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The Gen Z Revolution

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In Nepal, a sudden social media ban ignited a wave of Gen Z protests that quickly grew beyond screens and hashtags. In this month's issue, we explore what led to the agitation and look at the faces of a leaderless youth revolt. We also examine how the ban struck at the heart of Nepal's remittance-driven economy, amplifying the unrest. Beyond the streets, the political spotlight falls on Sushila Karki, the country's first woman Chief Justice — and now its first woman Prime Minister.

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What led to the 'GenZ' agitation in Nepal

– Yashee and Yubaraj Ghimire

The house of Nepal's Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli and other political leaders were set on fire on September 9, as protests raged in defiance of a curfew order a day after the killing of 19 protesters.

The protests were dubbed the Gen Z protests, as many of its participants were under 28 years of age.

This was the first time the youth of Nepal, the 'GenZ', mobilised on the streets like this. Organisers asked political parties and their youth wings to stay away.

While the immediate trigger for the protests

was a now-lifted ban on social media platforms, grievances had been simmering in Nepal for a while now, specially over the corruption allegations against the political leadership.

Social media ban to 'nepo babies'

On September 4, the Nepal government banned 26 social media sites, including the Meta-owned Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram, X, and YouTube, for not complying with an earlier order. The Nepal government has sought to regulate big social media companies for more than a year, citing a rise in cyber crimes, fake news, and misleading content. Last month, armed with an order from Nepal's top court, the government gave the companies a final deadline to register with the government, name a grievance handler, and agree to remove posts the government flagged. Those who did not register were banned.

Those who registered and escaped the ban are TikTok, Viber, WeTalk, Nimbuzz and Poppo Live, Reuters reported. TikTok had previously been banned in 2023 but allowed to resume after it reached an agreement with the government.

Former Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli said his party was not against social media, "but what cannot be accepted is those doing business in Nepal, making money, and yet not complying with the law", as quoted by PTI.

Critics of the move, however, say the government is

trying to police self expression, muzzle criticism, and curb press freedom. Also, many in Nepal's tourism-powered economy rely on social media for their businesses, while for its expats, social media is one way of staying in touch with their country and with family members left behind.



Protesters surround an armored vehicle of a police during clashes outside the Parliament building in Kathmandu, Nepal, Monday, Sept. 8, 2025. (AP Photo)

Lack of jobs, opportunities

The social media ban is emblematic of the larger churn in Nepal. The youth, especially, are increasingly frustrated with the same set of 70-plus leaders, all facing corruption allegations, coming in and out of power since the country became a democratic republic in 2008.

In fact, the few younger leaders who have come to prominence in the past few years can thank social media for their rise to no small degree. Among them are Kathmandu mayor Balendra

Shah, a former rapper in his thirties, who has expressed his support for the GenZ protesters (under 28 years of age), and Rashtriya Swatantra Party chief Rabi Lamichhane, a former TV anchor and former deputy PM.

In this scenario, the government banning most major social media platforms has raised suspicions. A Bill to police social media platforms is also due to come up in Parliament.

In the lead-up to the events, young people protesting against the social media ban had also been posting about corruption among the ruling class and about 'Nepo Babies', to attack entrenched privilege. The terms 'Nepo Babies' and 'Nepo Kids' were trending online, with people posting pictures of the young members of prominent families and questioning how their lifestyle was funded.

Grievances building up among Nepali youth

The young in Nepal have many reasons to be unhappy with the government.

According to a World Bank report, "Nepal's economic growth accelerated in the first half of FY25 (H1FY25). Real GDP grew by 4.9 percent in H1FY25, up from 4.3 percent in H1FY24". However, this number does not present the full picture. Job creation is slow, inequality, worsened by climate vulnerabilities and natural disasters,

is high, and many among the young are leaving the country.

The same World Bank report adds, “Nepal’s reliance on remittances…has been central to the country’s growth but has not translated into quality jobs at home, reinforcing a cycle of lost opportunities and the continued departure of many Nepalis abroad in search of employment. A staggering 82 per cent of Nepal’s workforce is in informal employment, far higher than global and regional averages.”

Added to this is political churn, with power rotating among Oli, Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda of the Maoist Centre, and five-time PM Sher Bahadur Deuba in alliances that are frequently made and unmade.

In fact, protests had broken out in Nepal a few months ago in March too, although then, many had demanded a return to monarchy, claiming the experiment of making Nepal a republic had failed.

The corruption allegations

As The Indian Express has reported earlier, almost all senior leaders in Nepal are under some sort of corruption cloud. It has been a practice since 2006 to grant immunity to politicians against investigation if a “policy decision”, which is essentially a decision by the cabinet, is taken to that effect.

