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PLUS+

GULF ON THE BRINK

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INDEX

Dear Reader,

This month's cover story examines a conflict that is rapidly reshaping geopolitics of the Gulf. The United States and Israel's strikes on Iran, and Tehran's sweeping retaliation, have pushed the Middle East to the brink of a wider war, choking energy flows and upending global markets.

In this issue, we explore the deeper currents that shape the crisis. We revisit how Shi'ism shaped Iran's politics for centuries, why ideas like martyrdom remain a powerful strand in the country's collective memory and political imagination, and examine the lessons of Iraq after the 2003 regime change. We also trace India's ancient connections with Iran and recall a wartime echo in the shelling of Madras in 1914.

Together, these stories remind us that war is rooted as much in history as in strategy.

The Indian EXPRESS

INDEX

How Shi'ism took root in Iran and shaped its politics for centuries

Nikita Mohta

An ancient land in western Asia, Iran occupies a strategic crossroads: the Indian subcontinent and China lie to its east; Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean world to its west; Russia to the north; and the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula to its south. This geography has long made it a conduit for cultural exchange, commercial networks, and population movements. Today, Iran is also home to one of the largest Shia Muslim populations in the region, alongside countries such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.

As theologians such as Jon Armajani argue in Shia Islam and Politics: Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon (2020), this religious demography has enabled

Iran both—to form alliances against external threats as well as mobilise its masses. A look at how Shiism took root in Iran and how Shia clerics have historically shaped and mobilised political action.

Historical background

The Shi'is seceded from the great majority of the Islamic community in the seventh century (AD) due to a difference of opinion regarding the heirs of the Prophet Muhammad. After the death of the Prophet, three factions emerged, each claiming to be his rightful heir. "The debate was broadly focused on the issue of authority and legitimacy for that authority. The prophet, claimed the Sunni majority… won his authority through his character and achievements," notes academic Ori Goldberg in Shi'i Theology in Iran: The Challenge of Religious Experience (2012). The prophet transformed a fragmented tribal society and turned it into a unified, monotheistic empire. Goldberg notes, "Therefore the Sunnis considered the prophet to be the man who brought border, prosperity and discipline." When the prophet died (632 AD), the Sunni needed to know that their next leader could maintain the prophet's achievements and perhaps add to them. They supported the selection of Abu Bakr, a close companion of the prophet, as the first caliph.

Shi'is, however, maintained a different view. They claimed that Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and

son-in-law of the prophet, was the heir apparent to Muhammad. “The Shi’is”, notes Goldberg, “claimed that the prophet’s legitimacy had to do with the fact that he developed an intimate relationship with God. All the members of the twelver chain (from Ali to the Imam Mahdi, the hidden Imam) carried a divine spark, a nass. The heir of the prophet should be someone related to him by blood, so as to keep the spark alive.” They wanted a leader who would serve as constant proof to them of God’s existence. This difference of opinion regarding authority, according to Goldberg, turned the Shi’is into a persecuted minority. In an interview with indianexpress.com, Goldberg adds, “Shi‘ism, since its inception around the 7th century, was for a long time a minority religion.” In its early centuries, he says, it functioned almost like a nomadic missionary movement, operating on the margins of power, while Sunni Islam remained the established creed.

Ismail I at a battle in 1510 (Wikipedia)

Although there were Shiʿite kingdoms in Mesopotamia and communities in Iran, the historical heartland of Shiʿism was in Lebanon. “There, religious schools trained Shia clerics, some of whom travelled abroad to spread their teachings. In time, they encountered a confederation of warrior tribes on the Central Asian steppes known as the Safavid dynasty. These tribes were converted to Islam under Shia influence and gradually consolidated power.” By the early 16th century, the Safavids unified the territories of Iran under their rule.

The Shi’i state in Iran

The year 1501 was a turning point in Iran, when Shah Isma’il the Safavid established the first Shi’i state in Iran. The Safavids were warrior tribes from Central Asia. While they conquered and unified Iran, they lacked any sort of institutional legitimacy. They were also Shi’is of a militant, mystical school. Goldberg writes, “Since Shi’ism was never a dominant court religion, it prospered on the frontiers and peripheries of the Islamic world, eventually coming to power on a ticket of flexible mysticism rather than rigid, institutional doctrine.”

The Safavids began to import Shi’i religious scholars from abroad, mostly from the great scholarly centre in Lebanon, to provide religious legitimacy for their rule. They were quick to offer sound rewards to the native religious

establishment in Iran, which was mostly Sunni. “The Safavids offered the Shi’i clerics (some of whom were Sunnis who had converted to Shi’ism) the support of a strong state. The clerics would receive state appointments and salaries, a chance to become an elite,” writes Goldberg. In return, they would profess their allegiance to the state and persuade their adherents to do the same.

Ismail I 1487 – 1524 (Wikipedia)

According to Goldberg, the Iranian state had two leaderships: one religious, the other temporal.

The religious leadership developed into a traditional elite with the support and funds of the state. Still, it never demanded the mandate to rule the country. The political community was never swallowed up into a religious social order. Religious scholars preferred to remain behind the scenes, occupying a pastoral role. “The Safavid model allowed for the joint, yet separate, development of the state and the religious establishment. The religious scholars relied on the state for institutional legitimacy, but also created religious venues for legitimization,” writes Goldberg.

The Qajar and Pahlavi dynasties

The Safavid dual system functioned for just about 400 years. With the fall and disintegration of the Safavid state in 1722, and after some six decades of internal wars and political instability, the Qajar dynasty rose to power.

Western powers began to covet Iran’s resources and strategic location from the end of the eighteenth century onwards, and they played an active part in the machinations of the Qajar court. The religious establishment feared both for its elite status and for its role as the guardian of social morale and morality. In 1892, the clerics directly took on the monarchy when the leading source of emulation, Mirza Hassan Shirazi, published a religious decree forbidding the faithful to use tobacco products of any kind. This came about

after the Qajar Shah granted a tobacco franchise to a British firm, allowing foreigners to take over tobacco production from the growing stage to the selling of tobacco products. An entire nation stopped smoking, and the Shah was forced to rescind his order. However, conflict ensued for the next three decades.

Reza Shah (Wikipedia)

In Goldberg's view, although Iran was long subject to British and Russian interference, it was never formally colonised. He argues that many Iranians

interpret this resilience as closely tied to their religious identity. “In this understanding, Shiʿism is not merely a faith but an essential component of national identity.”

In 1925, Reza Shah Pahlavi was enthroned, establishing the Pahlavi dynasty. Goldberg notes, “Reza Shah had an agenda which viewed with disdain the Iranian-Shi’i system of multifocal, intertwined institutions and legitimacies. Reza Shah looked to the west, and wished to emulate the unitary structure of the western institutional state. He wished to change the balance of power in Iran, building a new state whose sole source of legitimacy and authority was the monarchy.” While this new identity did not reject Islam wholeheartedly, it was predominantly secular and saw its historical roots in Iran’s imperial, pre-Islamic past.

The Shah established a new, state-guided educational system which extolled the monarchy and was run by state-trained employees. Religious schools, the main form of popular education in Iran, were gradually replaced. The Shah also established a new legal system, adopting European codes and appointing Western-trained jurists as judges. By doing this, he undermined the livelihood of the religious scholars, while also removing their moral and public authority. Additionally, he wanted to take over as the nation’s spiritual guardian, not only to establish his status as absolute monarch. Mohammad

Reza Shah positioned himself as an omniscient and omnipotent leader. For some religious leaders, this signalled an impending crisis in their traditionally stable relationship with the monarchy. “The ways in which the religious establishment regulated and influenced the creation of meaning in society were now being overtly threatened,” writes Goldberg.

Iranian Revolution (Wikipedia)

Western-educated intellectuals denounced the Shah’s increasingly authoritarian rule, while traditionalists, including Shiʿa clerics, were alarmed by his state-driven Westernisation. By the late 1970s, the monarchy had become politically isolated and its social base eroded. This growing discontent set the stage for revolutionary upheaval, culminating in the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which overthrew the Pahlavi monarchy

and established a Shia Islamic government in Iran.

As Goldberg explains in his interview, during the twentieth century, the Iranian state under the Pahlavi Shahs pursued an aggressive programme of secularisation. The Shahs feared that if the population's primary loyalty remained with Shia Islam, it might undermine allegiance to the monarchy.

However, these efforts ultimately failed to displace Shiʿism from Iranian public life. Shiʿa Islam remained central to popular identity, and its custodians—the clerics— retained authority. "Far from being isolated seminary scholars, Shia clerics were embedded throughout Iranian society, maintaining a direct relationship with the people. They were always political," asserts Goldberg.

Since the Iranian Revolution

Since the 1979 Revolution, Iran's leaders have woven Twelver Shia Islam into the state's vision, using it both as a source of domestic legitimacy and a vehicle of regional expansion. Under the doctrine of velayat e faqih (guardianship of the Islamic jurist), leaders such as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini held that Shia clerics would guide not just religious but also political life. Iran has also funded and backed the Hezbollah in Lebanon—a Shiite Muslim political and militant group that emerged in Lebanon following the Israeli invasion of the country in 1982.

The Iranian state has also leveraged religious and educational institutions, cultural centres, and media outlets to expand its ideological reach. It also preached the need to protect Shia shrines and emphasised the Shia struggle. Interestingly, the notionally shaped Shia Crescent region of West Asia also stands to represent Iranian influence and soft power. Including Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Azerbaijan, and Yemen, it illustrates that Shi'ism is woven into the geography. Through this alignment, Iran hopes to expand its geopolitical footprint while countering rival Sunni powers like Saudi Arabia and external actors such as the United States and Israel.

Yet, Goldberg warns, "The widespread narrative that Sunnis and Shiʿa have been locked in perpetual religious warfare is misleading. While periods of tension and conflict have certainly occurred, for centuries, Sunni and Shia communities lived side by side across the Middle East. Even in the Gulf states, the two communities coexisted without embracing the notion that only one sect could survive."

The notion of a 1,400-year-old Sunni–Shia war, Goldberg says, is largely a product of the past few decades, driven by regional rivalries and political agendas.

Iran agreed to unprecedented terms. So why did US attack?

Bashir Ali Abbas

Joint Israeli and US air and missile strikes on Tehran have killed Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader of 37 years. These strikes were part of a larger US-Israeli aerial attack on Iran across centres of military and political power, which have also killed the Supreme National Security Council Secretary, Ali Shamkhani; Defence Minister Amir Nasirzadeh; and Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Mohammed Pakpour; among others.

The US-Israeli attacks continue. Despite the decapitation of its senior guard, Iran has kept up a sustained region-wide retaliation, targeting US bases in every country of the Gulf as well as Iraq and Israel with drone and missile attacks. Why

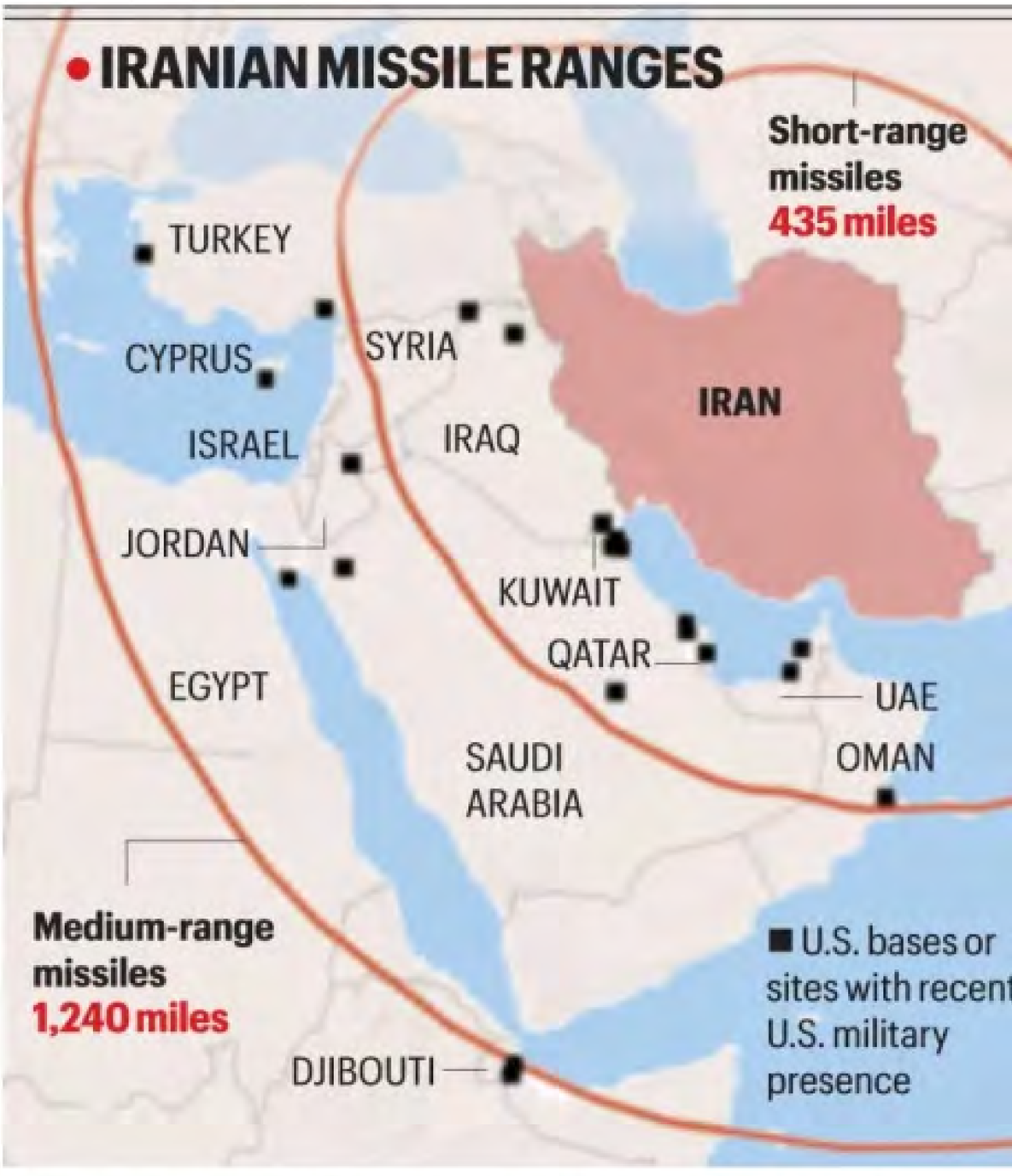
couldn’t this expanding conflict be prevented?

Commitment trap

Like in June 2025, the US attacks occurred at the height of indirect but active negotiations between Tehran and Washington, not in their absence. But the key difference is that the current war has arguably broken out due to a breakthrough in talks, not a breakdown. This was evident in that Oman, which traditionally holds discretion to be its most important suit as a serious mediator, broke all precedent early on February 28. Speaking to CBS News, Oman’s Foreign Minister Badr al-Busaidi made the details of US-Iran negotiations public. The details included Iran agreeing to zero stockpiling of nuclear material, down-blending its existing 60% enriched stockpile to irreversible fuel, and allowing US inspectors access to Iranian nuclear sites, among other measures which could be implemented immediately. He asserted that the Obama-era Iran nuclear deal (which US President Donald Trump has always sought to outdo) did not contain such extensive Iranian commitments, making it a significantly better deal from Washington’s perspective.

