have made' as she moved to Kerala.

After a chat with former India fielding coach Biju George, she made the shift. It also required Arundhati to convince her mother. “I am glad those 3 years happened because I am the cricketer I am today because of that,” she had said on the day of her ODI debut. At the T20 World Cup against Pakistan last year, she was the match-winner.

Did you know? Growing up, Arundhati idolised MS Dhoni and wanted to be a wicketkeeper but was nudged by her coaches to become a seam-bowling allrounder.

Cricket migrant: Radha Yadav

Age: 25

Role: Spin-all rounder

Baroda, Gujarat



Born in Mumbai, Radha Yadav plays for Baroda in domestic cricket and is the first woman cricketer from the Gujarat team to be picked in the Indian team. Without doubt the best fielder in the side, Radha was a T20I specialist for a long time, playing in that format from 2018. Having made her ODI debut in 2021, it wasn't until 2024 that she played in the format again. If it wasn't for an injury to rookie spinner Shuchi Upadhyay, Radha might not have made it to the squad for England this summer. Coach Praful Naik spotted a young Radha in 2012 playing cricket inside a compound in Kandivali and it stuck with him how she charged towards a boy who was holding onto the bat despite getting out. He took the initiative to convince her father, a vegetable vendor, to make her a cricketer. The Yadavs lived in a small house and couldn't afford to spend on sports. Radha then moved to Baroda when Naik shifted base.

Did you know? Radha once went on a record run of picking up at least one wicket in 27 consecutive T20Is.

Dad carved her bat: Amanjot Kaur

Age: 25

Role: Pace-all rounder

Chandigarh

Bhupinder Singh, a carpenter, found one evening that his daughter Amanjot was upset because

the boys in their neighbourhood didn't let her play as she didn't have a bat. He went to his shop and returned late in the night with a wooden bat he himself had carved. It would be the first bat that Amanjot owned. Despite the taunting she faced, Bhupinder encouraged her to play. When she turned 14, he took Amanjot to coach Nagesh Gupta. Despite initially not having a spot for her, Nagesh took her on board. Amanjot was player of the match on her T20I debut but a back stress fracture and a hand ligament injury saw her miss a big chunk of 2024. It was at the WPL with Mumbai Indians this year that Amanjot signalled her return. Nagesh said that Amanjot took a while to come to terms with it, but became more spiritual as she plotted her comeback.



Did you know? Amanjot was only the second player to make a 50+ score batting at No.8 or lower at a Women's World Cup, when she rescued India against Sri Lanka.

Athletics' loss, cricket's gain: Sree Charani

Age: 21

Role: Spinner

Kadapa, Andhra Pradesh



When she was in Class III, Sree Charani started playing with her mama Kishore Reddy at their home with plastic bats, and followed him to the grounds in the quarters where she competed with players way above her age. For Kishore, cricket was just a hobby but it would be the foundation for Charani's sharp rise. It was athletics that she was serious about early on at school. When she was in Class X, her physical education instructor, Naresh, brought her to Hyderabad for selections at the Sports Authority of India training centre in Gachibowli. Former India selector MSK Prasad saw her athleticism and suggested she try cricket. At the WPL, she earned the trust of Meg Lanning with her dedication in training and impressed enough to make her way to the ODI squad, where

India were chopping and changing with the left-arm spinner's slot that she has made her own.

Did you know? Sree Charani finished with 10 wickets in T20Is in England, becoming the player of the series in her debut outing.