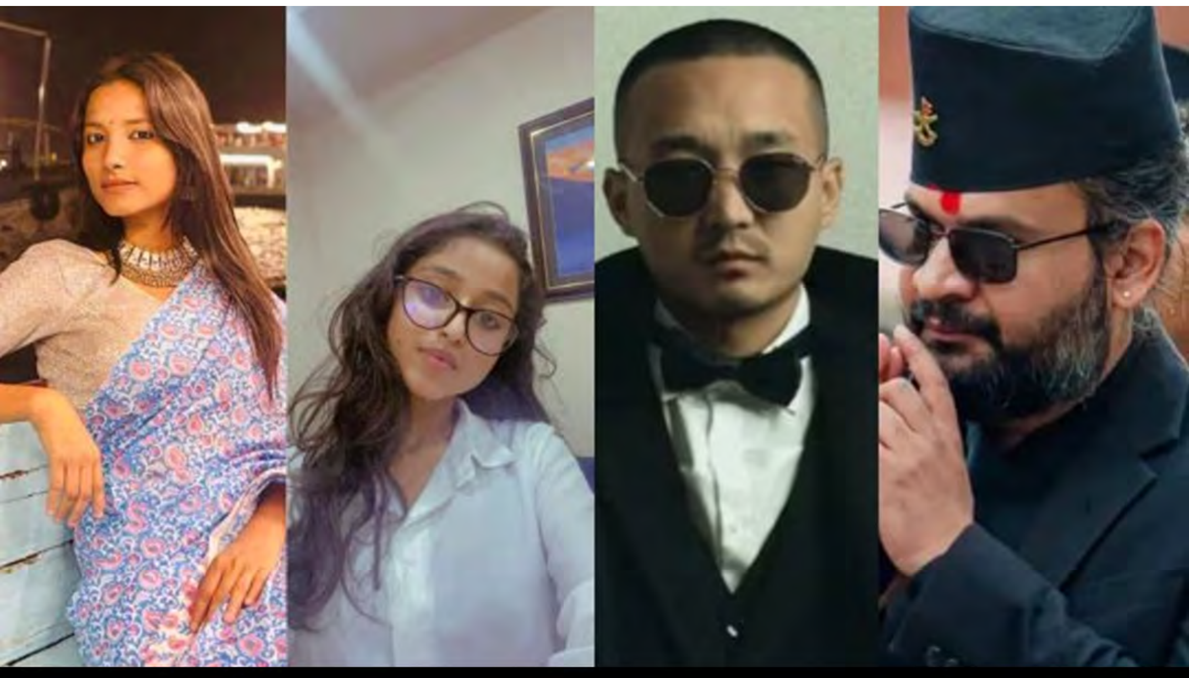
Some of the major allegations are:

Oli faces a contempt case for violating a Supreme Court order against converting a tea estate into commercial plots.

Three other former PMs, Madhav Nepal (2009-11), Baburam Bhattarai (2011-13), and Khil Raj Regmi (2013-14), are accused in scams to give government land to private individuals.

Complaints are pending against three-time PM Prachanda for allegedly making billions by diverting money meant for Maoist guerrillas when they were kept in UN-monitored cantonments during the peace process that began in late 2006.

Deuba is accused of taking illegal commissions in the purchase of aircraft, and his wife Arzu Rana Deuba, currently the foreign affairs minister of Nepal, has often faced questions in Parliament about her alleged role in fraudulently turning Nepali citizens into Bhutanese nationals on paper, and sending them to the United States as “refugees”.



The many faces of the Gen Z revolt

– Aishwarya Khosla

On September 9, Nepal's Gen Z protest had scorched Kathmandu — ministries, Parliament and the Supreme Court were set on fire and the K P Sharma Oli government was brought down. And yet, in the shadow of this destruction, another image emerged. At dawn on September 11, in Kirtipur, 5 km southwest of the capital city, groups of Gen Z volunteers fanned out with gloves and trash bags, sweeping streets and collecting debris. For some, these gestures were proof that the generation leading Nepal's youth-led uprising was not defined by violence alone.

But the contrast cuts deeper than optics, revealing the fracture at the heart of the revolt. Leaderless

and decentralised, the movement lacks consensus on who speaks for it or where it should go next. The tension between the movement's moral core and the violence unleashed in its name was laid bare in a message from Next Gen Nepal. "Gen Z has not appointed a representative through discussion, nor entered into any such process. Yet everyone is claiming to be the representative of Gen Z," wrote the anonymous administrators, accusing some of "pulling siblings from their own pockets."

Despite the evident lack of cohesion, a few figures have emerged — DJs, mayors, activists and climate organisers — all of them pulled into prominence by circumstances that have singed the Himalayan kingdom.

While The Indian Express reached out to them for comment, they did not respond.

Sudan Gurung, 36

A known name in Kathmandu's nightlife scene, Sudan Gurung was a DJ and owner of the club OMG. But the 2015 earthquake that killed nearly 9,000 people – including a child who breathed his last in his arms, according to Nepal-based daily The Annapurna Express – is said to have "transformed him".



A known name in Kathmandu's nightlife scene, Sudan Gurung was a DJ and owner of the club OMG. (Sudan Gurung/Facebook)

Gurung, 36, then turned his social media following into a rescue network, summoning hundreds of volunteers to deliver aid when the state faltered. That ad-hoc effort evolved into Hami Nepal, an NGO that has since mobilised for earthquakes, floods, and even international relief campaigns.

When the government blocked major social media platforms this month, Gurung turned again to social media. Days before the blackout, his Instagram carried an appeal: "Brothers and sisters, September 8th is not just another day. It is the day we, the youth of Nepal, stand up and say 'Ab Pujyo (now it's enough)'. For too long, corruption has stolen our future … But today, we say no more."

He urged students to gather at Maitighar Mandala in the heart of Kathmandu, framing the rally not

as a party-driven march but as a generational reckoning. “Do not stay silent. Do not stay home. Bring your friends, your family, your courage, and your voice … This is not just a protest. This is a movement.”

Some of his posts have been disclaimers – “I would humbly like to request everyone, do not link me with any political party” – and clarifications that he was not tied to fellow Gen Z activist Tanuja Pande.