It is reasonably certain that Muscat was aware of Washington’s plan to attack Iran despite the seeming diplomatic breakthrough, reflecting that the White House was operating as if in a commitment trap. For Trump, even a deal with

such unprecedented terms would not allow him to save face. The means ultimately spurred their own ends: an attack without any guarantee that the strategic objective of "regime change" could be met, even with decapitation strikes.



NOTE: MINIMUM RANGE ESTIMATES FOR SOME OF IRAN'S MISSILES ARE SHOWN.
SOURCE: CSIS MISSILE DEFENSE PROJECT, THE NEW YORK TIMES

In June 2025, Washington's casus belli (cause of war) was the destruction of Iran's nuclear programme. Despite international evidence of Iran continuing to retain 60% enriched uranium,

the White House could still use the significant damage at Fordow to maintain that the Iranian nuclear programme was "obliterated" and that "suggestions otherwise" were "fake news". In February 2026, even as some officials still alleged that Iran was "one week away from a nuclear weapon" (again), the US' new casus belli was the need to aid regime change, built on the premise that the third round of negotiations did not yield an agreement — even as more talks were scheduled.

However, with the attacks and Iranian responses now under way, it is clear that while Trump can still claim victory with Khamenei's death, the regime surviving with new leadership (even if transitional) will be publicly verifiable evidence of the system's resilience. It will represent change within the system, not of the system. Rather, having lost the Supreme Leader, Tehran has significantly fewer reasons to show restraint and more to follow through with its threat of massive retaliation.

Punishment as strategy

The Iranian threat of massive conventional retaliation to even a limited US strike, was intended to be a deterrent: to prevent the US attack. Iran could not afford to replicate its strategy from June 2025, when it retaliated symbolically to US strikes on Fordow, Natanz, and

other nuclear sites by targeting Al Udeid air base in Qatar, given that it would puncture all Iranian deterrence. Washington was likely aware of this Iranian predicament. Combined with Trump's fresh need for a decisive win (which a deal could no longer provide) and the commitment trap of the military build-up, this meant that the US strike could no longer be symbolic (as it could have earlier been, say around January).

The aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford in 2017. Washington began preparing for Iran's massive retaliation, evident most prominently in that the USS Gerald R. Ford carrier strike group parked itself next to Israel. Photo: US Navy/Wikimedia Commons

Now, the US would need to attempt to draw maximum gains that airpower alone could provide, especially since boots on the ground remained a non-option. So, Washington also began preparing for Iran's massive retaliation, evident most prominently in that the USS Gerald R. Ford carrier strike group parked itself next to Israel — not Iran — since Washington knew

that Tehran would strike Israel in response. The US would rely on the wide gap in technological capabilities and the sophistication of its air defence network (enhanced by the Ford's cover) to absorb Iran's attacks.

However, Iran's retaliation has incorporated both vertical and horizontal escalation. Vertically, in terms of the use of missile/drone barrages that are intended to cause significant damage (unlike in June 2025), and horizontally in terms of the unprecedented across-the-board set of targets in the region, which includes attacks on Dubai, Bahrain, Riyadh, and Kuwait, targeting both military and civilian sites (where Tehran believes US servicemen to be sheltering).

So far, the Iranian attack has comprised almost as many missiles and drones aimed at the UAE as at Israel. Iran has also combined this by announcing a halt to oil tankers passing through the Strait of Hormuz (a historic first), which brings 20% of global oil trade to a halt. Collectively, this reflects Iran's desire to impose costs not only on the US and Israel, but also on regional states that host American bases and are Washington's allies.

With Khamenei's death, Tehran (especially through the IRGC) has promised even fiercer attacks on US allies, especially Israel, and the military crisis is far from finished. However,

the US-Israeli attacks have not brought forth organised coherent Iranian opposition to the fore, which can fight and replace the well-entrenched regime. This is in line with past precedent.

Moreover, striking civilian areas in Iran — including a school, which killed civilians including children — complicates the prospects of Trump's call for systemic change in the country. As the war continues, the costs increase significantly for the US (since Trump does not desire a prolonged campaign) and Iran's capacity to sustain its region-wide punishment is tested. But between the two, it is only Iran which is fighting for survival, which means it has far greater stakes in the conflict and consequently has more incentive to continue attacks until Washington backs down.

Before Iran, there was Iraq

Adrija Roychowdhury

As US President Donald Trump considers putting "boots on the ground" to topple the Iranian regime amid the US-Israel bombing campaign, it is worth recalling a different invasion from 20 years ago that profoundly reshaped the Middle East.

The stated aim of the 2003 invasion of Iraq — led by the US and including troops from the UK, Australia, Denmark, the Netherlands and Poland — was to destroy its "weapons of mass destruction (WMDs)" and "liberate" its people from the rule of Saddam Hussein.

Two decades on, Iraq continues to bear deep scars from that invasion — internecine conflict, insurgency, state fragmentation and the rise of extremist groups.

What happened in Iraq in 2023?

George W Bush assumed office in January 2001. After the September 11 attacks, his administration cited Iraq's alleged possession of WMDs and purported links to terrorist groups, including Al-Qaeda, as grounds for military action. Those claims would later prove unfounded.

In his 2002 State of the Union address, US President George W Bush said: "States like these and their terrorist allies constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world…"

By March 2003, Bush concluded that diplomatic efforts had failed and delivered an ultimatum to Saddam Hussein: Leave the country within 48 hours. Several countries, including France, Germany and Russia, objected to the move, seeing it as a build-up towards war.

The Iraqi president refused to comply and US-led forces attacked Iraq on the morning of March 20. Within a couple of weeks, Baghdad had fallen. The toppling of Hussein's statue in Firdos Square would become the most abiding image of the Iraq War. Hussein, who had fled, was caught in December 2003 after one of the biggest manhunts in history.

Bush infamously declared: "Mission accomplished". But the victory on the battlefield

quickly gave way to a bigger challenge: How to govern a society that had for long been strung together through repression.

Following the collapse of the Ba'athist regime, the major cities of Iraq erupted in violence and looting, mostly directed at government offices. Regional and sectarian conflicts broke out across the country over old grudges.

An interim governing body — the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), headed by a senior American diplomat — was established. The primary objective of the interim government was to maintain security, law and order, and to rebuild Iraq's severely damaged infrastructure.

Its efforts, however, were largely hampered on account of rising insurgency involving both Iraqi and non-Iraqi fighters from other Arab states. The majority of them were the thousands of people who had been removed from the former ruling party and the Iraqi army. Faced with unemployment and disenfranchisement, they contributed to the acute lawlessness that followed.

Aftermath of the 2003 Iraq invasion

Sectarian violence emerged as one of the most immediate and far-reaching consequences of the invasion. The removal of Hussein and the

subsequent empowerment of the Shia majority resulted in violent backlash from the Sunnis who felt marginalised.

The Shia-Sunni violence peaked in 2006 with the bombing of the Al-Askari mosque, a major Shia shrine, by Al-Qaeda. Many analysts consider it a watershed moment towards full-blown sectarian war. The resistance against foreign presence had swiftly intertwined with the battle over communal identity.

Meanwhile, efforts to hand over power to the Iraqi people continued. In June 2004 the CPA was dissolved and political authority passed on to an interim government headed by Ghazi-al-Yawar.

In January 2005, despite violence, elections were held successfully for Iraq's new Transitional National Assembly.

In April 2005, the role of Iraqi president was taken over by the Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani. A draft constitution was soon approved.

But the predominant presence of the Shia and Kurdish communities in the new government further alienated Sunnis.

The withdrawal of additional US troops in 2007 along with Sunni Awakening — a movement

in which Sunni insurgents eventually moved away from extremism — did reduce violence to some extent. Political reconciliation, however, remained a distant dream.

The withdrawal of US troops and the rise of ISIS

In December 2011, the US military held a ceremony in Baghdad to formally declare an end to its mission in Iraq.

The country's internal challenges, however, were far from over.

A new extremist threat emerged within the power vacuum left by the withdrawal of American forces — the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Driven out of Iraq by the Sunni Awakening in 2007, the group made a powerful comeback in 2013, riding on mounting Sunni discontent.

By 2014, ISIS had taken over Mosul and other key cities, and declared a caliphate of its own. It demanded that Muslims all over the world swear allegiance to its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and migrate to territory under its control.

By the end of 2015, the group ruled over an area with a population of approximately 12 million people and enforced an extremist interpretation

of Islamic law. It frequently deployed beheadings, crucifixions and mass shootings against its enemies.

Despite several US-led airstrikes and other efforts to squash the group, ISIS remained rather resilient. It was only in March 2019 that the caliphate collapsed. Later that year, Baghdadi was killed.

Despite losing control, the group continues to function.

A 2020 report by Washington DC-based thinktank Wilson Center notes: “Since the Islamic State fell in Syria and the caliphate collapsed in March 2019, ISIS launched hundreds of attacks primarily in the central desert region, in the east near the Iraqi border and to a lesser extent in the south near the Jordanian border.”

The structural weaknesses that led to its rise remain unresolved.

Long-term effect: Death, displacement, political uncertainty

Although numbers vary, a report published by the World Health Organisation in 2008 estimated 151,000 Iraqis to have died from violence between March 2003 and June 2006.

Yet another population survey published in PLOS Medicine in 2013 suggested that between March 2003 and mid-2011, approximately 405,000 excess deaths were attributed to the conflict.

There was also the large-scale displacement caused by the conflict. As per reports, the number of internally displaced people rose from zero registered in 2003 to 2.6 million in 2007. With the rise and advance of the Islamic State in 2013, the number of internally displaced persons rose again, reaching a peak of 4.5 million in 2015. As of 2022, there were 1.2 million internally displaced people across the country.

Millions of other Iraqis turned into refugees. As of 2022, the UN had registered 3,45,305 Iraqi refugees living mostly in Germany, Jordan and Iran.

Iraq today is a federal parliamentary republic with elections having been held here regularly since 2005. Yet, its problems of endemic corruption, fragile governance and influence of militias in politics remain.

Two decades after regime change, Iraq stands as both a cautionary tale and a living polity still striving for coherence amid competing forces.

What ‘martyrdom’ means in Iran

Adrija Roychowdhury

With the death of Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in joint US–Israeli airstrikes in Tehran, sections of Iranian state television and several officials have described him as having attained “martyrdom.” For much of the world, martyrdom generally denotes the act of giving up one’s life for a belief or cause, often religious. In Iran, however, the idea carries far deeper historical and cultural resonance.

Rooted in Shiism, the official religion of the Islamic Republic, martyrdom is not merely a theological concept but a powerful strand in the country’s collective memory and political imagination.

The concept of martyrdom in Iran has gained renewed resonance in key moments of the

country's history, notably during the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–88, when sacrifices on the battlefield were woven into national identity, and more recently amid the 2022 nationwide protests sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini, where slain demonstrators came to symbolize the cry encapsulated in the slogan "Women, Life, Freedom."

Martyrdom in Shia history and culture

The Shia branch of the Islamic community trace their genesis to the idea that the political and religious authority of Prophet Muhammad was to pass on to his biological descendants after his death. However, at the death of the Prophet in 632 CE a disagreement arose among his followers who split into two groups. One was led by Abu Bakr, a companion of the Prophet, and the other followed Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law.

Eventually, Abu Bakr became the first Caliph of Islam, and his followers came to be known as Sunni Muslims. The followers of Ali, on the other hand, were known as Shias.

In the year 656 CE, supporters of Ali, who were strongly of the opinion that Islam ought to be led by a descendant of Muhammad, rose up against Uthman ibn Affan, the descendant of Abu Bakr who was then the third Caliph. Uthman was assassinated and replaced by Ali as the fourth Caliph.

Ali's reign, however, was marred by several rounds of violent struggles between his supporters and the Sunnis. When Ali was murdered in the year 661 CE, he came to be regarded as the first martyr of the Shia faith. His struggle was continued by his two sons, Hasan ibn Ali and Husayn ibn Ali. In 680 CE, Husayn along with his small band of followers were killed at the Battle of Karbala after he refused to pledge allegiance to Yazid I, who was then the Caliph. Yazid's reign was considered unjust and veering away from the basic tenets of Islam. The massacre, which happened on the 10th day of the month of Muharram, elevated the martyrdom of Husayn to near mythical levels.

In Shia belief, Husayn's death was not just a defeat but a conscious moral stand against tyranny. His sacrifice is seen as testimony to faith, justice, and dignity. Husayn's death is commemorated annually during Ashura, the 10th day of Muharram and is marked by mourning rituals, processions and passion plays based on his martyrdom.

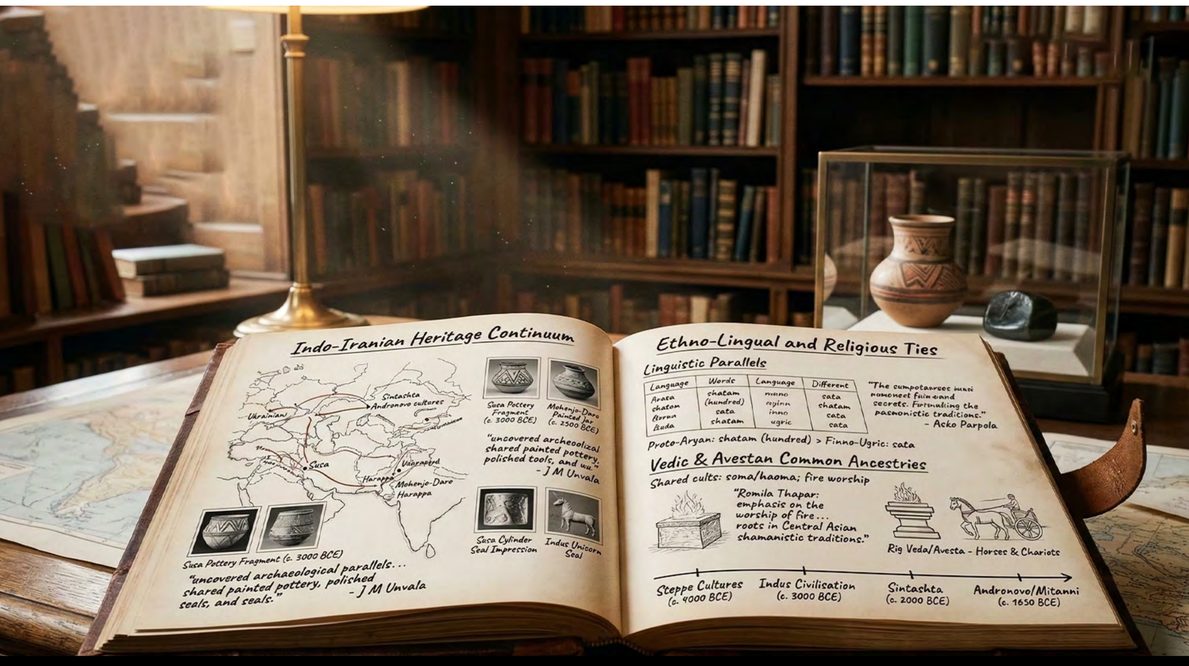
The public demonstrations commemorating the martyrdom of Husayn have been a crucial part of Iranian public life for centuries. The British explorer Thomas Herbert, who travelled through Persia in the 17th century had described the events during Muharram in his writings: "I haue seene them nine seuer-all days in great multitudes, in the streets all together crying out Hussan Hussan."