Redemption arc: Shafali Verma

Age: 21

Role: Opening batter

Rohtak, Haryana

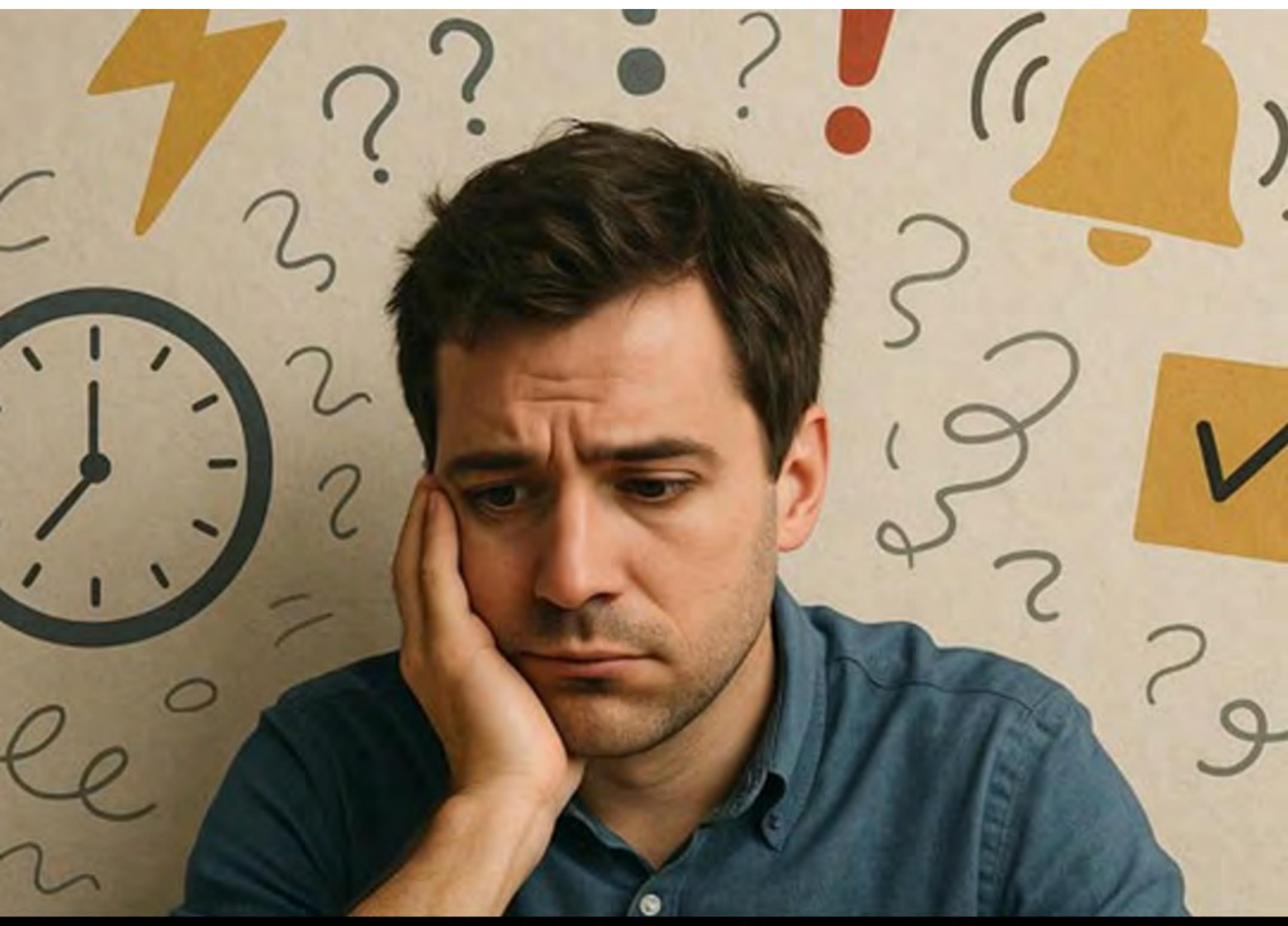


The story goes that Sanjeev Sharma got a 10-year-old Shafali to cut her hair really short so that she could pass off as her older sick brother in an all-boys' school team, and she went on to become the player of the tournament. It didn't take long for Shafali to capture the imagination of Indian cricket. In the precursor to the WPL – the Women's T20 Challenge – her blistering attacking approach as a 15-year-old was something the women's game hadn't seen. And she took down

Aussie legend Megan Schutt for a six in her first tour Down Under. A huge fan of Sachin Tendulkar, Shafali broke his record for being the youngest Indian to score an international half- century at 15. She also led India to their first ICC title at a women's event at the inaugural U19 T20 World Cup. Her rise to the top was rapid but recent inconsistencies saw her fall out of favour, before Pratika Rawal's injury brought her back into the fold.