During the protests, he stayed in the background, arranging safe houses, dispatching safety tips, and urging students to march in their uniforms and with books in their hand.

Balendra Shah, 35



Balendra Shah, widely known as Balen, is one of the most prominent figures to emerge from Nepal’s latest political crisis. (Balendra Shah/Facebook)

Balendra Shah, widely known as Balen, is

Kathmandu's 35-year-old mayor and one of the most prominent figures to emerge from Nepal's latest political crisis. Once part of Kathmandu's underground rap scene, Shah first gained attention in the early 2010s with freestyle battles and tracks that denounced corruption and inequality. Trained as a civil and structural engineer from Bengaluru's Nitte Meenakshi Institute of Technology (NMIT), he shocked Nepal's political establishment in 2022 by winning the capital's mayoral race as an independent candidate, defeating nominees of both the ruling Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal.

Since taking office, Shah has built a reputation for his unconventional, hands-on style: live-streaming city council meetings, ordering the demolition of illegal buildings, and aggressively tackling Kathmandu's chronic waste management problems. His clashes with federal ministries over jurisdiction have often turned him into a national talking point, boosting his popularity among younger voters.

This week, as student-led protests rocked Kathmandu, Shah positioned himself at the edge of the movement. He did not march with the demonstrators but publicly defended their right to protest. On September 9, a post on his X

account, where he has more than half a million followers, read: “We had clearly said this: this is entirely a Gen Z movement. Dear Gen Z, the resignation of your murderer has already come. Now, please remain calm!! … Be prepared! Also, be ready to hold talks with the Chief of Army. But remember — before any talks, the parliament must be dissolved.”

While urging restraint, Shah acknowledged the legitimacy of the students’ demands and directly addressed the army’s role in the crisis. His intervention fueled speculation that he could emerge as a candidate for interim prime minister following Oli’s resignation.



A protester waves a national flag as vehicles burn during a protest against a social media ban and corruption in Kathmandu, Nepal, Tuesday, Sept. 9, 2025. (AP Photo/Niranjan Shrestha)

Crowds at Maitighar Mandala chanted his name,

and social media platforms filled with calls for him to take over the national leadership. On social media, the slogan “Dear Balen, Take Now or Never” began trending, with supporters urging him to resign as mayor and launch a political party, according to the República, an English national daily published in Kathmandu.

Rakshya Bam, 26



Rakshya Bam from Kailali, young activists of the Gen Z revolt.(Raksya Bam/Facebook)

Rakshya Bam from Kailali, in Nepal’s far-western Sudurpaschim Province, has become one of the most recognisable young activists of the Gen Z revolt. According to her LinkedIn profile, she serves as executive coordinator at the Ujwal Thapa Foundation, a civic group named after the late social entrepreneur, and has also worked with the US Embassy Youth Council on youth engagement and digital rights.

Her activism ranges from women's inclusion in technology to the fair treatment of street vendors, but she rose to prominence during the current unrest by amplifying Gen Z voices both online and on the ground.

Bam was briefly drawn into the talks at the army headquarters, where the military sought to mediate between protesters and political leaders. But she walked out after discovering that hardline pro-monarchy figures, including businessman Durga Prasai and members of the Rastriya Swatantra Party, were being treated as stakeholders. "We immediately went out after the discussion against basic norms of the movement started," she later wrote on Facebook, rejecting the process as an insult to the sacrifices of demonstrators.



Protesters throng Singha Durbar, the seat of Nepal's government's various ministries and offices during a protest against social media ban and corruption in Kathmandu, Nepal, Tuesday, Sept. 9, 2025. (AP Photo/Niranjan Shrestha)

Her decision triggered criticism, with detractors pointing to her US Embassy ties while accusing her of "vested interests". She countered that no one individual could speak for the movement. "There is no leader of the Gen Z movement," she wrote. "This movement is led by different Gen Z groups. We will work together with representatives from 77 districts to prepare one joint document of demands. Gen Z should decide the way forward to the state."

Bam has publicly proposed Sushila Karki's name as head of the government.

Tanuja Pandey, 27



Tanuja Pandey founded Harin Nepal, a youth-led alliance focused on "intersectional environmental justice". (Tanuja Pandey, Facebook)

Tanuja Pandey is a climate justice organiser with a background in law. In 2018, she founded Harin Nepal, a youth-led alliance focused on

"intersectional environmental justice". She also serves on the EU Youth Sounding Board, which, according to its website, "is a space for young people to have an influence on EU external action and international partnerships".

After Prime Minister Oli resigned, Pandey posted a statement on behalf of Gen Z: "Preparations are underway for a citizen government and new political direction. Therefore, let us move forward with patience and discipline. Our minimum demand is to form a citizen government under universally acceptable leadership and to move towards new elections."

When reports suggested her cohort was negotiating directly with the army, Pandey quickly denied them: "We were neither in the conversation yesterday nor today… We will work together with all Gen-Z protesters' representatives from 77 districts on the same joint document… There is no leader of the Gen Z movement. This is what we all know."





Why the social media ban ended up having an outsized impact

– Anil Sasi

Anti-corruption protests in Nepal were sparked by a ban on 26 social media apps, before spiralling into a wider anti-corruption movement that ended up toppling the government after the mostly leaderless protests spilled over into Kathmandu's streets.

Social media may have been the immediate trigger for the unrest, but in Nepal, apps such as Facebook and Whatsapp played an increasingly outsized role for multiple reasons. It gave people, especially youngsters, a platform to vent anger against the moribund economic prospects and the

general lack of opportunities. More importantly, these were vital communication channels for the Nepalese people to keep in touch with family members increasingly working abroad, in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Malaysia, apart from India.