Martyrdom in Iranian political history

The collective memory of the events that led to the death of Husayn continues to play a significant role in Iran's cultural, religious and political fabric. Political scientist Osana Didyk in a research paper published in 2023, notes that memory of the Battle of Karbala influences contemporary interpretations of martyrdom and fosters a sense of resistance against oppression and tyranny.

During the Islamic Revolution of 1978-79, for instance, the martyrdom of Husayn served as a "potent and mobilising force", writes Didyk. It eventually led to the demise of the Pahlavi regime and the birth of the Islamic Republic. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeinei, the leader of the Islamic Revolution and the architect of the Islamic Republic of Iran played a pivotal role in shaping the concept of shahadat (martyrdom) in Iran. He regarded it to be a central and honourable facet of the Islamic faith. His advocacy for shahadat had played a pivotal role in stirring the masses during the Iran-Iraq War.

Consequently, martyrdom has become a subject of fervent public discussions, profoundly shaping contemporary Iranian life.



How an ancient world linked India and Iran

Arup K Chatterjee

A long and complex history of cultural interactions, migrations, trade, shared ethnic propensities, and linguistic evolution characterises Indo-Iranian ties. These spread across an extensive Indo-Iranian contact-zone, beginning from the Russian steppes, via Bactria (Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), the Iranian plateau, and ending in north-western India. Interspersed across the banks of the Syr Darya and Amu Darya rivers of Central Asia, Indo-Iranian peoples were actors in a huge cultural landscape that linked the Indus Valley Civilisation with eastern Iran and Central Asia. Indus Valley's merchants appear to have travelled widely across the Iranian plateau and into Mesopotamia.

Such commercial networks created a cosmopolitan environment in which languages and cultural practices circulated widely. The mobility of merchants and pastoral groups, thus, facilitated cultural exchange across the Indo-Iranian frontier.

Shared linguistic and religious heritage

Distinguished Parsi archaeologist J M Unvala, in his study of the longue durée (long duration) history of Indo-Iranian ties, pointed to archaeological parallels uncovered at Susa (Shush, in the Kuzestan province of Iran) and at the Indus Valley sites of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, noting similar painted pottery, polished tools, and seals.

Fire worship traditions in the Rig Veda and Avesta reflect early Indo-Iranian cultural links. (Image generated using AI)

Unvala advanced the view that the pre Aryan Indus Civilisation showed affinities with Elamite and Sumerian cultural repertoires. Accordingly, trade links brought Afghan and Iranian metals and semi-precious stones into the Indian subcontinent, underpinning an integrated Asian trade network as early as the third and fourth millennia before Christ.

Proto-Aryan languages were spoken in the steppes of southern Russia around early 3000 BCE. Indo-European linguistic forms that emerged in the region retained loanwords that can be traced to Proto-Aryan forms. For example, as pointed out by eminent Finnish Indologist Asko Parpola, the Finno-Ugric word for 'hundred' is 'sata,' close to the Proto-Aryan 'shatam'. Proto-Finno-Ugric people were dispersed by about 2500 BCE; hence, Indo-Iranian languages were present in southern Russia even earlier.

Besides, since the earliest evidence for horse domestication comes from the Srednij Stog culture of the Ukrainian steppes, around about 4200–3500 BCE, and the Yamnaya culture, of about 3500–2800 BCE, these pastoral cultures with their horse-dependency circulated Euro-Indo-Iranian languages and Indo-Iranian populations across a vast region. Both the Rig Veda and the Avesta (the Zoroastrian religious text-corpus of ancient Iran) contain representations of horses as key elements of military and aristocratic living.

As Romila Thapar adds, Indo-Aryan and Old Iranian cultures are part of a broader ethno-lingual Indo-Iranian phase of common ancestries, whose evidence is found in the Rig Veda and Avesta, in that “the cult of soma/haoma and the emphasis on the worship of fire were common to Iran and India”. Notably, this cult “does not occur elsewhere in the Indo-European speaking world,” according to Thapar. They may well have had roots in Central Asian shamanistic traditions.

Besides, as Unvala notes, Indo-Iranians shared natural cults and solar and lunar divinities. The composition of the Gathas and parts of the Avesta had a shared substratum of cultural wellsprings, potentially around 2000 BC. By this time, Indo-Iranians formed a culture known as Sintashta, whose language was Proto-Indo-Iranian.

This was followed by the Andronovo culture, which marked the first recognisable splits between Indian and Iranian oral traditions. Around 1650 BC, the Mittani Empire, which was established around modern-day Syria, is known to have used an Indo-Aryan language that resembled Sanskrit—albeit written in Mesopotamian cuneiform. In fact, a treaty between the Mitanni and the Hittites is even known to have invoked Indo-Aryan gods like Varuna, Indra, and Mitra. Even the royal names of Mitanni rulers resembled Sanskrit and Iranian names.

No Aryan invasion

When the Vedic and Iranian religious traditions diverged, the Avesta's supreme deity, Ahura Mazda, emerged as a conceptual doppelganger to the Vedic notion of Asuras—originally meaning powerful and of divine origins. In the earliest Rig-Vedic nomenclatures, some deities, including Varuna and Mitra, are referred to as Asura—a trait that would be strongly disavowed in later Vedic traditions wherein Asuras would stand as the opposite of Devas or godheads. In the Zoroastrian tradition, however, the word daeva would come to signify demons, especially those antagonistic to Ahura Mazda. And these new emergences very likely date back to before the time of the Persian prophet, Zoroaster, who is believed to have lived between 1500 and 1000 BCE.

Regardless of the religious divergences, around this time, Persians began regarding the Indus region as part of their extended Asiatic domicile, and later, Persian palatial inscriptions even recorded tributes from Indian provinces. Accordingly, Thapar challenges the notion of Indo-Iranian culture as a fixed ethnic identity, as it was far more likely a dynamic network of communities connected by mobility and exchange—challenging politicised theories of Aryan invasions disseminated by colonial elites.

These Indo-Iranian ties are strongly attested by

archaeological findings. The cultural complex that the above timelines refer to—sometimes known as the Greater Iran Bronze Age—was likely dominated by a nomadic military elite, whose relics are found in excavated weapons, chariots, and aristocratic burials, whose descriptions match Indo-Iranian textual evidence on their warrior elites.

Shared funerary architecture, metalworking, fortified settlements, and above all, the early evidence for light, horse-drawn, two-wheeled chariots, are decisive technological markers of a continuous early Indo-Iranian complex. The Greater Iran Bronze Age complex probably migrated towards the Indus Valley around 2000 BCE.

Excavations at Mehrgarh, Sibri Damb, and Nausharo in Balochistan have unearthed cemeteries and burial practices indicating that Greater Iranian cultural groups entered north-west India during late-3000 BCE or early 2000 BCE. In the process, Harappan societies seem to have undergone decentralisation of urban life and long-distance trade by about 1800 BCE. Iranian immigrants also spread to the Deccan and the Gangetic plains.

Pre-Islamic, early modern, and Mughal ties

During the Sassanian dynasty's rule over Persia, between 300 CE and 651 CE (until the Arab Muslim

conquests), Persian political contacts extended to southwest India. As Unvala demonstrated, inscriptions and literary traditions suggest Sassanian knowledge of Indian polities, besides evidence of diplomatic and cultural transactions between Persian and Indian courts.

Persian language and culture shaped administration and literature in Mughal India. (Image generated using AI)

Persian literary and medical manuscripts, including translations of Panchatantra-like texts, entered Iranian intellectual life, while Sassanian aesthetic and administrative influence left imprints on northwest Indian monuments and iconography in Buddhist cave complexes. This was also the period of increased mobility of clerics and merchants who sustained intellectual and religious ties across the Arabian Gulf and the Arabian Sea.

Iran—then Persia—began adopting Islam around

700 CE, and by 1000 CE, most Iranians were Islamic. Many fled Iran for fear of persecution and due to the prosperous conditions in the Indian subcontinent. In 1501 AD, Iran officially adopted Shia Islam as its national religion—under Shah Ismail I, the founder of the Safavid dynasty—leading to another wave of Parsi and other ethno-religious immigrations to India.

One recalls here the traditional Kisseh-i-Sanjan, written by Mobad Bahman Kaikobad around 1600, versifying the experiences of Zoroastrian migrations to Gujarat. Parsis settled in India retained their attachments to ancestral Iranian rites and cities even as they integrated into Indian civic life, while remaining a living conduit of ancient Iranian traditions in modern South Asia.

According to the American scholar of Middle-Eastern history, Juan R I Cole, the parallel rise of the Persian Safavid dynasty and the Indian Mughal Empire elicits how political transformation shaped literary and clerical networks between the two cultures. While India had about 170 million inhabitants during the early modern era, Iran had only about five million. Urban concentration of Muslims in India, and the alacrity of Hindu scribes in adopting Persian, totalled up to make a substantial Persophone readership in the subcontinent. “There were perhaps seven times more readers of Persian in

the subcontinent," says Cole, "than in Iran at the height of the Mughal Empire".

Persian became embedded in chancery practices and court etiquette in India, producing a large scribal class—something that Thomas Babington Macaulay later attempted to do with English. Persian became a vessel for poetry, philosophy, mysticism, and technical manuals across long distances, including the vehicle in which translations of the Upanishads—and even commentaries on Yoga Vashistha (thanks to the Mughal Prince Dara Shukoh)—would reach Europe, where they were read in Latin translations by the likes of Goethe and Schopenhauer.

The Mughal Empire's decrees and court rituals reinforced the use of Persian in imperial records as well as popular culture, including among Hindu scribal castes (like Kayasth and Khatri) that embraced Persian and became its accomplished prose stylists and clerks. Persian prevailed within the Mughal bureaucracy's expanse from Lahore to Bengal until about the end of the eighteenth century.

Besides, courts in the Deccan, among others, adopted Shi'i symbols and liturgies resembling Safavid forms. Bijapur and Golconda, in particular, were known to host Safavid courtiers and jurists. The Shi'i nawabs of Awadh made Lucknow a key site of Iranian clerical and cultural presence,

leaving enduring footprints in the everyday lives of Indians even until contemporary times.

Even the British administration valued Persian, and a large number of Persian histories and printed books about India were produced in British Indian presses and 19th-century Iran, respectively.

India's principled postcolonial goodwill

Trade routes linked the Indus Valley with Iran, Central Asia, and Mesopotamia. (Image generated using AI)

In postcolonial times, Indo-Iranian diplomatic ties carried forward the civilisational goodwill into the Cold-War-era. A Treaty of Friendship signed in 1950 established rhetorical goodwill between the two nations, even though deeper strategic divergences remained. The Cold War imposed structural pressures on both that pushed Tehran and New Delhi towards incompatible security alignments and competing economic networks.

Tehran moved closer to the Western bloc in the 1950s and ’60s, while New Delhi embraced a principled policy of non-alignment and strategic autonomy. Towards the latter part of the 20th century, the two governments tried to balance their energy needs with regional influence and their complex relations with superpowers. The rhetoric of warmth of shared civilisational ties remained. However, it was permeated by cautious transactional attitudes on the part of both nation-states.

Although Tehran was initially sympathetic towards India, following the attacks by China in 1962, its reassurances were short-lived and eventually inadequate, especially after the outbreak of Indo-Pakistan conflicts in 1965, when Iran publicly tilted towards Karachi, the then Pakistani capital.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution transformed Tehran’s domestic order, profoundly reorienting its ideology, with the ascent of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini—whose family traced its lineage back to Barabanki in Uttar Pradesh. Khomeini even used ‘Hindi’ as a takhallus or pseudonym in his poems.

Following the end of the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq war in 1988 and the end of the Cold War era, the ground for pragmatic reassessment for Indo-Iranian ties was paved. Iran’s new era of reconstruction under President Akbar Hashemi

Rafsanjani prioritised economic openings and regional reintegration, coinciding with India's economic liberalisation in the 1990s, which renewed proximity between New Delhi and Tehran over energy supplies and transit states in Central Asia.

Despite the strong antagonistic views of Khomeini's successor, Ali Hosseini Khamenei, on Kashmir, energy remained a tangible strategic engine of Indo-Iranian cooperation. Diplomatic doctrines, like the Tehran Declaration (2001) signed with Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, formalised bilateral interests, notwithstanding limits imposed by third-party sanctions. Indo-Iranian bilateral cooperation during this period focused on counterterrorism, maritime exercises, and strategic defence collaborations, occasionally in discreet capacities.

Twenty-first century Indian firms have pursued stakes and projects in Iran, including investments by ONGC Videsh and upgrades to Chabahar port as a corridor to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Other shared interests include joint naval drills in the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal, and the Indian Ocean.

Concerns about Iran's atomic stance and the imposition of Western sanctions have repeatedly tested bilateral resolve and complicated the public perception of the two nations' bilateral position. Nonetheless, to India's credit, it has

maintained high integrity in its partnership with Iran in pairing its energy and strategic interests while managing relations with its Western partners in the 21st century. India has also acted as a strategic intermediary between Iran and India's other Asian partners, through consular channels, even though New Delhi has maintained a righteous distance from Tehran's nuclear approach.

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US strike on IRIS Dena and the memory of a German warship shelling Madras

Nikita Mohta

When a US submarine torpedoed and sank the Iranian warship IRIS Dena in the Indian Ocean on March 4, it marked the first known instance of such an attack on an enemy combatant since World War II. For many in India, the incident evokes memories of an earlier naval attack on the subcontinent. This was the bombardment of Madras (now Chennai) at the outset of World War I in 1914, when a German warship shelled the city's harbour installations.

German and British rivalry

In August 1914, Great Britain, with 29 capital ships ready and 13 under construction, and Germany, with 18 and nine respectively, were the two great rival sea powers. The first significant encounter

between the two navies was the Battle of Helgoland Bight, on August 28, 1914. A British force under Admiral Sir David Beatty, having entered German home waters, sank and damaged several light cruisers and killed or captured 1,000 men, at a cost of one British ship damaged and 35 deaths.

For the following months, the Germans in European or British waters confined themselves to submarine warfare—"not without some notable successes," notes academic Tara L Mann in World War I: A Political and Diplomatic History of the Modern World (2017). On December 15, 1914, for instance, battle cruisers of the German High Seas Fleet set off on a sortie across the North Sea, under the command of Admiral Franz von Hipper: they bombarded several British towns and then made their way home safely.

Mann writes, "Abroad on the high seas, the Germans' most powerful surface force was the East Asiatic squadron of fast cruisers, including the Scharnhorst, the Gneisenau, and the Nurnberg, under Admiral Graf Maximilian von Spee."

For four months, this fleet ranged almost unhindered over the Pacific Ocean, while the SMS Emden, having joined the squadron in August 1914, was detached for service in the Indian Ocean. "The Germans could thus threaten not only merchant shipping on the British trade routes but also troopships on their way to Europe or the Middle East from India, New Zealand, or Australia."