Did you know? Shafali is only the second Indian woman to hit a double century in Test cricket after Mithali Raj





'I thought I was just lazy': The quiet grief and relief of discovering ADHD in adulthood

- Aishwarya Khosla

Thirty-seven-year-old Ashwami, a chef from Goa, remembers the moment she began to see herself differently. She had been in therapy for years and felt “well-versed” in the language of mental health. Yet something remained out of reach. A life coach she was working with during the pandemic noticed her struggle to sit still, even while reflecting on her thoughts. “She asked if anyone had ever suggested ADHD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder) testing,” Ashwami recalls. “I said no. I just thought kids had it when they couldn’t pay attention in school.”

That session would change everything. Within weeks, an online assessment revealed what years of therapy didn't. She scored high on every ADHD marker. "It was a relief," she says. "For the first time, things made sense. It helped me approach myself with kindness."

Across the world, similar stories are surfacing. Professionals, artists, entrepreneurs, and parents are discovering in adulthood that the restlessness, disorganisation, or emotional intensity they once called "personality" is part of a neurodevelopmental condition they were never told they had.

The missing diagnosis

Dr Deeksha Kalra, a psychiatrist based in Delhi, says that ADHD in adults has always existed, but only now is it being recognised. "It's not occurring more than before. It's just being identified more now." Awareness, she says, is driving adults to seek evaluations that were denied to them as children.

For decades, ADHD was nearly synonymous with hyperactivity. "Teachers and parents were taught to look for the child who couldn't sit still," Dr Kalra says. "But many children, especially girls, present with inattention, impulsivity, and emotional dysregulation rather than physical restlessness. Those cases were often dismissed

as laziness or daydreaming.”

‘I thought I was just lazy’

For Vandhana Ashok, a 35-year-old content creator from Chennai, the label came later in life, after years of struggling to keep structure in a self-directed career. “When I was teaching, the classroom gave me routine,” she says. “Once I started freelancing, I was completely lost.” She laughs gently, then adds, “I’m very time-blind. If someone says five minutes, I genuinely think it’s five minutes, but it’s not. I’ll always be late.”