These were also a channel for routing some of the remittance money, a big source of Nepal's national income. The collapse of the domestic economy, the bristling anger over corruption, unemployment, and the fact that a lot of Nepalese politicians had become really rich and their children were posting snapshots of their lavish lives on social media – all these reasons could have played a part. Young activists were picking these pictures and sharing them on social media, which led to these apps becoming even more relevant for young Nepalese. And finally, a rumour that the two largest parties are getting together to form a grand coalition because leaders of both the parties were under investigation for corruption by the previous government, stoked the simmering unrest. This also played out on social media. The ban was read as a signal to brush these under the carpet, triggering an uproar.

Nepal's overseas workers, the remittance cycle

Nepal has over eight per cent of its population

living and working overseas and the remittances that they send back to that country amounts to over 33 per cent of Nepal's Gross Domestic Product, the fourth highest in the world after Tonga, Tajikistan and Lebanon. To that extent, apps such as Facebook and WhatsApp were vital for families to keep in touch with their relatives abroad. And the reason why they were working abroad was because of dwindling opportunities back home, all of which contributed to stoking unrest. The social media ban was akin to rubbing the proverbial salt in festering wounds.

With a population of over 30 million, Nepal was anyway undergoing a significant demographic shift, with young individuals aged 16-25 years constituting over 20 per cent of the total population, while those between 16-40 years accounting for over 40 per cent. According to Aashiyana Adhikari, a Research Officer at the Centre for South Asian Studies in Kathmandu, the shift in the demographic profile, while highlighting Nepal's "youth bulge" or "population dividend", also comes at a time when there was a marked increase in the number of young Nepalese workers migrating abroad in search of better educational and employment opportunities, especially over the last decade. This trend has a dual economic impact: while it significantly boosts the GDP through remittances sent home, it simultaneously resulted in brain drain in most upcoming sectors. "This drain, in turn,

potentially undermines the full realisation of the benefits that the demographic dividend could otherwise offer Nepal," according to Adhikari. According to World Bank estimates, there has been a "broad-based and deep reduction" in poverty levels as evidenced by the poverty headcount ratio measured at US$ 6.85 per day, which fell from 90 per cent in 1995 to below 50 per cent in 2023. Despite this achievement, the sobering reality is that Nepal's economy has struggled to keep pace regionally and globally and has not generated enough quality jobs in the non-agricultural sector, it said. Between 1996-2023, the economy grew at an average real annual rate of 4.2 per cent, respectable given the challenges of domestic conflict and multiple external shocks, according to the Bank. However, this rate lagged that of peer countries. Within South Asia, Nepal's growth rate ranked just sixth out of eight countries. The key factor behind the poverty reduction and resilience in the wake of shocks has been migration and the inflow of remittances, which was becoming increasingly important for the economy.

Economic stagnation, structural problems

Meanwhile, overall labour productivity remained low, with weak competition in logistics and transport, as well as subpar infrastructure and limited exports, which had not contributed to

real economic growth over the past decades. Appreciating real exchange rates and domestic trade policies, including high tariffs and excise taxes, further constrained exports. The manufacturing sector has been in steady decline from an already low base, while the tourism sector, a key growth and job opportunity, remained underdeveloped. The development of hydropower has progressed slowly, restricting its potential to shape the economy and facilitate stronger growth.

According to a study on 'The Role of Remittances in Household Spending in Rural Nepal' led by Resham Thapa-Parajuli of the Central Department of Economics, Tribhuvan University that employed 'two-stage least squares' regression — a statistical technique that is used in the analysis of structural equations — to analyse the impact of foreign remittances on total household consumption expenditures in rural Nepal, showed that foreign remittances "significantly and positively affect total household consumption". It found that the presence of elderly members tended "to reduce total consumption, potentially due to their lower consumption needs or their contributions to household income".

Bhubanesh Pant, former Deputy Director, Research Department, Nepal Rastra Bank, in a paper said that despite the lack of accurate data on the real volume of funds transferred,

there was ample evidence that remittance flows were substantial, stable relative to other forms of development finance, and well-targeted to vulnerable families, both as "support during a crisis" and as "an income-smoothing mechanism". "As the number of workers going abroad for employment continues to rise, the corresponding growth of remittances has become a critical flow of foreign currency into Nepal. This has been partly the result of measures undertaken by the concerned officials to streamline financial systems, dismantling controls and creating incentives, with the aim of attracting remittances particularly through the official channels, Pant noted.

In order to further encourage the inflow of remittances to the country through official channels, and to promote the tendency to exchange these remittances of foreign exchange into local currency, Pant said it was imperative that government policies "be conducive to the inflow of remittances". The social media ban ended up sending exactly the opposite signal, and ended up precipitating the crisis.



Sushila Karki: Nepal's first woman CJ — and now its first woman PM

– Yubaraj Ghimire

Eminent Nepalese jurist Sushila Karki, who has been named interim Prime Minister, is a former chief justice with a reputation for a no-nonsense, anti-corruption stance.

While she lacks political and executive experience, it's this anti-graft reputation that has prompted Nepal's Gen Z protesters to put forward her name as interim prime minister.

While the immediate trigger for the violent protests, that left 19 people dead, was a social media ban, tensions have long simmered over

corruption, a stagnating economy, and a lack of jobs.