SMS Emden sank merchant ships in the Bay of Bengal and bombarded Madras on September 22, 1914, while also haunting the approaches to Ceylon (Sri Lanka).

The Madras bombardment

Captain Karl von Müller was in charge of SMS Emden when it approached Madras on the night of September 1914. He would later write, “I had this shelling in view simply as a demonstration to arouse interest among the Indian population, to disturb English commerce, to diminish English prestige.”

After entering the Madras harbour area around 9.30 pm, Müller ordered an attack on several large oil tanks belonging to the Burmah Oil Company that the British kept near the port. After firing at least 125 shells in 10 minutes, Emden hit five of the tanks and destroyed 350,000 gallons of fuel, leaving Madras in panic. The bombardment was a severe blow to British morale and led many in Madras to flee.

Retreating, SMS Emden then sailed southwards down the east coast to Ceylon. It, however, was lost to the combination of naval fire from the Australian warship Sydney and a reef in the Cocos Islands on November 9, 1914. “This,” notes historian Jeremy Black in Mapping Naval Warfare: A Visual History of Conflict at Sea (2018), “was an important triumph for the Royal Australian Navy, which had been established in 1911.”

How Gautam Gambhir built a World Champion side without superstars

Sandeep Dwivedi

March 8, 2026 — history will remember this as the day Indian cricket witnessed a significant shift. For the first time ever, India won an ICC tournament without a larger-than-life megastar whose blinding glow eclipses everyone else in the frame.

Suryakumar Yadav deserves full credit for delivering that Cup at home, but he is no Kapil Dev, MS Dhoni or Rohit Sharma. He is not even Sourav Ganguly or Virat Kohli. He has never led an IPL side and isn't part of the ODI and Test set-ups. Hardik Pandya, once a diva, is now one among the boys — a former captain with no visible leadership ambitions. Jasprit Bumrah is what Sachin Tendulkar used to be: an elder statesman, a strong voice in the dressing room,

more trustee than CEO.

All of them have, at some point, been unjustly overshadowed by bigger names. None of them are bigger than the team.

The only man with a clear and distinct signature on this champion side is the head coach. This is Gautam Gambhir's dream team. Always an advocate of the under-appreciated, a longstanding critic of Indian cricket's star culture, Gambhir isn't just part of this miracle — he is its architect. He sowed the seeds, weeding out unwanted plants, pruning some and watering others over two years.

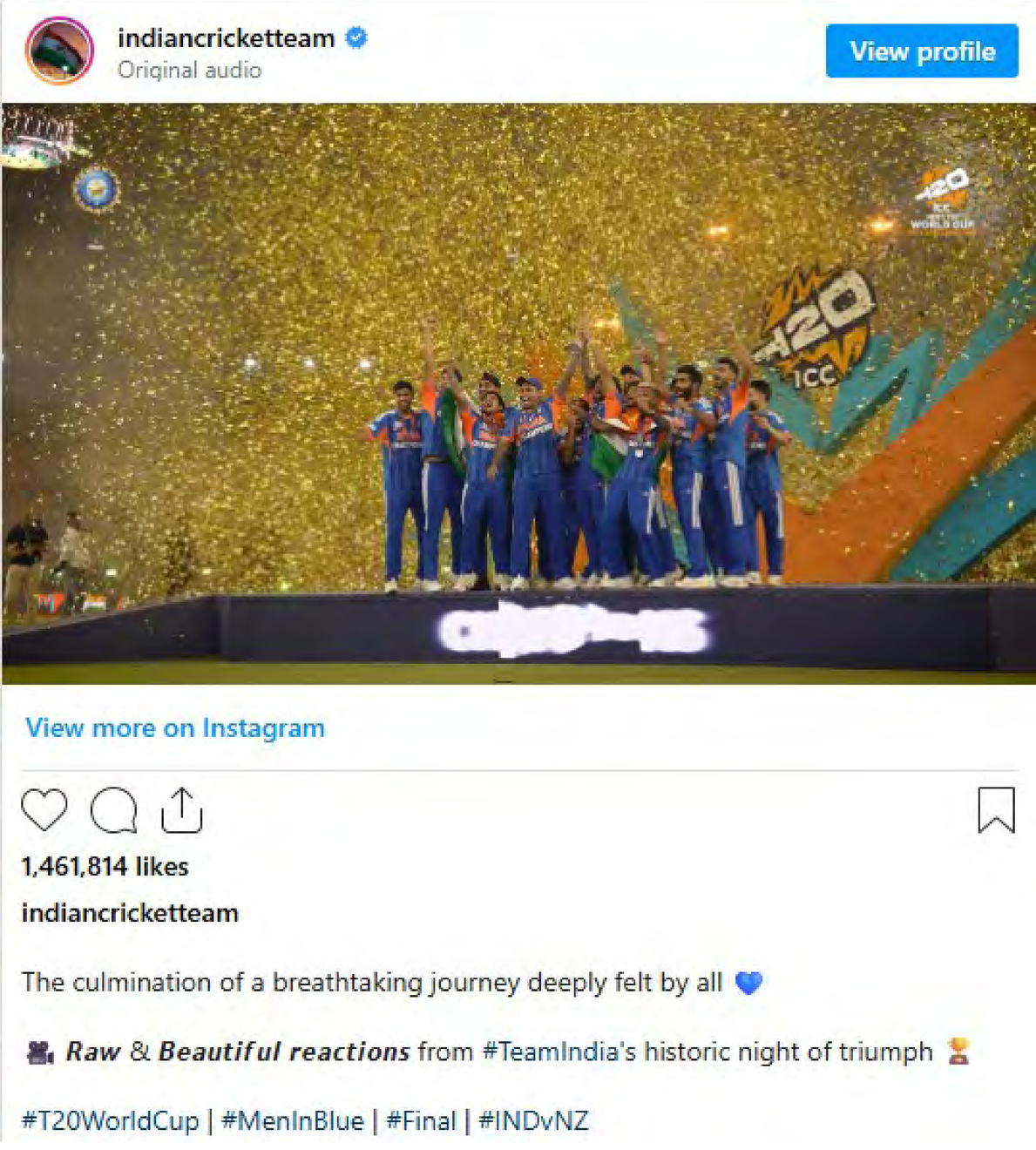
Now Gambhir's boys have grown. Don't miss the forest for the well-groomed trees.

Surya lifting the Cup with Gambhir floating in the background, his shy smile in place — it isn't just another Cup-winning moment — it is a Hall of Fame frame for the ages.

It is a picture that captures Indian cricket's changed mindset. India's Cup-winning teams had always been cracking units identified by the commanders who led them: Kapil's Devils, Dhoni's Army, Rohit's garden mai ghumne wale bande. That's no longer the case.

Indian cricket has finally caught the global sporting trend. Like football, where managers call the shots, coach Gambhir is clearly the man

in control — the last word. He decides strategy and has a major say in picking the players who carry his vision on the field. He is backed by chairman of selectors Ajit Agarkar, another decision-maker not intimidated by a player's power or popularity. More on him some other day.



This team — many left-handers, an excess of all-rounders, stars without immunity, an accommodative captain — is unlike any champion side from the past. It imbibes Gambhir's cricket philosophy to the T.

Exploring the mind of the often outspoken, contrarian and controversial coach — whose Test record is far less flattering than his white-ball report card — is an interesting study.

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It's July 30, 2025, the eve of the final Test at The Oval, London. Gambhir, looking relaxed, is having a casual chat with a few journalists on the dressing room steps. Coaches generally avoid talking shop at such moments, which makes this a reporter's chance to find clues that explain the man, not just the manager.

Gambhir talks about a book he always carries and keeps re-reading: a biography of freedom fighter Bhagat Singh. He finds the Punjabi revolutionary — hanged at 25, yet still the spirit animal of young rebels, rugged truck drivers and daredevil bikers — endlessly fascinating.

He throws a question that gets the small group thinking. Who was Bhagat Singh's biggest hero — that young revolutionary whose picture he kept in his pocket? He answers it himself. Kartar Singh Sarabha: the largely forgotten martyr the British executed in 1915 when he was just 19.

What follows is a gripping monologue on Sarabha's valour, and then a lament about the politics of enshrining a handful of freedom fighters while airbrushing the rest. He is getting

goosebumps, he says.

India were trailing 1-2, a Test to be won the next morning, their best bowler unavailable, the batting losing steam — and yet the “unsung vs over-sung” question had stirred something inside him, as it always does. Glorifying a few, under-appreciating others: a trait long associated with Indian cricket, and one that always gets his goat.

India’s Abhishek Sharma with head coach Gautam Gambhir during a practice session before the T20 World Cup 2026 match. (PHOTO: PTI)

As India coach, Gambhir has walked his righteous talk. The once untouchable icons Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma couldn’t survive their long slumps — they were asked to go when they wanted to stay. Conspiracy theorists cried vendetta. It would turn out to be the new normal.

During the England tour, new captain Shubman Gill emerged as the next superstar, singlehandedly winning Tests. It’s a tag Gambhir doesn’t like. He doesn’t come across as someone inclined to

fall back into the old Indian habit of pampering and indulging big egos.

Within months, cricket's vagaries caught up with Gill. Miserably out of form in the lead-up to the T20 World Cup, the Test and ODI captain was dropped from the big party at home. Immunity for stars was a thing of the past.

With unprecedented calls comes extra scrutiny. Those not aligned to the politics of the former BJP MP mixed issues and pounced at the chance to write him off. The Ro-Ko fan armies relentlessly targeted him on social media. The influential voices in the commentary box — the ones Gambhir has taken on in public — haven't been kind either. The two home Test losses gave his detractors enough ammunition. Many times, the criticism has been justified.

Gambhir is stubborn. He sticks to his positions despite repeated failures or widespread outrage. In England, he persisted with all-rounder-spinner Washington Sundar and kept specialist Kuldeep Yadav out. Delhi pacer Harshit Rana was called his favourite, but that didn't stop Gambhir from insisting on him across formats.

The pundits wanted Sanju Samson dropped for good, but Gambhir trusted him enough to bring him back. Same with out-of-form opener Abhishek Sharma, who may have made three consecutive ducks in the tournament, but scored

a quickfire half century in the final. Gambhir has a soft corner for the game's unheralded. As if on a mission to correct a historic wrong, he seems to be on a reparation drive — determined to give the plebeians the same long rope that cricketing royalty once enjoyed. Players feel that. They seek him out for it.

India head coach Gautam Gambhir at a training session before the T20 World Cup semi-final against England at the Wankhede Stadium. (Express Photo by Narendra Vaskar)

In his playing days, one India coach called Gambhir 'Amitabh Bachchan, Indian cricket's angry young man'. In his avatar as coach, he is standing for the wronged and the underdog, just like the protagonist in old Bachchan movies.

On April 23, 2024, the IPL party was in full swing. Kolkata Knight Riders, with Gambhir as coach, were cruising. Star all-rounder Sunil Narine was smashing new-ball bowlers at the top and shattering stumps with the ball. West Indies captain Rovman Powell came to Gambhir with a problem. With his country hosting the T20 World

Cup in a few months, he needed Narine — but the Trinidadian mystery spinner's frustrations with his board had led him to walk away from international cricket.

Powell knew Gambhir's equation with Narine. The story goes that he asked Gambhir to convince him to come back. Those in the KKR dressing room savour what followed.

Narine said he was ready — on one condition. "What?" asked an excited Gambhir. "If you coach the West Indies." They laughed, and that was that. KKR won the IPL on the back of Narine's heroics. West Indies, without him, didn't win the T20 World Cup.

That personal currency — the loyalty he earns, the instinct it frees up — has driven his boldest calls. KKR won the title the year Gambhir, as captain, preferred domestic player Manvendra Bisla over Brendon McCullum — the Baz, the God of cricket on steroids — for the final. Bisla repaid him with a hundred. That's Gambhir.

Once, asked to pick between Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi, he named then-Manchester United striker Marcus Rashford. Even Rashford might have disagreed.

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World Cup-winning coaches never have it easy.

Accolades bring lofty expectations. There will be setbacks, tactics that backfire, stars who bounce back to prove him wrong. But with this T20 World Cup title, Gambhir has rocked the boat. He has made Indian cricket aware that there is life beyond superstars. His coaching staff say he often reminds them that they won't be here forever — but they should put in place a system that those who follow them will benefit from.

Bhagat Singh kept Kartar Singh Sarabha's picture in his pocket. Gambhir, it seems, carries a resignation letter — he was never here for fame. Like the angry young man, he wants to prove to the world that the line starts from where he stands. He just found a quieter way to start a revolution.

A Padma Shri, a fading art

Nithya Pandian

For members of the Alu Kurumba community in the Nilgiris, the Centre's announcement of a Padma Shri earlier this year was both surreal and heartbreaking. The award went to Krishnan Raghavan, known by his pen name Kitna. But it came after his death.

Born in the Vellarikombai settlement in Kotagiri, Tamil Nadu, Krishnan belonged to the Alu Kurumba tribal community, a subgroup of the Kurumba. The Kurumbas are classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) in India. According to the Indian government, a tribal community can be designated as a PVTG if it is socially and economically backward, has a stagnant population, and has low literacy levels. The Nilgiris district is home to all six PVTG communities identified in Tamil Nadu.

While the posthumous honour cast a spotlight on Krishnan's work, it also revived a troubling question: who will carry forward his legacy?

A fragile legacy

Kurumba painting is a prehistoric art form, estimated to be over 3000 years old. According to reports, the earliest documented evidence of Kurumba paintings on dwelling structures in the Nilgiris can be traced to the period of 1871-1872.

The art was traditionally drawn on rocks and in caves across the high hills of the Nilgiris.

Today, fewer than 10 indigenous practitioners remain. Among them, only three know how to extract the natural colours used in the paintings that make the artwork last longer.

Tribal leaders and activists fear that without immediate support, the art form could disappear. They are urging the state government to recognise the artists who still practise it and to create a visual anthropological record of Krishnan's works as evidence of the Alu Kurumbas' way of life.

From caves to canvas

Krishnan was born in Vellarikombai and grew

up learning traditional knowledge from his maternal grandfather, Kithari. Along with lessons on cultivating millets, collecting honey and preserving forest produce, Kithari also introduced him to drawing on rocks and rock beds.