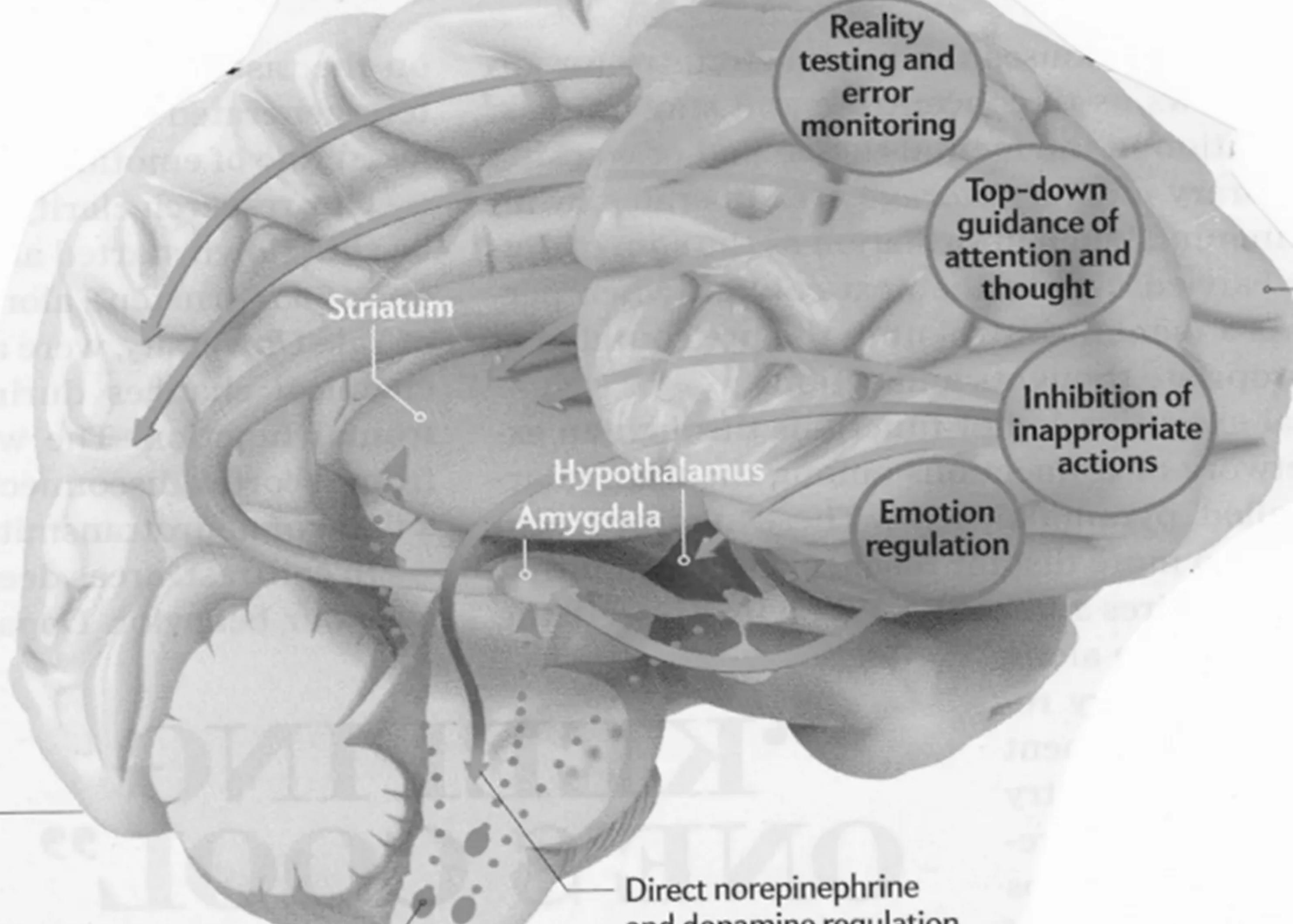
Vandhana’s story is one of quiet endurance. She grew up introverted and studious, thriving in structured school environments. “I loved learning, so I did well,” she says. “But I was always last-minute. I’d pull through exams by luck and adrenaline.” When she moved into adulthood, the scaffolding of routine disappeared, and her mind’s volatility grew harder to hide. “It took me longer to calm down than others,” she recalls. “I thought maybe it was trauma or PMS. It wasn’t until my sister was diagnosed that I realised it might be ADHD.”

Her sister’s therapist had noticed similarities in behaviour between them. When Vandhana finally took the assessment, she felt an odd relief. “It was not that I changed overnight. But knowing there was a reason I struggled with everyday

things – it was liberating.”

She recalls years of shame over her disorganised spaces. “People would say, How can you live like this? But in my head, it made sense. That’s my order.” The shame, she says, lifted once she understood it was neurological, not moral.

‘Underdiagnosis and over-identification’



ADHD arises from maldevelopment in brain. (Wikimedia Commons)

The pandemic years catalysed this reckoning. As lockdowns confined people to their homes, social media became both a mirror and a magnifier. “The rise in adult ADHD diagnoses is strongly linked to online communities,” says Dr Itisha Nagar, a Delhi-based psychologist. “People began

reading about neurodivergence, hearing others describe experiences that mirrored their own. It gave them vocabulary.”

Awareness, however, has brought confusion. “We have a dual problem,” says Dr Kalra. “Underdiagnosis and over-identification.” The internet has turned self-diagnosis into a cultural shorthand. “Someone forgets an appointment and says, ‘my ADHD brain,’ ” she says. “This casualness dilutes what people with ADHD truly go through.”

At the same time, others who could benefit from assessment are discouraged by stigma. “There’s still a taboo around psychiatric medication,” Dr Nagar notes. “In India, even antidepressants carry shame. Stimulant medication for ADHD is tightly regulated, which means people are often under-medicated rather than misusing drugs.” In the West, stimulant misuse has been documented among students and professionals. But in India, access itself is the barrier. “You can’t walk into a pharmacy and buy ADHD medication,” says Dr Nagar. “It’s highly controlled. The bigger issue is that many adults who could benefit from it are not even assessed.”