In her student years, Karki was associated with the Nepali Congress, then struggling for democracy in the kingdom. After studying law at Banaras Hindu University, she dedicated herself to the legal practice in Nepal and married Durga Subedi, once her tutor. She would later call Subedi her "most dependable friend and guide in crisis and all seasons".

Subedi, a leader of the Nepali Congress, was among four people who, in June 1973, hijacked a Nepal Airlines plane that was ferrying Rs 40 lakh from Biratnagar to the Kathmandu Central Bank, forcing it to land at Forbesganj in Bihar's Purnea district.
The money was handed over to G P Koirala, waiting there to purchase arms to give effect to the Nepali Congress's plans for an armed struggle for democracy.

In late 2006, Karki was appointed as a permanent judge to Nepal's Supreme Court, where she forged her reputation.

She rose to the position of Chief Justice seven years later, in a tenure marked by controversy. The Nepali Congress party, then leading the government, used its parliamentary strength to move an impeachment motion, leading to her immediate suspension.

Karki was not impeached but left dismayed by what she saw as political corruption, an issue that kept her occupied after retirement.

But questions were also raised against her when she, as CJ, pushed for the appointment of judges with affiliations to political parties. “They will have to take off their political shoes once they occupy the bench,” Karki had said, defending her action. Later, however, she exposed some ministers who allegedly pressured her to appoint their relatives to the bench.

Her landmark judgement came when a bench headed by her annulled the appointment of Lokman Singh Karki as the chief of the Constitutional anti-graft body. The appointment was made by President Ram Baran Yadav, interim Prime Minister-cum-chief justice Khilraj Regmi and four major parties in power.





When Gen Z protests, the revolution is hashtag-ed, meme-d, and reel-ed

– ***Sonal Gupta***

Back in 1970, American poet and musician Gil Scott-Heron warned that "the revolution will not be televised". In today's algorithm-driven world, Nepal's revolution was not only televised but reel-ed, Snapchatted, and streamed in real time.

For years, Nepal's youth have been watching their rights being snatched away and their prospects shrinking at the hands of a corrupt political class. Until they had had enough. The final straw had been the government's ban on social media, which ended up igniting the very

uprising it hoped to contain.

Youngsters stormed out onto the streets, demanding an end to corruption and social injustice. The protests quickly spread online as well, and social media became a powerful tool to mobilise the masses and drive change.

Reaching millions of screens

Viral videos captured assaults on political leaders, the ransacking of their homes, and their frantic escapes by helicopter. Within hours, they had racked up hundreds of thousands of views, sparking fierce debate online. Many condemned the violence, while others voiced support for the uprising.



A view of the charred Hilton Hotel after it was vandalised during the anti-government protests, in Kathmandu, Nepal. (PTI Photo)

Echoing the spirit of the West's "eat the rich" campaign, protesters turned their anger toward wealthy leaders. Residences were set ablaze. Clips showed demonstrators showering money, allegedly seized from these homes, while others smashed the furniture. The Singha Durbar, Nepal's seat of power, along with the Supreme Court, political party offices, and even luxury hotels like the Hilton, were engulfed in flames. Much of the chaos unfolded live on Snapchat. Shaky, grainy snaps revealed tires and buildings burning in Kathmandu, and victory rallies on motorbikes. One clip showed a young man grinning in a stolen Nepal Police hat, shield, and baton, as someone off-camera dubbed him "Gen Z police." Another video captured youngsters gathered around a candlelit graffiti to mourn the 19 protesters who had been killed.

In countless clips, Gen Z protesters can be seen filming the chaos on their phones. In one surreal scene, a young man recorded a TikTok dance as flames rose behind him. Another viral video, which quickly garnered over 5 million views on YouTube, showed British travel vlogger Harry of the channel 'We Hate The Cold' sprinting through the streets of Kathmandu as Parliament burned. His cheerful exchanges with protesters made for a jarring contrast, until he finally admitted: "I am going to get the hell out of here."



Protesters take selfies at the Singha Durbar, the seat of Nepal's government's various ministries and offices, after it was set on fire during a protest against social media ban and corruption in Kathmandu, Nepal. (AP Photo)

Social media as a protest tool

The online ubiquity of the Nepal protests also proved–once again — the power of social media to mobilise and empower. Long before the protests broke out, Nepal's youth had come together to expose the corruption of the political elite. Every evidence of luxurious vacations, high-end purchases, or any indulgence was screenshotted and shared under the hashtag 'NepoKids'.

The allegation is that those in power were accumulating wealth from taxpayers to fund their children's vacations and businesses, while a large chunk of the populace (over 20 per cent, according to the United Nations Development Programme) lived in poverty. So, when the

government banned social media, it was seen as a direct attack on free speech.

During the short-lived ban, the youngsters turned to VPNs (or virtual private networks that allow users to circumvent these bans, using a secure, unmonitored network to connect to the Internet). In a September 7 post on X, Proton VPN, a service provided by Swiss company Proton AG, shared that VPN connections from Nepal had spiked 6,000 per cent in just three days. There was a marked interest in VPN searches on Google as well.

Hami Nepal, one of the rallying organisations behind the protests, also mobilised thousands of members through Discord. As of September 11, the 'Youth Against Corruption' Discord server had over 1.4 lakh members. Here, users, often behind anonymous or random display names, engage in regular discussions.