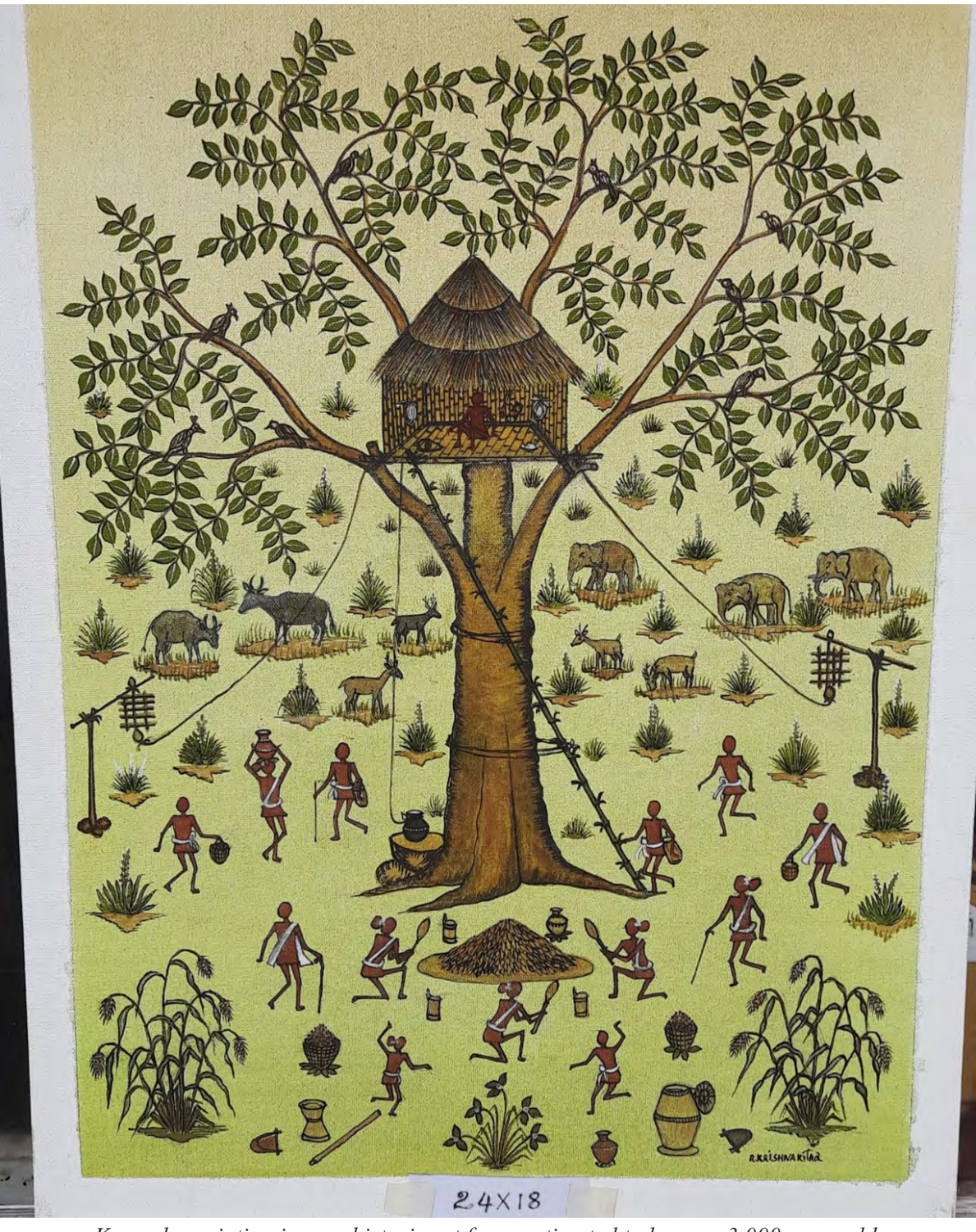
Every year, Kithari took Krishnan to the Ezhuthuparai cave, where community elders had for centuries drawn paintings on rock surfaces. At the age of six, Krishnan began learning these patterns.

What began as a hobby gradually evolved. Krishnan started replicating the drawings on cloth, later moving to canvas and paper. Over time, exposure to other indigenous art forms across the country helped shape his craft. Scholars today refer to his work as the “Krishna school” of Kurumba art.

His paintings depicted the life of the Alu Kurumba community, once hunter-gatherers and honey collectors living primarily in the Coonoor and Kotagiri regions of the Nilgiris. His art became a visual narrative of the community’s culture.

KT Gandhirajan, a project officer at the Tamil Virtual Academy, said Krishnan played a crucial role in reviving an art form that was once found in caves and on the walls of Kurumba habitats in the Nilgiris.

“He (Krishnan) met several artists and trained at a few institutes to shape the art form and convert it into a conventional one. People often say they find similarities between Warli art and Kurumba art. But the geometric art forms of Warli depict the celebrations of tribals from Maharashtra. However, Kurumba art depicts the life of Alu Kurumba, their marriage rituals, menarche ceremonies, funeral rituals, and ancestral worship,” he said.



Kurumba painting is a prehistoric art form, estimated to be over 3,000 years old. (Special Arrangement)

The colours themselves come from the forest. The essence from the Vengai tree trunk is used to produce yellow, brown and purple shades, Pachaikeeda leaves are crushed to provide green pigment, red sand gives earthy tones, and the Karimaram tree is used to produce black, explains Krishnan's wife Sushila.

Krishnan's paintings focused on the community's relationship with the flora and fauna of the Nilgiris, their cultivation practices, and methods of rock honey hunting. Krishnan's works were the extension of an early Kurumba art form. His artwork is categorised into three themes — social life, ritual life, and daily life — under which he produced hundreds of paintings.

"He was an artist. Artists who follow his methods are now just craftsmen," Sushila said.

Krishnan's works travelled far beyond the Nilgiris. According to Kannan Ramaiah, co-founder of the Heritage Foundation, a non-profit organisation located in Kotagiri, Nilgiris, Krishnan's paintings now hang in the homes of foreign visitors to the region, in the houses of Tamil cinema personalities such as Pa Ranjith and Mari Selvaraj, and in art galleries across the country.

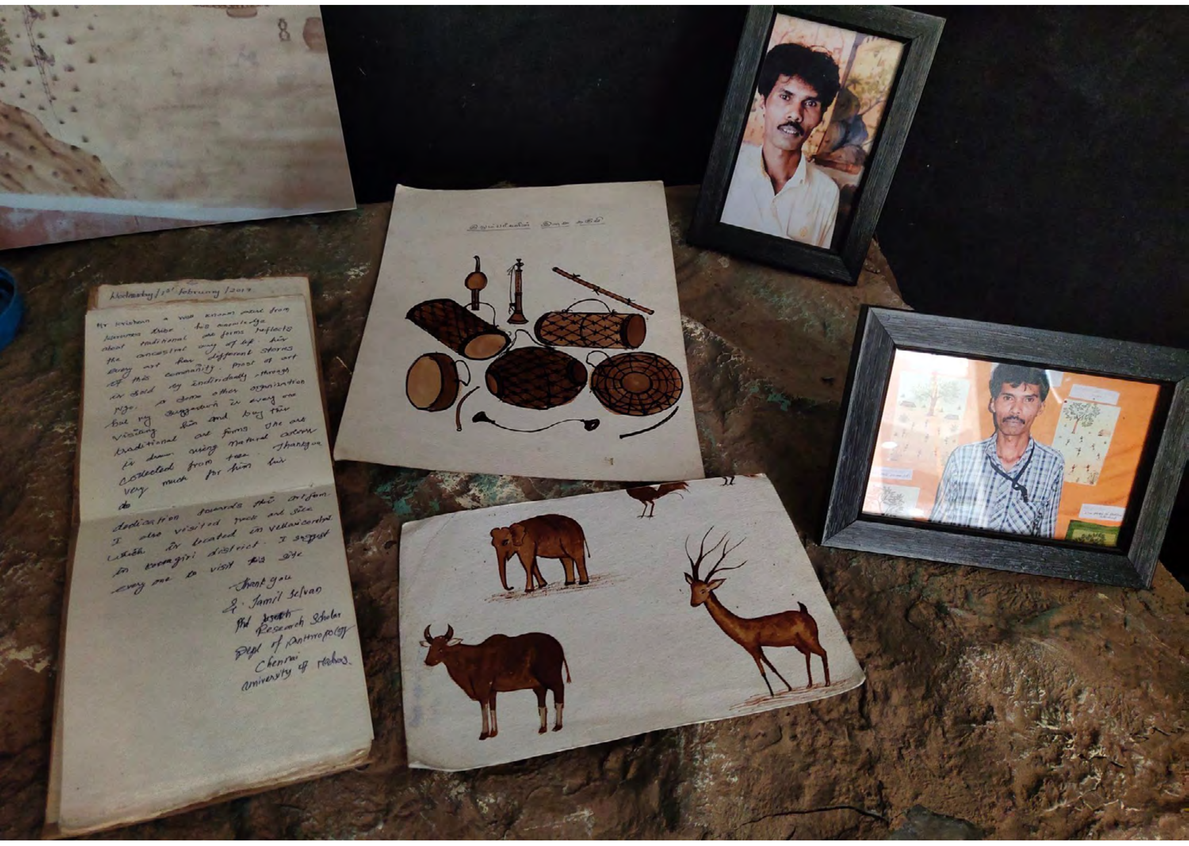
Fame without fortune

Yet, despite the grand reach, his family lived in poverty. “During his last days, he was not able to make money to repair his house, which was damaged by a wild elephant,” Kannan said.

Sushila recalled that Krishnan often painted for free and charged between Rs 50 and Rs 1,000 for a painting.

“People never consider the time, effort and talent that go beyond such works,” Ramaiah added.

After Krishnan’s sudden death, the family’s financial situation worsened. A single mother with four children, Sushila eventually moved from Vellarikombai to Mettupalayam in Coimbatore district to live with her parents.



Krishnan’s photos at temporary art installations at Anna Centenary Library (Centre for Social Justice and Equity)

“In Vellarikombai, I was working as a farm labourer in coffee estates and pepper farms. After his demise, it had become very tough for me to go to work and return home to a wildlife-bearing area to take care of my four children,” she said.

According to Sushila, the settlement does not have proper roads or transportation. “We need to walk three kilometres to get any sort of transportation facility. The presence of wild elephants was one of the reasons for me to consider relocating,” she said.

In Mettupalayam, Sushila continued to work as a farm labourer for a daily wage of Rs 300, barely enough to cover monthly expenses. One of her daughters, Vasuki, dropped out of college last year.

A fading art form

Even as Krishnan’s work gained recognition, Kurumba art itself remained fragile.

Only a few community members, including Bala Subramanian, Ganeshan, Bharath, Adi Bellan, Dharshini, Sornavalli and Sivakami, currently practise the art. They were once Krishnan’s students.

With limited recognition and income, activists

fear younger members of the community may not consider pursuing the art form.

Krishnan himself had once expressed the wish to obtain a Geographical Indication (GI) tag for Kurumba art to prevent exploitation by outsiders. Yet he also taught school students and non-tribal learners.

“Krishnan wanted to protect the art form, but he never stopped anyone from learning it,” Ramaiah said. “He wanted the art to continue as a legacy.”

Government steps in

Krishnan had once expressed his disappointment that the state government had hardly recognised his contributions to the art and urged the government to support artists like him.

Following the Padma Shri announcement, however, the state government initiated several steps to support his family. In February, it announced a permanent job for Sushila as a gardener at the Eklavya Model Residential School in Ooty with a monthly salary of Rs 32,000.

The Tamil Nadu Adi Dravidar and Tribal Welfare Department also organised an event called Ajil Pottu - Alu Kurumbar Kalaiyum Kalaignanum on February 21. At the event, community members from the Nilgiris and researchers gathered to

pay tribute to Krishnan and stressed the need to recognise artists while they are still alive.

The way forward

Tribal rights activist Odiyan Lakshmanasamy said the state government should take steps to ensure the next generation of Alu Kurumbas continues the tradition.

“The state government should not wait for the Union government’s recognition to honour our artists. The state should reward existing artists to keep them practising their art,” he said.

He also suggested introducing certified courses for Alu Kurumba students who want to learn about their art, along with a stipend. “It will ensure both students and their teachers have money and time to learn their own art form,” he said.

Gandhirajan concurs. “The uniqueness of his (Krishnan’s) paintings is that they were decorative yet thematic. His research into natural dyeing and his introduction of new methods to shape the art form deserve the same treatment that has been given to classical music and dance forms in Tamil Nadu.”

Gandhirajan also called for Krishnan’s works to be collected to produce a visual anthropological

record. “The record would act as an introduction for those who want to learn more about Alu Kurumbas. Through his art forms, the gap between the mainstream and tribes would be reduced.”

Krishnan is survived by his wife Sushila and their four children — Vasuki, Rahul, Deepa and Keerthika.

“Krishnan wanted to protect the art form, but he never stopped anyone from learning the art. He wanted the art form to continue as a legacy,” Sushila said.

“He dedicated his entire life to art. Even on the days when we starved, he was not ready to give up his art,” says Sushila, adding that the award and recognition came too late.

How Tripura's royal court helped shape Santiniketan's spring festival

Debraj Deb

For decades, Santiniketan's Basant Utsav has been celebrated as Rabindranath Tagore's creation— a refined spring festival where dance, music, and colour replace the chaos of street Holi. What that story leaves out is Tripura.

The small northeastern state, once an independent kingdom with a centuries-old tradition of music and Vaishnava devotion, had a direct hand in the aesthetic and institutional life of Tagore's Santiniketan. Its royal family funded Visva-Bharati University for nearly fifty years, dispatched trained Manipuri dancers who shaped the curriculum, and influenced the very songs Tagore wrote. That connection came into formal view in September 2023, when Santiniketan was inscribed as India's 41st UNESCO World

Heritage Site —a recognition of a cultural legacy that was, in part, built in Agartala.

A festival recreated

The royal family funded Visva-Bharati University for nearly fifty years, dispatched trained Manipuri dancers who shaped the curriculum. (Express photo)

The event now known as Basant Utsav began in 1907 as Ritu Utsav, a modest seasonal observance initiated by Tagore's youngest son, Samindranath.

By 1923, it had taken its current form and name. Tagore's ambition was specific: to replace what he called the "riotous" character of traditional Holi with something he described as "sacred and well-cultured"—structured around music, movement, and a deliberate visual palette.

That palette had a source. When Tagore visited Agartala in 1926, he encountered the city's own Vasant Utsav—processions in yellow basanti attire, the percussion of khol and kartal, devotional song woven through the streets. The experience prompted him to write the Holi song

Faguner Nobeen Anonde. It was one of seven visits he made to Tripura over his lifetime.

The kingdom behind the poet

The Manikya dynasty's engagement with Tagore began not as patronage but as grief. In 1881, following the death of his wife, Maharaja Bir Chandra Manikya read Tagore's Bhogno Hridoy (Broken Heart) and was moved enough to send his minister, Radha Raman Ghosh, to Kolkata to convey his admiration to a then-teenage poet. It was the start of a relationship that would span four generations.

Financial support from Tripura to Visva-Bharati began under Maharaja Radhakishore Manikya and continued for close to five decades. In 1939, Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya sent two members of the royal household—Rajkumar Buddhimanta Singh and Prince Nabakumar Singh, both trained in Manipuri dance—to Santiniketan, where they helped establish the form as part of the curriculum. Their contribution gave birth to Rabindra Nritya, the dance style now inseparable from the Spring Festival.

Three months before his own death, Bir Bikram Kishore conferred on Tagore the title Bharat Bhaskar—"Indian Sun."

Deep roots

The kingdom's cultural influence predates its connection to Tagore by centuries. According to the royal chronicle Srirajmala, compiled by Kaliprasanna Sen, Maharaja Dhanyamanikya (r. 1490–1529) brought music teachers from Mithila to the Tripura court. Scholar Sukumar Sen documented that some of the earliest known verses of Brajabuli—the devotional poetic language of 16th-century Vaishnava literature—originated with court poets in Tripura.