The emotional landscape of ADHD

ADHD, as both clinicians emphasise, is a condition that shapes emotion as much as attention. “We

talk about attention deficits, but the deeper issue is regulation,” says Dr Nagar. “Energy, mood, and emotion are all connected.”

For Ashwami, this rings true. “My energy is never steady,” she says. “I can be very high or completely drained. And I feel emotions too intensely. Even small rejections used to feel like heartbreak.”

This emotional volatility often defines adult ADHD more than fidgeting or forgetfulness. “Many people come to therapy not because they can’t focus,” says Dr Kalra, “but because they feel everything too much.”

Vandhana remembers thinking she was “too emotional” as a child. “I’d cry over small things,” she says. “I was told I’m overreacting. Now I know it’s neurological.”

These patterns — emotional dysregulation, sensitivity to criticism, bouts of hyperfocus followed by burnout — are common threads among adults diagnosed later in life. “The ADHD brain doesn’t lack attention,” says Dr Nagar. “It lacks regulation of attention. That’s why hyperfocus is as much a symptom as distraction.”

In Bellingham, Washington, Mike Ortiz realised this at 30. A digital marketing professional, he was struggling with anxiety and chronic disorganisation. “He was always late, always

overwhelmed,” says his wife, Andria Ortiz. “He felt like he was constantly letting people down.”

A visit to his doctor for unrelated health concerns led to an unexpected question: had he ever been tested for ADHD? Childhood teachers had mentioned it, but no one had followed up. The adult diagnosis brought an almost immediate shift. “It was a sense of validation,” says Andria.

“He realised he wasn’t broken. His brain just worked differently.”

Mike channelled that difference into entrepreneurship. He left his corporate job and launched *Canvas Monsters*, a small business turning digital art into custom home décor. “He realised he could hyperfocus on his own work,” Andria says. “He stopped fighting his brain and started using it.”

That ability to redirect attention is increasingly recognised by clinicians as one of ADHD’s paradoxical strengths. “These are incredibly creative, idea-driven minds,” says Dr Nagar. “Many entrepreneurs are neurodivergent. The same wiring that makes routine difficult can make innovation natural.”

But success depends on understanding. “Without awareness, hyperfocus can lead to burnout,” warns Dr Kalra. “With awareness, it can be harnessed.”

The price of misunderstanding

The late diagnosis, while often transformative, carries emotional costs. Adults who learn about ADHD in their thirties or forties frequently speak of grief for their younger selves. “It’s like looking back and seeing how hard you tried,” says Ashwami. “All those years thinking you were lazy, or unreliable, when you were just wired differently.”

Dr Nagar hears this often. “People cry in my office. Not because of the diagnosis, but because of the realisation that their struggles were never moral failings. They were neurological patterns.” Vandhana agrees. “It’s freeing, but also sad. I think, what if someone had told me sooner? Maybe I’d have been kinder to myself.”

A shift in cultural understanding

India’s growing recognition of adult ADHD marks a cultural turning point. Mental health literacy has expanded dramatically over the past decade, aided by social media, wellness platforms, and pandemic-era introspection. Yet stigma persists.

“In Indian families, behavioural differences are moralised,” says Dr Kalra. “‘Lazy,’ ‘careless,’ ‘emotional’ – these are labels, not diagnoses.” She recalls patients whose parents dismissed their symptoms as excuses. “We must educate

families that ADHD is neurodevelopmental. You don't 'grow out' of it on your 18th birthday."

Dr Nagar adds that ADHD's cultural framing also intersects with gender. "Women internalise failure. They mask symptoms to appear competent. They're more likely to be misdiagnosed with anxiety or depression."

A 2025 study in the *Asian Journal of Psychiatry* echoes this finding: Indian women with ADHD often report more severe symptoms than men, including lower self-esteem, higher emotional volatility, and greater demoralisation. Yet they are less likely to seek help. Many were first misdiagnosed with depression or personality disorders, their inattention and impulsivity explained away as emotional frailty.

"It's a generational ripple," says Dr Kalra. "Parents recognise their child's symptoms because they see themselves."