Gen Z turned to memes, shitposts, and songs to rally support. One person recreated the viral 'aura farming' boat-racing dance on top of a burning building. Another showed up with a placard that read, "So f**cked up, even the introverts are here". Many carried the image of the Straw Hat Pirates' Jolly Roger flag from the popular anime One Piece, which stands for the liberation of those oppressed.

This mobilisation through social media joins a long list of protests across the world, where hashtags and digital channels have fuelled uprisings.

Parallel protests in Indonesia against inequality are also being led by students, gig workers, and unemployed youth. The protests were widely covered on social media, prompting TikTok to suspend the 'LIVE' feature in the country for security reasons. Protesters mounted online dissent through hashtags and shared viral videos of police brutality, which sparked outrage. In fact, support flooded in from neighbouring Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand, with the hashtag 'SEAblings', a play on South East Asia's acronym.

The use of social media as a protest tool dates back to 2010-11, during the wave of uprisings in West Asia, or the 'Arab Spring', which was famously termed the "Facebook revolution". Tunisian academic Haythem Guesmi writes that activists turned to Twitter and Facebook to "organise and amplify their demands". However, he also cautions against calling it the sole enabler of the protests, stating that "social media was just one channel of social and political networking among many others".

As Nepal slowly returns to normalcy, the protests stand as a reminder of the immense power of social media to mobilise, unite, and amplify collective strength. Nearly half of the country's 29 million people are active online, using these platforms to raise their voices, search for jobs, and build networks across borders. Social media also helps them stay connected to Nepal's vast diaspora, whose remittances form a critical pillar of the national economy.

Many young voices have also used the platform to grieve the violence and hope that a "Naya Nepal" will rise from the ashes. For now, they seek solace in the lasting symbol from the protest: the bold orange letters spray-painted onto the Parliament building, declaring, "We won."





How the practice of border-making began in America and reshaped the world

– Adrija Roychowdhury

The story goes that in the 1490s, Christopher Columbus accidentally 'discovered' America, and mistook it for the East Indies. This marked the beginning of a series of geographical confusions among the Europeans. To begin with, the Spanish were keen on establishing authority on the newly discovered land, even though the true nature of the territory was yet to be known. And soon, the discoverer of the new world realised that the traditional means of asserting authority — by making a proclamation and unfurling the royal standard — was clearly no good for a land that

was poorly, or rather hardly, understood.

What ensued in America in the 15th century went on to shift human perception of the world. This was the first time that we saw territorial ownership being established by drawing linear boundaries, thereby marking out the precise length, breadth, and shape of the land one controlled.

“The typical story we tell about borders is that Europeans invented them, had always used them, and then imposed them on everyone else,” remarks Jordan Branch, Professor of International Conflict at Claremont McKenna College, USA, and author of *The Cartographic State* (2013). “But the interesting thing is that Europeans did not use borders within Europe first. They actually used them first in those colonial moves in the New World, because they needed a way to divide up something that they did not understand,” he tells indianexpress.com.

This is not to suggest, though, that territorial divisions did not exist in the pre-colonial history of the world. As Professor Goettlich explains in an interview, “Boundaries in some sense are inherent to human societies.” But there was something far more potent in the linear political borders of the kind that gave rise to defined nations and national identities of today. They were first drawn in America, and then replicated across the world.

The pre-modern borders

Branch explains that in the pre-modern or medieval European world, spaces were structured with a mix of territorial and jurisdictional or personal forms of authority. The way in which territoriality was understood here was very different from the exclusive, linear bounded territoriality of the modern world. "Territory was understood as a series of places, with authority radiating outward from centres rather than inward from linear boundaries," writes Branch in his research paper, *Colonial reflection and territoriality: The peripheral origins of sovereign statehood* (2011). It meant that authorities in medieval Europe were often non-exclusive and overlapping. For instance, there would be vassals or subjects who would often pay homage to various and often competing lords.

"People did not really care that much," says Branch. "Identities were not tied down to some form of territorial idea." Instead, identities were perhaps tied to a town, where people farmed or paid taxes, and a bit of land beyond that. But the divisions between the towns were fairly unclear.

Outside of Europe, too, pre-modern states were often understood by personal quasi-kinship bonds. In his writings, Branch gives the example of pre-colonial Africa, where polities were understood in terms of authority radiating

outward from a centre of strong control to fading peripheries.

National boundaries, even when they existed, were far from clear. An example would be the case of classical China and Korea, which were two different political units, with the latter paying tribute to the former, but the border not having been precisely marked out in the late 19th century.

There were also forms of imperial territorial understanding that were not exclusive or homogenous. The Roman or Chinese empires, for instance, would be understood as ruling over the entire world, with authority simply diminishing from the centre to tributary areas.

Sometimes, there would be natural boundaries, such as a river or a mountain range that might give a semblance of territorial divisions, but they would often be vague or impermanent definitions. Rivers, for instance, change their courses and width, while mountain ranges are vast areas with large towns within them. An often cited example is that of the Pyrenees mountain range between Spain and France, which for a long time was recognised as the line of division between the two countries. However, there were several towns and villages within these mountains, and, for a long time, there was a lack of clarity about which among them were French and which were Spanish. The international border between these

two countries was not officially established until the late nineteenth century.

What happened in America?

On arriving in the new world, the European settlers realised that authoritative claims over them could not be made in the traditional sense of naming jurisdictional rights over towns or cities. They were, as termed by Branch in his article, “spaces without places”, or in other words, these were territories about which almost everything was unknown. Consequently, the European settlers realised that a more effective means of defining a claim over an unknown territory was required, which was found in linearly defined territorial boundaries.