The Holi tradition itself runs deeper still. Professor Manika Das of the Sachin Debbarman Memorial Music College in Agartala cites the Trilochan section of the Srirajmala as evidence that Dolotsav—the festival of color—was a fixture of the dynasty from the reign of the legendary Maharaj Trilochan, whose rule the text places in the era of the Mahabharata.

The Manipuri infusion

A decisive turn came in the 1780s, when Maharaj Rajdhar Manikya married Harisheshwari, a princess from Manipur. Historian Jagadish Gan Chaudhuri has written that the marriage brought a wave of Vaishnavism into the Tripura court, popularising Raas Utsav and Dol Utsav in forms shaped by Manipuri practice. The fusion deepened under Maharaj Birchandra Manikya (r. 1862–1896), whose Manipuri queens extended the tradition across both court and common life.

Tagore's aesthetics and philosophy reshaped how Tripura understood and practiced its own traditions, and that cross-pollination continues.(Express photo)

The royals were not passive consumers of this culture. Maharaj Bir Chandra Manikya composed the Holi song Laale Laal Aji Kaal Tanu. Maharaj Birendra Kishore Manikya wrote the Dol Leela dance drama. Maharaj Bir Bikram Kishore founded the Fagua Sangha, a procession group he personally led through Agartala's streets each spring, queen and princess alongside him,

singing Holi songs. Others in the royal circle who contributed compositions and performances included Maharani Tulsivati, Prabhavati Devi, and Kumar Sachin Deb Burman—later known as S.D. Burman, one of Hindi cinema's most celebrated composers.

An exchange, not a debt

The influence moved in both directions. Tagore's aesthetics and philosophy reshaped how Tripura understood and practiced its own traditions, and that cross-pollination continues.

This year's Basant Utsav, scheduled for March 6 at Visva-Bharati University, will feature a performance of Tagore's dance drama Natir Pooja. (Express photo)

"Tripura has a unique and rich cultural heritage," said Pradyot Kishore Manikya Debbarma, the current titular head of the royal family. "Tripura princes contributed to the dance, musical, and overall cultural landscape of Santiniketan—and we have learnt a great deal from them as well. It has been a cultural exchange over generations."

Sankarshan Ghosh, a singer and composer from Udaipur in Tripura, put it plainly: “Manipuri dance, floral foundations, and Tripuri culture are mixed into Santiniketan’s iconic festivals today. Some Tripura kings composed great pieces of music. And we, at Tripura, have an immense influence of Tagore’s music and culture here. Our children sing and perform Tagore throughout the year.”

This year’s Basant Utsav, held on March 6, at Visva-Bharati University, featured a performance of Tagore’s dance drama Natir Pooja—the same work that Nabakumar Singh organized during his time at Santiniketan, and that incorporated Manipuri dance from the outset. That continuity is, in its own way, the story.

Why your next phone could cost more and offer less RAM

Anuj Bhatia

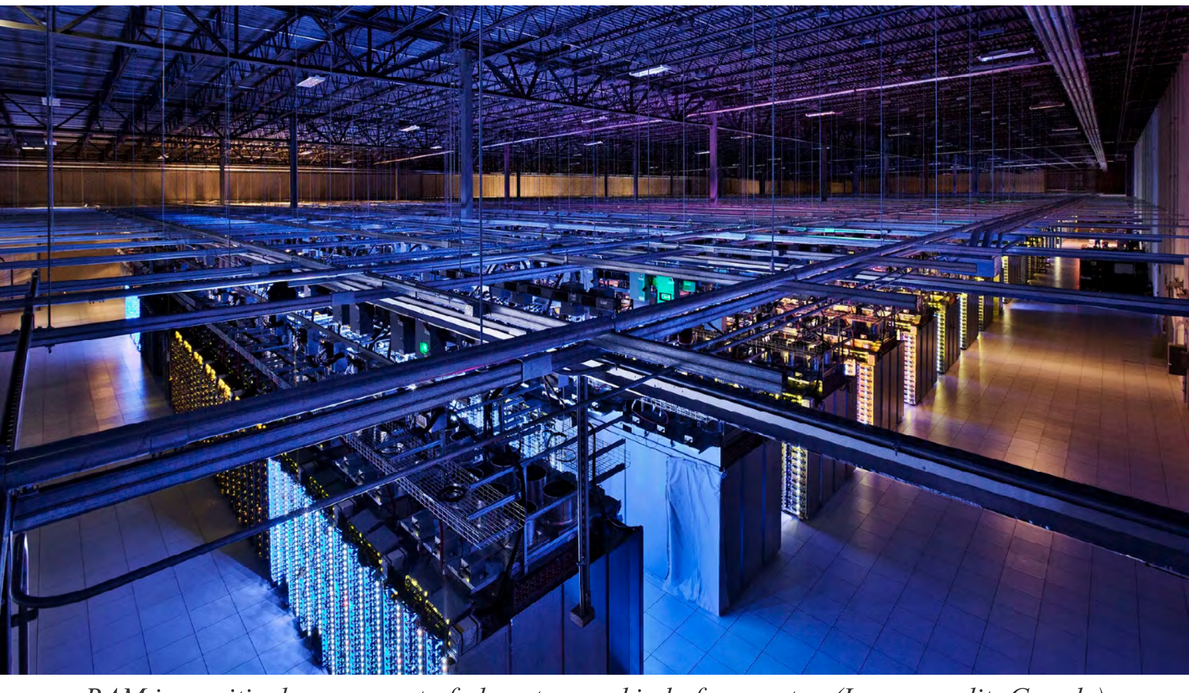
Across brands, smartphones and laptops are becoming more expensive with AI development being blamed for the rise in input costs, especially of chips. Even cash-rich tech companies, which typically keep prices steady for their devices, are no longer doing so. In the past few days alone, Apple, Samsung, and Nothing have all launched new devices at marginally higher prices compared to previous versions.

“Vendors are increasing prices primarily because memory costs have surged dramatically, in some cases rising 200–300 per cent in recent months. Most vendors operate on relatively tight hardware margins, particularly in the mid-range and entry segments. As a result, they are

forced to pass part of these higher component costs on to consumers," Francisco Jeronimo, Vice President of Client Devices at International Data Corporation (IDC), told indianexpress.com.

Why AI needs more chips

With AI companies buying memory chips for their data centres or data farms, a key focus at the AI summit held in India last month, the prices of these components have shot up, forcing companies like Apple and Dell to raise prices or cut margins. These chips are also used in laptops and smartphones.



RAM is a critical component of almost every kind of computer. (Image credit: Google)

All computing devices require RAM, or Random Access Memory. Think of RAM as a computer's short-term memory that allows multiple applications to run simultaneously. Essentially, RAM is a foundational component of modern computing devices, and it goes into almost every

tech product you buy, from smartphones, tablets, laptops to a car's infotainment system and video game consoles.

For years, RAM production had remained steady, keeping up with consumer demand. During the pandemic, however, there was a brief global RAM shortage, although supply eventually returned to normal. This time, amid the AI boom, companies like OpenAI, Meta, and Google are using large amounts of memory to power servers in their massive data centres.

In fact, AI data centres require significantly more high-performance memory than a typical consumer electronic device. Chipmakers such as Nvidia place several blocks of high-bandwidth memory (HBM) around the graphics processing unit (GPU), the part of the chip that performs the main computations. This fast, specialised memory is needed for heavy AI workloads.

For context, Nvidia's Rubin GPU uses up to 288GB of next-generation HBM4 memory, arranged in eight blocks around the processor, and is deployed in the NVL72 server rack, which combines 72 GPUs in one system. In comparison, smartphones typically come with only 8GB, 12GB or maximum 16GB of lower-power DDR memory.

To understand the current RAM price rise, it is important to know that Samsung, SK Hynix, and

Micron are the three largest RAM manufacturers in the world, together accounting for about 93 per cent of the market. With only a few global players in the RAM business, memory supply has suddenly become constrained, as AI companies are getting first access to memory for their data centres and are willing to sign long-term deals.

One might wonder whether Samsung, the world's largest smartphone maker, has unlimited access to RAM for its phones. It doesn't work like that. Samsung Semiconductor, which manufactures memory and other chips and supplies the global market, may choose to sell to companies willing to pay top dollar for their hardware, prioritising data centre customers to maximise profits. Samsung's mobile division may still have to compete to secure RAM for its Galaxy phones, and there's no guarantee, given the current RAM shortage, that the phone-making division can secure a long-term supply deal. That's how business works.

With prices of phones gradually increasing, customers will need to decide whether to pay more or accept a less powerful device. (Image credit: Anuj Bhatia/Indian Express)

‘Phone makers are already feeling the pressure’

Jeronimo says all phone makers are immune to the memory drought, with smaller players being the worst hit, grappling with thin margins and rising component costs.

“All vendors will feel the impact, but not equally. Vendors such as Apple and Samsung are generally in a stronger position because they operate heavily in the premium segment, where margins are higher. They also have greater financial resources and supply-chain leverage, allowing them to absorb part of the cost increases or secure better component supply. Smaller brands or those competing primarily in lower price segments face a much greater challenge,” he said.

Samsung has become the first major phone brand to increase the price of its Galaxy S26 series, which debuted late last month and will go on sale worldwide this week. The mainline Galaxy S26 starts at Rs 87,999, the S26 Plus at Rs 1,19,999, and the highest-end Galaxy S26 Ultra at Rs 1,39,999. In comparison, the Galaxy S25, launched in India last year, started at Rs 80,999, with the S25 Plus at Rs 99,999 and the S25 Ultra at Rs 1,29,999. That’s a big price jump, with the S26 Plus’ price rising 20 per cent over the S25 Plus. Although Samsung has made 256GB the

base storage this time, consumers may still feel the pinch with the higher asking price.

If you think only Samsung's high-margin Galaxy S26 saw a price hike, you are mistaken. The company has also adjusted prices of several Galaxy smartphones across the M and F series in India, which fall in the mid-range segment. That's an indication that price hikes are widespread and higher RAM prices are now hitting a company like Samsung, too.

British tech company Nothing has followed a similar path to Samsung by increasing the prices of its smartphones. The newly launched Phone 4a series was unveiled last week in London, with the baseline Phone 4a starting at Rs 31,999 and the 4a Pro at Rs 39,999. Both new phones are more expensive than their predecessors: the Phone 3a and 3a Pro, launched a year ago, were priced at Rs 22,999 and Rs 27,999, respectively.

Samsung's Galaxy S26 lineup of smartphones come at a higher prices. (Image credit: Anuj Bhatia/The Indian Express)

While Nothing did introduce changes to its new smartphones – the 4a Pro features a major design revamp and improved cameras, consumers' monthly paychecks have clearly not kept pace with rising smartphone prices. CEO Carl Pei had indicated in January that smartphone prices may rise this year, and that brands in the low-end and mid-range segments could struggle due to the surge in memory costs.

Lenovo-owned Motorola has also increased smartphone prices, with the new Edge 70, a mid-range smartphone, starting at Rs 26,999. Its predecessor, the Edge 60, was launched a year ago at Rs 22,999. In January, a Motorola India executive revealed to indianexpress.com that the company had been delaying price hikes on its smartphones, even as many of its competitors had already passed on the extra costs to consumers.

Apple, which is known for absorbing costs and has kept iPhone prices unchanged in recent years, is now charging more for the newly launched iPhone 17e, a premium mid-range smartphone in India. The iPhone 17e retails for Rs 64,900 in India, Rs 5,000 more than the iPhone 16e's launch price a year ago, although Apple has also increased the storage from 128GB to 256GB.

Why mid-range devices are worst-hit

As explained by Jeronimo, mid-range

smartphones, which typically range between Rs 20,000 and Rs 50,000 in India, are clearly becoming a casualty of the memory shortage, a large segment that most phone companies cannot afford to ignore. However, Jeronimo added that the low-end segment has been hit the hardest. Affordable smartphones are widely seen as a way to narrow the digital divide in developing markets like India, where millions of people still use feature phones. But the ongoing RAM crisis may force companies to either stop launching budget phones altogether or increase their prices significantly. At that point, however, it would be difficult to call a budget phone an affordable smartphone.

“The impact will be most severe in the low-end segment, particularly devices priced below $200, which rely on extremely tight margins. With memory prices rising sharply, it becomes economically unviable for vendors to maintain those price points,” Jeronimo agrees, adding that many devices that previously sold for around $100 could move closer to $150–$200.

It doesn’t matter whether the phone is made in India or imported from China, the shortage of RAM supply will impact the entire ecosystem. However, it is still unclear how companies plan to address the issue.

“Most manufacturers secured enough memory

supply earlier in the year to support production and channel inventory through the first half of the year. As a result, distributors and retailers are currently stocking up on devices while supply is still available, which is helping sustain sales in the near term," Jeronimo said, adding that the situation could become worse from the second half of the year onward, when inventories decline and vendors begin producing devices with much more expensive components.

Nothing's Phone 4a Pro, although come at a higher price point compared to its predcessor, got substantial upgrades. (Image credit: Anuj Bhatia/Indian Express)

All this is happening at a time when phone companies are marketing their smartphones as "AI phones" and going to great lengths to promote devices built around AI agents, where the phone understands intent, coordinates across apps, and takes action without needing to open individual apps to complete the necessary steps. However, supporting the newest and updated AI features, especially those that run on-device requires

phones to have more RAM onboard. As a result, the idea that AI's future lies on the device rather than in the cloud begins to face challenges.

Up until last year, tech companies promised a shift AI processing from cloud data centers to personal devices like phones and laptops mainly for speed, privacy, and cost savings, while also allowing AI to work without an internet connection. However, this shift requires more powerful hardware to support specialised AI models.

With a memory crisis looming, phone makers and chip companies need to go back to the drawing board and find new ways to make on-device AI work on devices with less RAM. It would not be surprising if phone makers once again start introducing lower-tier 8GB RAM models in smartphones. However, shipping a phone with 8GB RAM in 2026 may not be a good idea.

While an 8GB RAM phone may be sufficient for daily use, the on-device AI experience would be severely impacted. Cloud-based AI does exist, but experts repeatedly point to privacy and security as key advantages of on-device AI.

But beyond the on-device AI push, phones with less RAM are not future-proof, especially as more consumers hold on to their phones for longer. This is why RAM is one of the most important components inside a smartphone.

The Pixel 10a still ships with 8GB RAM. (Image credit: Anuj Bhatia/Indian Express)

No wonder phone makers are facing a dual challenge: whether to ship a phone with less RAM when devices are heavily reliant on AI, or to cut down on internal storage or use an older-generation processor. These tough decisions could impact the smartphone experience, even as shoppers pay more out of their pockets for the newest devices.

“Pressure on prices will continue for the next couple of years, at least, not just a few months,” he said. It doesn’t look like the RAM shortage is going to subside anytime soon, as analysts predict that it could “persist well into 2027.”

Jeronimo says expanding memory production capacity takes a lot of time, typically two to three years for new fabrication capacity to come online. At the same time, demand for memory from AI data centers and hyperscale cloud providers is growing rapidly and is often prioritised by suppliers, as

these customers purchase large volumes under long-term agreements. He adds that even as supply eventually improves, memory prices are unlikely to return to the levels seen last year.

IDC forecasts the global smartphone market is expected to decline 13 per cent in 2026 – the biggest decline ever, while the PC market is also projected to contract 11 per cent as higher prices reduce affordability.