Between awareness and misuse

As awareness grows, so do misconceptions. ADHD medication, usually stimulants, is tightly regulated in India, partly due to fears of misuse.

"People assume it's addictive," says Dr Kalra.

"But when prescribed correctly, it improves focus and quality of life."

In the United States, where stimulants are more accessible, concerns about overprescription have led to stricter oversight. Yet even there, Andria Ortiz says, stigma lingers. “People joke about ADHD, but they don’t see the exhaustion behind it,” she says. “Before the diagnosis, Mike was drowning in guilt. After medication and therapy, he could finally breathe.”

In India, under-medication is the larger issue. “Most adults with ADHD don’t reach a psychiatrist,” says Dr Nagar. “They either self-diagnose or stop at therapy. Medication can be life-changing, but access and stigma keep people from trying.”

Both experts caution against taking medication without supervision. “We’ve had cases where people took their friend’s prescription to ‘improve performance’ before exams,” says Dr Kalra. “It’s unethical and risky. These are powerful drugs that must be tailored and monitored.”

“People still think ADHD means you’re careless or spoiled,” says Sourav Banerjee, a 42-year-old advertising executive in Kolkata who was recently diagnosed with it. “When I told colleagues about it, someone said, ‘Everyone has concentration problems these days.’ They didn’t see how years of missed deadlines or lost files weren’t because I didn’t care, but because my brain just works differently.”

The everyday adjustments

For many adults, management involves more than medication. “Therapy helps rewire habits,” says Dr Nagar. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and coaching can address time blindness, task initiation, and emotional regulation. “The goal is to work with your brain, not against it,” she says.

Ashwami agrees. “I’ve learnt to plan differently. I keep visual reminders, move my body when I need to reset, and give myself permission to take breaks.” She laughs. “I’ve stopped trying to be a morning person.”

Vandhana’s approach is similar. “I structure my day around my energy, not the clock. Some days I’m hyper-productive, others I’m not. That’s okay.”

For couples like the Ortizes, communication is key. “We had to learn a new language,” Andria says. “If Mike’s overwhelmed, I don’t take it personally. We talk about what’s happening in his head. It’s made our marriage stronger.”

The broader picture

The growing awareness of adult ADHD reflects a larger shift in how societies view neurodiversity. The conversation has moved from deficit to

difference – from “disorder” to “divergence”. In workplaces, this shift is beginning to take hold. Some companies are introducing neurodiversity training or flexible policies that recognise varying attention patterns. Yet progress remains uneven.

“Corporate India still prizes uniform productivity,” says Dr Kalra. “Neurodivergent employees are often labelled as inconsistent. But what they bring – creativity, intuition, problem-solving – is invaluable.”

Dr Nagar believes that inclusion begins with language. “We must stop using ADHD as a punchline. Every time we say, ‘I’m so ADHD today,’ we erase real experiences.”

What comes next

Adult ADHD remains under-researched in India. The 2025 gender study is among the first of its kind, signalling a growing recognition of the condition beyond childhood. Clinicians hope this will spur policy changes, including better training for general practitioners, insurance coverage for assessments, and public awareness campaigns.

For those living with ADHD, the journey is ongoing. “It’s not something you cure,” says Ashwami. “It’s something you learn to live with, and even love, sometimes.”

She recalls a recent moment at her restaurant. “We had a chaotic evening. Orders were flying, music was loud, everyone was shouting. And I thought, this is my element. My brain thrives in chaos.” She laughs. “Maybe that’s the gift in it.”

Across borders, cultures, and genders, what once hid in classrooms has found its voice in adulthood, reshaping how we understand the human mind and ourselves, one diagnosis at a time.





Can 2 minutes of doing nothing make you smarter? Neuroscientists say yes

– *Bijin Jose*

Is there a way to boost your memory simply by doing nothing? If you’re scratching your head for an answer, science has got your back. In the age of instant gratification, retaining information can be challenging. However, a study published in *Nature Reviews Psychology* suggests that even two minutes of rest with your eyes closed could improve your memory. In fact, it may be almost as beneficial as a full night’s sleep.