The decision to draw linear borders, though, was a product of a specific kind of groundwork that had been laid out in Europe during the period of the Renaissance in the 14th and 15th centuries, characterised by a renewed interest in classical antiquity and unprecedented progress in the spheres of arts, science, literature, and philosophy. It was during this period that the European world encountered the work of the Egyptian astronomer of Greek descent called Ptolemy. His work included instructions for mapping according to the celestial coordinate system of latitude and longitude. The Ptolemaic cartographic grid made possible the linear division of the world. It was exactly what the

European settlers needed in America.

It must be noted that Ptolemy had written his geographic treatise sometime in the second century CE, and it had long been known in the Islamic world. It was rediscovered by Byzantine scholars around 1300, and was made widely available to Western Europe through its Latin translations a century later. “This just shows that one tool or one idea is never enough to drive these huge changes,” says Branch. This is where the colonial encounter became important, coupled with other shifts in Europe, such as internal economic development, increasing scale of military activities, fortifications, use of gunpowder weapons, and more, that pushed towards a centralised rule. In this context, the rediscovery of the mapping tools was suddenly so useful.



Ptolemy’s world map, reconstituted from Ptolemy’s Geography (circa 150) in the 15th century. (Wikimedia Commons)

In his article, *The rise of linear borders in world politics* (2018), Goettlich writes that, along with the cartographic knowledge system that Ptolemy's work produced, came two other epistemic developments in Europe that acted as catalysts for the process of linearisation of boundaries. One was the concept of bounded, self-contained geographical entities that began to be represented in early modern European maps. Then there was the system of international law, which was just as crucial. "The project of international law has, from its origins, been an application of allegedly universal reason on the global scale," he writes. "It was a novel solution to the gap between the legal systems of Spain and that of the Native Americans that the Spanish encountered, based not on Christian divine law, but on the universal reasoning ability of humans," adds Goettlich. It was international law, he suggests, that entitled European powers to draw definite, fixed borders, not only between themselves, but all over the world.

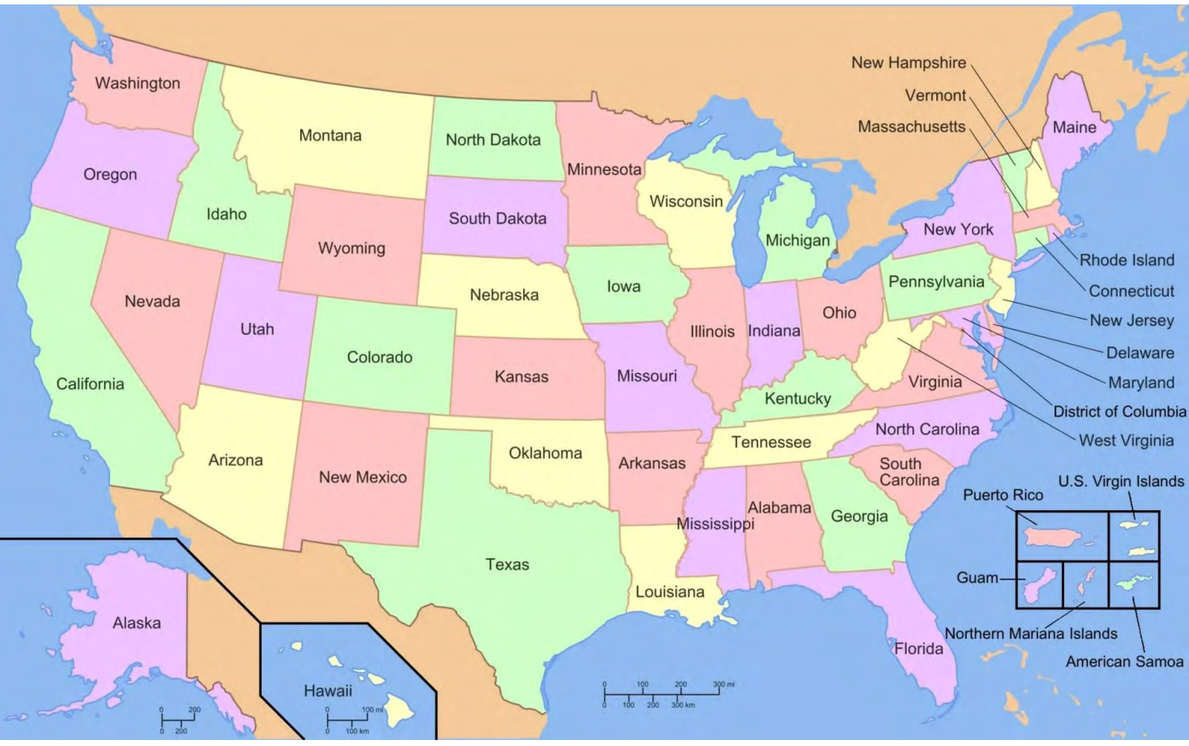
The first such linear division was the Papal Bull issued by Pope Alexander VI, dividing all the newly discovered territories in America between Spain and Portugal with an imaginary line in the Atlantic Ocean. The Treaty of Tordesillas, signed between the two countries a year later, moved that line further west to accommodate Portugal's interests. Accordingly, Spain comprised all newly discovered territories situated to the west of the line, and Portugal was granted all the land to the east.