If smartphone sales slow down worldwide, the big message that has been heavily promoted about the dazzling capabilities of AI may fizzle out. Smartphones and laptops are still the primary gateways for experiencing AI.

‘RAM shortage could kill low-cost laptops’

Skyrocketing memory costs mean laptop prices may also go up and force companies to take less risks in the short term. The impact of the worsening memory market is already seen on newly launched laptops.

Laptops are already getting more expensive, as analysts predicted. The newly launched Apple MacBook Air and MacBook Pro with M5 series chips cost more than their predecessors. In fact, it was surprising to see the price of the M5 MacBook Air, perhaps Apple’s most popular

Mac in terms of volumes, start at Rs 1,19,900, up from Rs 99,900 for last year's M4 MacBook Air, a jump of Rs 20,000, although Apple also increased the minimum storage from 256GB to 512GB. The MacBook Pro with M5 chips also saw steep price increases.

Dell, HP, Asus, and other laptop vendors have also increased the prices of their laptops. Lenovo, the largest PC maker by market share, said that it will raise the average selling price of its PCs in 2026.

As evident in the case of smartphones, laptop makers are also following in the footsteps of phone makers by launching more high-end notebooks instead of focusing on reducing cheaper PCs or temporarily halting production of the latter.

However, Apple saw a market opportunity amid the RAM shortage. Take the case of the new MacBook Neo, Apple's most affordable Mac notebook, priced at Rs 70,000. Although it costs less than the mainline MacBook Air, the Neo runs on the A18 Pro chip and offloads heavy processing to the cloud, with compromises such as a flimsy keyboard, limited storage, and only 8GB of RAM.

A large company like Apple isn't immune to cost pressures; it did raise the prices of the new iPhone 17e, MacBook Air, and MacBook Pros. But insiders believe that the idea of a low-cost

Mac could succeed in the current landscape of shortages: memory prices are high, inflation is rising, and Windows notebooks in the low-end segment are slow and underperform at their tasks. It remains to be seen how consumers react to Apple's MacBook Neo, which goes on sale from March 11.

Apple has increased prices of its MacBook Air and MacBook Pro series with M5 chips. (Image credit: Anuj Bhatia/Indian Express)

So what should consumers do?

With memory shortage to last for a few more months, it is advised to buy laptops with higher RAM and pay upfront more, since most modern laptops have soldered RAM that can't be upgraded later on. For gaming laptops with upgradeable RAM, it's much cheaper in the long term to fill all DIMM slots. If you find a good deal on a laptop, buy it now instead of waiting, as prices are rising and brands may take advantage of the situation by raising the prices of older laptops as well.

Why 60-year-olds in China are queuing up to learn OpenClaw

Bijin Jose

OpenClaw has quickly become a talking point in developer communities. China, which is known for switching older technologies and jumping straight to newer ones, is seeing an unprecedented interest in OpenClaw. Recently, Chinese tech giant Tencent hosted a public OpenClaw setup event that attracted participants over 60, including retired aviation engineers and librarians eager to experiment with AI agents.

For the uninitiated, OpenClaw is a type of AI assistant that can run on its own continuously without relying on a human operator to give it instructions. While popular AI tools such as chatbots answer queries and engage in conversations, OpenClaw has been designed

to act more like a digital assistant that keeps running 24×7, monitoring tasks and taking actions autonomously. It is described as an autonomous AI agent that has been developed by Peter Steinberger.

For example, OpenClaw systems could check your emails, respond to them, monitor folders on your computer, run tasks or scripts, collect information and report to the user. In simple words, AI chatbots react to the user; OpenClaw systems act on behalf of the user. One of its major highlights is that it is open source, meaning the software code is publicly available and anyone can download, modify, or even build on top of it. Part of the appeal is that OpenClaw allows users to run autonomous agents locally on their own machines while connecting to different AI models and tools.

What is happening in China?

China is known for its affinity to adapting the latest innovations and is seemingly showing interest in AI agents like OpenClaw. Reportedly, OpenClaw's popularity is growing rapidly among developers and tech companies in China. Reportedly, major tech giants like Alibaba, Tencent, and Baidu are offering services around it. Many of these companies are reportedly offering installation services where technicians help users set up OpenClaw on their computers.

This rapid adoption seems structural, as many users in China are accustomed to super-apps like WeChat, where payments, messaging, shopping, and services exist in one place. This makes it relatively easy to add AI assistants that can perform tasks inside these apps. This is in stark contrast to the US or Europe, where digital life is scattered across multiple apps and systems, resulting in slower integration and raising concerns about security and privacy.

According to reporter Juro Osawa from The Information, the reaction in China's startup ecosystem has been particularly intense with

many entrepreneurs rapidly shifting focus towards building products and business models based on AI agents. This excitement in China's developer community and startup ecosystem began earlier this year when they became absorbed by the possibilities the OpenClaw brought along. OpenClaw surfaced in November last year, and by January many had already started exploring opportunities with the AI agent.

Entrepreneurs began experimenting with a wide range of ideas. Osawa shared that a founder based in Hangzhou held a hackathon to explore applications inspired by Moltbook, a social network for AI agents that stemmed from the OpenClaw ecosystem. At the event, developers came up with prototypes for services that are specifically designed for AI agents rather than for humans. Some of the ideas included a Tinder-like matchmaking platform for AI agents and a recruitment site where AI agents could find work and collaborate with other agents.

The AI matchmaking platform is a unique concept, where personal AI agents could represent their human users. Since these agents learn their user's preferences, interests and personalities, they could interact with other agents and may even arrange meetings between compatible humans.

Besides, OpenClaw is offering opportunities to solo entrepreneurs to scale with AI. According

to Osawa, one entrepreneur in Beijing used OpenClaw to scale a one-person operation of managing social media accounts for AI influencers. Instead of operating each account manually, they built a group of AI agents that generate content and manage interactions autonomously. And to set this up, the entrepreneur gathered a small cluster of second-hand MacBook Air laptops and deployed them with OpenClaw agents.

Sense of urgency

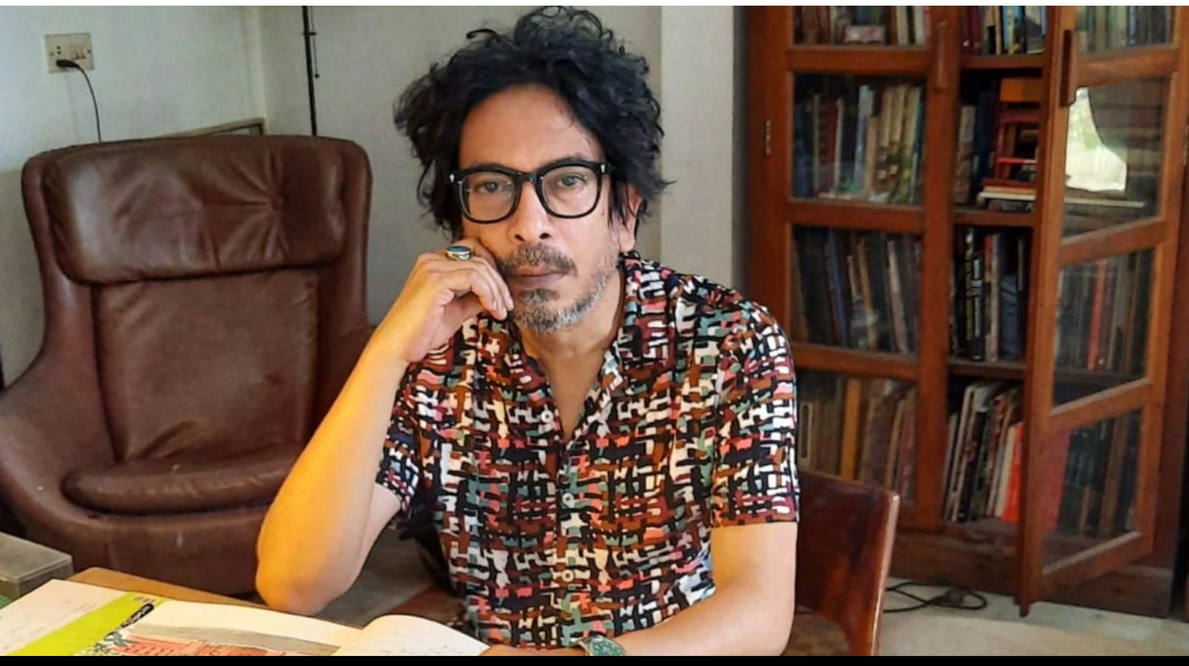
Even as more and more people are experimenting with OpenClaw, there is also a sense of urgency among many Chinese founders who feel they need to move quickly before their rivals outdo them. The fear of missing out, which is characteristic of the rapidly evolving tech space in China, is pushing many startups to rapidly prototype new platforms and services built around AI agents.

On the other hand, large Chinese companies have been swift in their response to the new wave. Influential cloud providers such as Baidu and Alibaba have reportedly started offering services to run OpenClaw on their cloud platforms since January. This is particularly beneficial for developers as they get easy access to the technology without the need for costly hardware. By making OpenClaw available in the cloud, Chinese tech giants are making it accessible for developers and startups to experiment with AI

agent applications.

This is not all; it is also bringing forward new opportunities for hardware makers. Reportedly, the Chinese hardware ecosystem is also exploring how AI agents may interact with connected devices. Startups have already begun developing software that lets users control their hardware through OpenClaw agents. In essence, this could let users interact with an AI agent through messaging apps, which could then remotely operate connected devices. For hardware companies this means integration of AI agents could open new ways for users to manage and automate their devices.

China’s response to OpenClaw indicates how its tech ecosystem is moving rapidly to capitalise on this emerging AI agent wave.



‘The world has critical thinkers. What it lacks is critical imagination’

Aishwarya Khosla

It is the fourth day of the conflict in West Asia when Sarnath Banerjee and I finally speak. He is supposed to fly to Berlin later that week– to work on an illustrated book on mosquitoes and how they challenged the British Empire–but a postponed court hearing has thrown everything into uncertainty.

“I was told: whatever flight you get, just get yourself there,” he says. He, too, is eager to leave, his son awaits his return in Berlin. “It seems like everything is happening at the same time,” he says, and then, with the weariness of a man who is simultaneously a father, a litigant, and a witness to the world catching fire, exclaims: “What’s happening with the world!”

This state of being suspended between cities, hearings, the ordinary and the catastrophic, and the real and the imagined, is the territory of his new graphic novel, Absolute Jafar. It follows the protagonist, Brighu, through the labyrinths of Delhi and Berlin, the swamps of Indian bureaucracy and India-Pakistan relations, and the indignity of proving that you belong. Banerjee is well-versed with this condition. Born in a military hospital in Burdwan, West Bengal, he was shaped by New Delhi – and now shuttles between the Indian capital and Berlin. He is, in the most lived sense, an expert on what it means to be perpetually unmoored.

On turtles, fish, cheetahs and falcons

Animals are a recurring motif in Absolute Jafar. (Courtesy: Sarnath Banerjee)

Ask him what animal best represents the Indian courts–the book is full of animal symbols, and incidentally bureaucracy travels on the fish of the mystic Jhule Lal–and pat comes the response.

“The courts would be on a turtle. It takes its own time. It teaches you the humility of waiting. Or maybe even a plant. You feel like a benign gardener, you have sown your gladiolas and you are just waiting for them to flower. You cannot rush it. You cannot make water boil faster by standing next to it.”

He calls these “life lessons”– the kind that should be administered early to impatient people with road rage or those who are rude to waiters. “Being in unfamiliar circumstances, being humiliated, failing. These are all ways in which you grow,” he says.

He mentions a drawing he did years ago of someone in scuba gear, diving into a small pond, over and over. “Deep diving your own little puddle. You are all geared up and you are just diving into that same pond again and again,” Banerjee says. He made a little frog to go with it. The literal, ‘kuen ka mendhak’ to drive home the message. “But that is what Delhi was, from the outside–these men, particularly men of a certain class, who had never been socialised outside the parameters of their own social construction.”

The last migrant

The cheetah at the heart of Absolute Jafar is the heart of the graphic novel. Banerjee found the image while thinking about the cheetahs

reintroduced to Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh. “Beautiful, sophisticated, but fragile,” he says. “Like some human beings. Their only fault is that they are not opportunistic go-getters. And those people are getting a beating in the world currently.”

A sketch from ‘Absolute Jafar’ of a lone cheetah standing against the dying light is called, ‘The Last Migrant.’ (Courtesy: Sarnath Banerjee/Harper Collins)

When he drew the lone cheetah in the dying light of the Kuno forest, he says, he was almost moved to tears. “There is so much disquiet in that picture. And it is not the usual bourgeois love for animals, not some homocentric approach. I could just feel it.” The cheetah is the migrant par excellence, not the migrant as activist or symbol, but the migrant as a creature of particular, unheroic vulnerability. The Last Migrant. The one whose only fault is refinement.

The book is also an Indo-Pak romance, and a meditation on who gets to find a house in south

Delhi. It is about the small, precise failures of imagination that make ordinary life so difficult for some people and so frictionless for others. Banerjee draws a parallel with Germany, where he lives with his son. “You tell a German person that one of the biggest problems for migrants in Germany is dealing with the administration. And the response is, ‘oh, it’s hard for Germans also.’ It is exactly like when I tell someone that Muslim people have problems finding an apartment in Delhi, and they say, as a Punjabi man when I was 18, I also found it difficult. Not even having the imagination to understand. I am not talking about empathy. I’m talking about just a small auto ride from here to the southeast. Just imagination.”

A deficit of imagination

This failure of imagination is the subject of his 2025 Berlin Biennale installation, Critical Imagination Deficit. Banerjee gave a keynote address on it at The University of Art, Berlin, in the middle of the Gaza crisis. In these politically sensitive times, he chose his words carefully. After all, he has seen firsthand what happens to those who are outspoken. “But we also have to say what we have to say.” So instead he spoke of children in a playground in Germany, how protective Germans are of their children, how vivid their imagination of what safety looks like, and the absence of that same imagination for a child elsewhere, “whose life is so uncertain that

she doesn't even know whether she can finish the Lego set before the sirens approach."

Europe, he says, has lost its capacity to imagine other worlds. "In every university and humanities department, there is this big fetish for critical thinking. They have all read Deleuze (the French philosopher). They are all critical thinkers, and in an argument they say things like, 'that depends,' 'you are generalising.' It is precisely the fact that they speak on behalf of a received imagination – a received knowledge and a received idea of criticality – that marks the failure of their critical imagination."

The politics of walking

Walking, in Banerjee's telling, is political. "You walk in different geographies differently. You walk in Delhi as if you are the grand wazir of a badshah, not a worry in your head, not knowing that there is a possibility of being beheaded in future. Your ancestors built the city, you have a natural claim to the tea shops, the flower shops, everybody around. So everybody in Delhi is a badshah of their mohallah." Bombay, by contrast, is "a geography of love. Loved ones, loved people" Berlin, which is home for him now, requires a different kind of navigation. Marzahn, in the east, was once synonymous with neo-Nazi violence. "There's no violence anymore. I have never had any racial encounters there. But there is that old fear."