It is common that we spend a lot of time daydreaming, allowing our minds to wander freely. This is known as the ‘offline state’, and

the study shows that nearly half of our waking hours fall into this state, in simple words, in an activity where we do not focus on anything around us. This state would have been seen as wasteful traditionally, but scientists beg to differ.

According to Dr Erin J Wamsley, a neuroscientist and psychologist at Furman University in South Carolina, USA, these quiet moments are not wasted at all. Wamsley, in her paper that yokes together years of research, suggests that resting quietly, even for a few minutes, can help the brain to strengthen memories, much like how a night's sleep does.

Sleep is not the only memory booster

For several years, scientists have shown how sleep helps us in remembering information. It is said after learning something new, sleeping soon after can significantly improve our ability to recall the next day. This is because sleep lets the brain 'consolidate' or, in simpler words, replay and strengthen new memories. This allows the brain to retain memory for the long term.

Wamsley's paper also throws light on some new findings, such as how even shorter periods of quiet wakefulness or the act of closing your eyes for 10 to 15 minutes after studying can produce a similar effect. In her experiments, those who rested quietly without any distractions right

after learning something new remembered more than those who did another activity immediately after.

In one of the experiments, people were told a short story, after which they either rested quietly or played a spot-the-difference game. Those who rested after the test remembered more than those who did something else. According to the researchers, this boost was still visible a week later. Similar results have been observed for motor skills such as finger-tapping patterns and spatial tasks such as remembering map routes.

Why is rest crucial for memory?

To understand this better, imagine the brain's memory consolidation as something like saving a document. When you learn something new, the details or 'file' are stored in the hippocampus region, which is also the brain's quick-access memory. When you are resting, the hippocampus replays the information to the cortex, a region that is responsible for long-term storage. According to the paper, this replay seems to happen during sleep and moments of quiet wakefulness.

This replay mechanism has also been recorded in animals. For instance, the same brain cells that fired while a rat navigated a maze fired up again when it rested later. Similarly, in brain-imaging studies, humans showed similar replay

patterns while resting immediately after learning. Researchers also noted that certain brain waves, known as ‘sharp-wave ripples’ appeared during these replays. These waves seem like bursts of electrical activity in the hippocampus, and they often coincided with other slow waves, all enhancing connections.

Rest vs sleep: What’s the difference?

Both rest and sleep can strengthen memories, but they are not the same. Both have the ability to reduce sensory input, lower the levels of a brain chemical called acetylcholine, and allow memory replay. Unlike rest, sleep has stronger spindles and slow-wave activity, which are likely to make the brain consolidation last longer.

Essentially, a few minutes of resting with eyes closed can stabilise a memory for hours. However, sleep may be needed to make it last for days or weeks. Wamsley proposes that rest provides a temporary ‘saving draft’, while sleep does the final save.

During their experiments comparing two, 30 minutes of rest and 30 minutes of napping led to almost similar memory gains immediately afterwards. But it needs to be noted that only those who later slept overnight retained the benefit for longer.

Can micro-rests actually help?

In the research, Wamsley points to findings that show even seconds-long micro-rests can help. The human brain is capable of naturally switching between ‘online’ or focussed and ‘offline’ or drifting states multiple times in a minute. According to the researchers, when you take these quick pauses or simply stare into space mid-task, the sensory input drops, and the brain shows the slow and synchronised patterns connected to memory replay.

Moreover, in studies using EEG and eye-tracking, people entered mini-offline states every few seconds. According to scientists, the more often this happened after learning something, the better they remembered it. This essentially proves that even tiny moments of zoning out may help your brains save more information.





Why Gen Z is shifting towards steel

– *Vaibhavi Mishra*

As I made my way through the bustling markets of Chandni Chowk, what caught my attention was a gleaming display of steel utensils – in designs I had never imagined. The steel crockery I've used for the past 28 years has always carried a signature simplicity. This collection, though, spoke fluent Gen Z – the kind of aesthetic my Instagram feed would approve of. What was once a staple of the older generation suddenly seemed like the latest trend.