A djinn walks in Karachi, the protagonist Brighu, walks with his son, the eponymous Jafar, on his back. (Courtesy: Sarnath Banerjee)

He walks fast–"with great purpose and great speed," he says, "things just zip past me"–and he has lost friends who have tried to keep up. But he is equally alert to the walks he cannot take without calculation, without rerouting. He remembers being a student in England during the British National Party years, turning down a street and seeing three men smoking–probably fine people, he says, short hair, normal–and taking another road entirely. "So walking is very politicised. It depends on the place, your location, your identity. "To be able to walk is a privilege," he wryly adds, "which most privileged ones deny themselves."

The Indian graphic novel

Banerjee has been described as the pioneer of the Indian graphic novel, a label he wears lightly, preferring to name members of the "cohort." His debut, Corridor (Penguin, 2004), was perhaps

the first self-described Indian ‘graphic novel’, as opposed to a graphic novel by an Indian with American or Japanese sensibilities, that was published by a mainstream publisher, and around it gathered a generation: Orijit Sen, Vishwajyoti Ghosh, Amruta Patil, Parismita Singh, George Mathen (Appupen). “It was just a shelf of Indian comic books that were talking of local concerns instead of global trends, not inspired by manga or Franco-Belgian comics, but just very much our own stuff. A khuddari (self-respect).”

A sketch of Thugs Bar in Broadway Hotel from the graphic novel, Absolute Jafar. (Source: amazon.in)

For a decade, he says, they had their modest shelf of the Indian graphic novel, and then it disappeared. “I was in complete financial ruin after writing these comics for over two decades.” Then there was what he calls the “brahminical aspect” of Indian literary culture, the pedigree system that has always looked down on visual storytelling. And then the deluge of Japanese

manga, Western graphic novels, and an internet that makes every teenager a citizen of Osaka or Gotham before they have finished reading the city they live in. “That tiny voice that appeared for those 10 years is not represented anymore. We occasionally find a book by me or by Amruta or by Vishwajyoti. But that shelf is not there anymore.”

It is not, however, all doom and gloom. He finds hope in Generation Alpha, the 11 to 17-year-olds who are, he says, “blunt, kind, just, beautiful people navigating tragic times with a certain lightness.” They read multigenerationally. They are out on demonstrations with their parents. They are not defined by the digital isolation of the generation just above them, the Covid cohort whose socialisation was so badly fractured. “I don’t know how they are doing it,” he says of the Alphas, “but they are doing it.”

A return to tradition

Meanwhile, he is turning towards tradition. Indian classical music. Kabuki theatre. Chinese opera, whose sound “does wonderful things” to him. In that spirit, his son, who already knows how to sew, hopes to learn the art of cutting from a masterji the next time he visits Karachi. “I told him if you learn how to make a good blouse and petticoat, your life will always be secure,” he half-jokes. In the age of AI, skilled handwork

is protection. “The future of comics is not in comics but outside comics. You cannot improve your filmmaking by just watching films. You cannot make your writing better by just reading. There are other things you need to infuse your form with,” he says.

Sarnath Banerjee, the author of Absolute Jafar, in his flat in Berlin. (Source: Sarnath Banerjee)

Comics, he contends, belong to neither the art world nor the literary world. The art world does not read — or rather, reads only when forced to write a proposal, he says, at which point literature shrinks to a ‘text.’ The literary world, for its part, cannot tolerate images breaking the flow of prose, and so relegates comics to the children’s shelf. “If the river is unbridgeable, why try to become a bridge?” he says.

“The comic book world is an isolated world without patronage, without money, without fellowships.” This, he has decided, is not a tragedy.

“The most politically radical thing to do right now is to have a day job. You free yourself from the art establishment, the literary establishment. You are not trying to influence anyone. You are not there to create a movement. You are just doing something that gives you enormous pleasure, and giving it to a small group of people who also get enormous pleasure.”

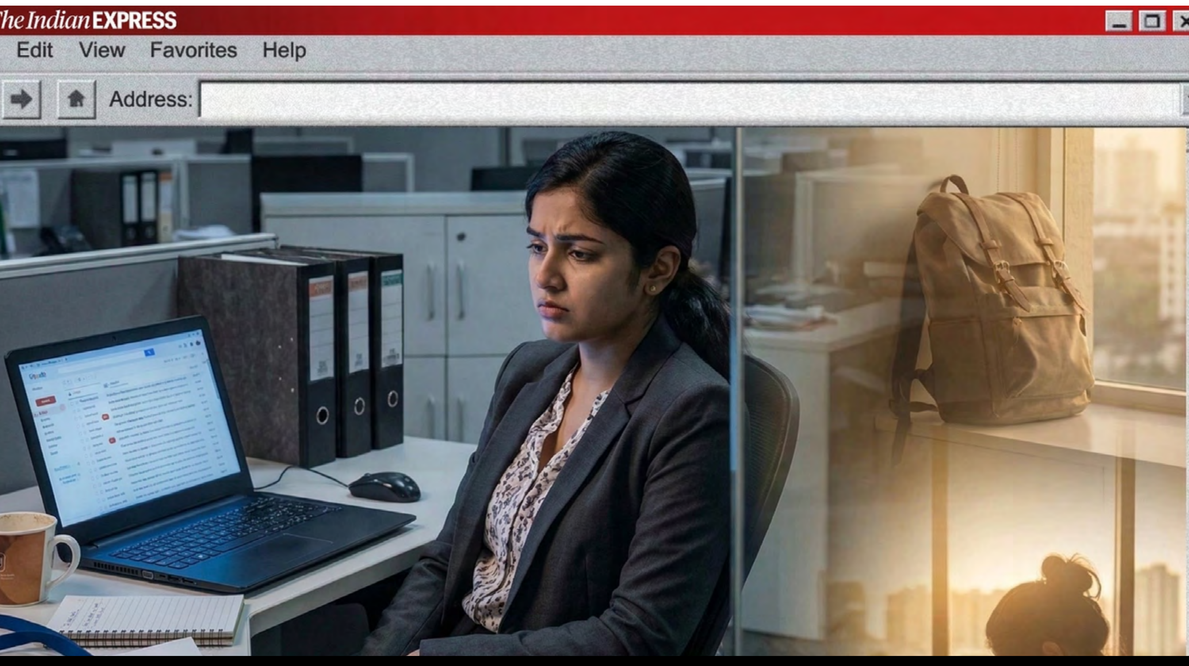
The cover of Sarnath Banerjee’s graphic novel Absolute Jafar. (Source: Harper Collins)

There will not be another graphic novel soon. This one, he admits, financially “exhausted me.” He has jobs to do, a child to take out for sushi once a month if he can manage it. He owns a flat in Delhi, which gives him the freedom to work on comics –”if I had to pay rent in India along with Berlin, I don’t think I would be able to do comics. I would be doing XR (extended reality)

and VR (virtual reality) or whoever knows what."

The last image in Absolute Jafar is of the cheetah, alone, in the dying light. The world, on the day we speak, is on its fourth day of being on fire, no end in sight. The court is on holiday, and the flight to Berlin is still uncertain. Banerjee walks fast. He walks with great purpose and great speed through cities that no longer quite belong to him, and things just zip past. He discovers things in that raftaar, in that velocity. All one can really do, he seems to have concluded, is keep moving, "even if it does not take you anywhere."

Absolute Jafar is published by HarperCollins India.



Why India's Gen Z hates the 9-to-5 but refuses to quit

Swarupa Tripathy

Prachi Kumari was 21 when she walked into her first corporate job, certain she had made the right call. At 24, she's not very sure. The deadlines haven't stopped, the inbox never empties, and somewhere between the performance reviews and the appraisal cycles, she finds herself asking a lot of questions about her position in life.

She's not alone. Across India, a generation of young professionals continues to show up at the same offices they critique on social media. They post about burnout, swap memes about toxic workplaces, and dream aloud about freelancing, passion projects, and 'escaping the matrix'. Yet most of them haven't left.

This isn’t hypocrisy. It highlights a generation that is caught between the life they want and the financial ground they can’t afford to lose beneath their feet.

A safety net they can’t let go of

Ask any Gen Z professional what they think of the 9-to-5, and you’ll get a similar answer: it’s complicated.

Sristhi Jain, 23, tells indianexpress.com, “I have a bit of a love-hate relationship with the traditional 9-to-5 model. On one hand, I genuinely see it as a strong safety net, especially for our generation. We’re ambitious, experimental, and often drawn toward unconventional paths. Having a steady 9-to-5 provides financial stability, structure, and a sense of security that allows us to explore those non-conservative dreams without constantly worrying about survival.”

But in the same breath, she acknowledges the friction, stating, “The fixed hours, rigid structure, and mental bandwidth it demands can slowly chip away at the energy and freedom we need to pursue what truly excites us.”

It’s a tension that Nehal, 25, recognises viscerally. She values the predictability of “knowing these are the hours meant for work helps me organise my day and my energy,” but it rarely stays within

those hours. Commutes stretch the day. Deadlines spill into evenings. The clean boundary between work and life that Gen Z craves rarely materialises.

What keeps them close to the model, even so, is a single word: certainty. As Nehal says, “There’s psychological safety in knowing what your month roughly looks like and that compensation will follow.”

Ask any Gen Z professional what they think of the 9-to-5, and you’ll get a similar answer: it’s complicated. (Source: AI Generated)

From a financial standpoint, this instinct is entirely rational. Snehasish Das, a quantitative finance expert and financial advisor at Solvay

Brussels School of Economics and Management, explains why the salaried job retains its gravitational pull even in an era of gig work and creator economies. He says, “A salaried job still provides predictability, which is the foundation of financial planning. Fixed monthly income, employer-backed benefits such as provident fund contributions, insurance coverage, and easier access to credit products like home or personal loans create a structured safety net.”

For first-generation wealth builders, the stakes feel even higher. The risk of financial instability isn’t abstract. It’s the end of independence.

The cost of staying

If the financial case for staying is clear, the psychological cost is subtler and accumulates slowly. Dr Munia Bhattacharya, senior consultant in clinical psychology at Marengo Asia Hospital, Gurugram, has watched this pattern emerge with increasing clarity in her practice. “Clients often report numbness, irritability, low energy, and a sense of being trapped. Over time, the job becomes a survival mechanism rather than a source of purpose, which creates quiet resentment and emotional withdrawal,” she says.

Dr Bhattacharya puts a clinical name to the internal split many young workers feel without quite being able to articulate it: cognitive

dissonance. A daily tug-of-war, she says, between “this pays my bills” and “this doesn’t feel like me”. Many Gen Z individuals, she observes, function well on the outside while feeling internally disengaged, “as if they are living someone else’s life”.

Aishi Chatterjee, a PR executive in her early 20s, describes it. “The mental cost isn’t always visible burnout; it’s often a quieter sense of restlessness, creative stagnation, or feeling like life is on pause,” she notes.

For Jain, the conflict manifests as a values gap between who she is and what corporate life demands of her. “I’m someone who thrives on curiosity, creativity, and trying new things, but corporate structures don’t always allow the freedom to choose work that truly aligns with what excites me. Often, I find myself completing tasks without my heart fully in them. That disconnect can feel draining,” she explains.

Dr Bhattacharya warns that the danger is not immediate collapse but slow erosion “of confidence, curiosity, and self-trust” as motivation shifts from internal drive to external compulsion: salary, fear, validation. Over time, she says, identity itself begins to blur. People stop asking what they want and start asking what is expected of them.

The anxiety of imagining otherwise

Almost every Gen Z professional interviewed had considered leaving corporate life. None had done it. The reasons illuminate just how layered the decision really is.

At minimum, individuals should maintain an emergency fund covering six to 12 months of expenses (Source: AI Generated)

For Jain, it comes down to readiness. For her, what holds her back are very real practical concerns. “The volatility of the market is a big one—stepping away from a stable corporate role means stepping into uncertainty, and that can be daunting.”

Nehal spent months questioning herself before even entertaining the idea seriously. “What held me back was security, the predictability of income, the comfort of knowing what comes next, and the very real anxiety of stepping into an uncertain job market.” But she also identifies a social dimension that’s rarely discussed openly: “Being attached to a known organisation protects you from questions. Leaving means explaining yourself.”

That fear of scrutiny from family, from peers, from society is something Dr Bhattacharya identifies as central to Gen Z’s career paralysis. “Gen Z grew up watching layoffs, economic shocks, and social media highlight both extreme success and failure. This creates a constant background anxiety: ‘What if I fall behind?’ Social comparison intensifies this—seeing peers succeed online makes even a stable job feel inadequate.” The result, she says, is that decisions are often driven more by fear of loss than excitement for growth.

Das, the finance expert, mentions what a responsible exit actually requires. He explains, “At minimum, individuals should maintain an emergency fund covering six to 12 months of expenses, independent health insurance, and a disciplined investment plan that continues regardless of income variability. Without these safeguards, career flexibility can quickly turn into financial stress.”

The internalised pressure

The pressure to choose stability over experimentation doesn't always come with a face. Often, it's been so thoroughly internalised that it speaks in one's own voice.

Nehal informs, "In many Indian families, stability is seen as a responsibility. A formal job becomes proof that you're doing life 'correctly'. Even when no one directly questions you, you anticipate the questions." That anticipation, she says, shapes decisions in ways that are difficult to separate from personal choice. "You start negotiating with yourself: maybe wait a little longer, maybe this is practical, maybe wanting something different is deviating from the norm."

Jain, however, pushes back on the idea that external pressure remains the dominant force for her generation. Social media and greater exposure, she argues, have shifted the calculus: families are more aware that non-traditional careers can be viable. For her, the pressure is mostly internal, which she describes as "a quiet negotiation: Should I choose what feels secure, or should I take a leap toward something that excites me more?"

Redefining what success looks like

For Jain, the definition has moved inward. Earlier,

success may have seemed more external, involving a better position, salary, and recognition. Now, it feels more internal. “It’s about having something I can rely on financially and personally. It’s about growing through the process, building real skills, and gaining the confidence to consistently deliver work that reflects my true potential,” she tells indianexpress.com.

Prachi echoes this, “Earlier, career success meant a good job title, steady salary, and external validation. Now, it means something deeper—doing work that pays well and feels aligned with who I am.”

Das observes the same transformation from a financial lens. He observes that Gen Z still values security, but associates success less with home ownership and retirement milestones, and more with flexibility, time autonomy, meaningful work, and mental well-being. “Financial independence is viewed less as retiring early and more as having the freedom to make career and life decisions without being constrained by money,” he states.

Renegotiating the terms

Chatterjee articulates the middle ground her generation is occupying: “Many Gen Z professionals are staying in salaried roles while slowly redefining success. Stability still feels non-negotiable, but blind loyalty to work no

longer does.”

Dr Bhattacharya offers a framework for managing the tension rather than resolving it. The key, she says, is integration, not escape. “Psychologists often suggest separating ‘job’ from ‘identity’. A job can fund life while meaning is built through side projects, learning, boundaries, or creative outlets.” Naming the compromise consciously, rather than feeling silently trapped in it, makes an enormous psychological difference.

Das advocates a hybrid financial approach: building secondary income streams while still employed, keeping fixed expenses low, automating investments, and avoiding the trap of scaling lifestyle to match income spikes—all of which preserve optionality without demanding an immediate leap.