The new market trend

“The current trend in the market is steel only,” said Ankit Jain, proud owner of a 50-year-old

utensil shop in Sadar Bazar, while showing off his collection. He revealed that people are now ditching plastic, melamine, and aluminium in favour of steel.

“Young logon mein zyada craze hai. Woh samajhdar hain aur phir uska prachar bhi hai. Doctors bhi advice yahi karte hain,”

added Subhash Jain of Madras Metal. The 75-year-old trader seemed certain that Gen Z’s increasing focus on health is driving the change.

According to the traders, the shift is relatively recent, with sales booming in the last three to five years across both wholesale and retail. “In the past five years, demand for steel has surged, especially for tri-ply cookware. Big brands like

Hawkins, Prestige, Bergner, and Tramontina have all seen sales increase. Stainless steel cutlery, kadhais, utensils, and strainers are selling rapidly,” said Sushant Gupta, a utensil trader and owner of Shri Anil Ji Store, Vivek Vihar.

“Good-quality steel doesn’t react with food, is easy to clean, and is environmentally friendly.”

Some believe this rise is also tied to growing awareness of the health risks associated with aluminium. “Our cookers are all steel now. Aluminium sales have dropped to zero. Many companies that used to make aluminium products have switched to steel,” said Amit Gupta, another shopkeeper from Vivek Vihar’s Prime Collection.

Is steel truly the good Samaritan?

“Health comes first! I only eat in steel. Plus, I hate the foul smell that comes with plastic utensils over time,” said 26-year-old Gurveen Kaur. She isn’t alone. Gen Z’s growing health consciousness has made steel a preferred choice.

Senior nutritionist Ashlesha Joshi explains why. “Unlike materials such as un-anodised aluminium, uncast iron, or copper (especially with acidic foods), steel doesn’t typically leach large amounts of reactive metallic ions under normal conditions,” she said.

Steel also resists corrosion, scratching, warping, and flaking under high heat. “This means the cooked food retains its nutrient profile more reliably,” Joshi added, noting this as a key reason behind the generational shift.

Still, some remain cautious. “It’s the least dangerous option,” said 24-year-old yoga instructor Dev Verma. “*Kuch na kuch chemical usme bhi hota hai.* I try to eat in *mitti ke bartan* (earthen pots), but that’s not always feasible.” His concern is not unfounded – studies suggest that under certain conditions, steel can leach nickel and chromium into food.

Joshi clarifies, however, that “for most consumers, the leached amounts from stainless steel

cookware do not exceed safe intake levels.” Only people with nickel allergies or those who cook very acidic foods for long durations in low-grade pans may face higher exposure, she added.

Gen Z’s new economic investment

For many, it’s not just about health. “Steel is also economical,” said Mukesh Jain of Bishan Chand Jain and Sons. “Earlier, glass replaced steel, but because of its fragility and rising costs, people are returning to stainless steel. Demand has increased tremendously.”

Subhash Jain agrees. “Crockery is fashionable, but if one plate breaks, the whole set is ruined,” he said. Steel, by contrast, lasts longer and has even become a popular gifting choice.

The durability and ease of maintenance also make steel a hit among students and young professionals. “I have to do everything myself – with steel, I don’t have to worry about anything breaking,” said Shreshth Mishra, an art student in Lucknow. “Even though many hostel students have fancy, Instagram-friendly crockery, steel just makes life easier.”

The ideal way to use steel

Joshi recommends a few precautions for optimal use of stainless steel:

Choose quality steel: Go for high-grade stainless (18/10, 304, or 316) for better corrosion resistance and minimal leaching.

Break in gently: Use new pans for short cooking sessions before making long stews or sauces.

Mind acidity: For prolonged acidic cooking (tomato- or citrus-based dishes), switch to glass or ceramic cookware, or use high-grade, well-maintained steel.

Maintain well: Avoid scratches or corrosion; replace damaged cookware.

Nickel sensitivity: If allergic, opt for glass, ceramic, or cast iron, or choose ultra-low-nickel steel.

Mix materials: Use different cookware for different needs to balance exposure.

Keep balance: Cookware exposure is minor compared to diet, water, and environment — eat a varied diet, stay hydrated, and limit highly processed foods.





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