Interestingly, in the first half of the 16th century, Spanish explorers discovered that the abstract spaces being claimed through these agreements were inhabited by indigenous people. That is when the systems of international law were used in conjunction with brute force and complex negotiations.

By the early 16th and 17th centuries, when the English and French followed the earlier European settlers to America, the tendency to use linear borders to establish control became well established. The language used in English charters to North American colonies, for instance, typically based their authority claims using lines of latitude and longitude. Branch in his work, gives the example of the 1606 charter of Virginia, which delineated the colony as being all land on the Atlantic coast 'between four and thirty Degrees of Northerly Latitude from the Equinoctial Line, and five and forty Degrees of the same Latitude.'

Goettlich asserts that the act of creating such linear boundaries was a settler-driven process rather than anything that was directed from the imperial metropole. "A good example of this is the way the Dutch and the English settled New York and New England, respectively," he says. "The Dutch and English settlers worked out the border between themselves, even when it was never even approved by the imperial metropole." The imperial metropole, he says, did not even

recognise each other's existence or the right to colonise America, and so they did not want to agree on any boundaries. "But the settlers had to, because they were there and had to work out a way of living," he explains.



Map of USA (Wikimedia Commons)

But the cartographic logic of dividing land through linear borders got entrenched in American administration even after its independence in the 1780s. American geographer Matthew Edney points out an interesting difference between the borders of states on the East and West coasts of America. "In the East Coast, you have a lot more irregularly bordered states, whereas as you go westwards you get states which are more rectangular in shape," he says. In the East, he explains, were different colonial settlers disputing over the placement of their borders. After the American Revolution, the US government expanded westward more systematically. "Consequently, they divided up the American

West through a complex process, and they ended up carving it up along the meridian lines to turn them into modern-day states," Edney says.

Making borders in Europe

Even after borders and maps became a regular feature in the New World, within Europe, most territorial agreements were framed devoid of the language of borders. Scholars agree that borders began appearing in Europe in great numbers only after the Napoleonic conquests of the early 19th century.

A series of treaties between France and its neighbours in the late 18th century implemented linear boundaries. The need to implement linear borders takes off during this period due to greater centralisation efforts on the part of rulers, and consequently, the need to extract as many resources and taxes as possible. "There is also a cartographic mentality that seeps in, especially among the elites and educated who have been surrounded by maps for at least a couple of centuries by now," says Branch.

The treaties involved in the partition of Poland among Austria, Prussia, and Russia from the 1770s through the 1790s were yet another instance of early European usage of borders to define territorial divisions. "Like New World colonial charters, these partitions involved the imposition of linear divisions over territories inhabited by

people not consulted in the process," writes Branch in his article.



Allegory of the first partition of Poland, showing Catherine the Great of Russia (left), Joseph II of Austria (middle) and Frederick the Great of Prussia (right) quarrelling over their territorial seizures (Wikimedia Commons)

For the rest of Europe, this process takes off with gusto after Napoleon's conquests. In fact, scholars have often likened Napoleon's conquests to colonialism within Europe. It turned France into a dominant European power, with French control being spread over much of continental Europe. Consequently, the territories inside France would be rationalised through extensive land surveys and administrative reorganisation.

The treaties framed after the defeat of Napoleon were marked by a stark difference in their language from those in the previous eras. As Branch notes, "In sharp contrast with a century prior, territory was divided linearly, with those lines

of division described in careful geographic and cartographic terms. Authority was now defined exclusively by its boundaries, and places within those boundaries were implicitly claimed."

One might ask why these new forms of boundaries were found necessary to be used in Europe, where centuries of custom had for long determined territorial authority. The answer, writes Branch, is the usefulness of the new arrangements to rulers seeking to claim and impose authority on spaces both near and far. "European rulers quickly found some of their new colonial ideas — and technologies of power — useful enough that efforts were made to apply them within Europe," he writes.

Borders and Partitions in South Asia

Despite the widespread use of cartographic systems to draw borders in America, and later in Europe, the colonial authorities chose not to impose them upon the Indian subcontinent upon their arrival. Instead, they chose to adopt the existing territorial divisions that had been framed by the Mughals and other local powers. This by itself was one of the biggest differences between the ways in which the Europeans encountered the new territories in America and those in India.

Edney explains in an interview that colonisers in North America paid little attention to indigenous populations. Goettlich echoes similar thoughts

as he says that in America, there was a total lack of recognition of existing polities. “Whereas in India, the British believed they were preserving an existing political situation and replacing the Mughal emperors,” says Goettlich.

Consequently, the colonial strategies of border making drew heavily upon what the Mughals had already done. “Initially, the British were tied to just a few factories within established ports,” says Edney. “Later, as they started expanding, first in the south and then in Bengal, they largely took over the Mughal-derived systems of territorial management.” Even when they did draw lines to separate the major presidencies, it was largely a secondary exercise. The primary territorial divisions were the list of loosely defined districts drawn up by the local powers for taxation purposes.

The other great difference between the American and Indian colonial experience was that the border-making process in the former involved several petty negotiations among the various European powers. In India, on the other hand, apart from minor regions such as Portuguese Goa, the British were, in essence, marking their territories in consultation with the local powers. “One needs to remember that a fundamental aspect about British India was the fact that large parts of South Asia were ruled indirectly by the British, while it continued to remain under the direct authority of the native princes,” Edney argues.

Even when cartographic principles were not being used to draw borders in colonial India, the use of maps was extensive. As Edney notes in his book, *Mapping an Empire*, "Imperial British India was far more dependent on maps than early imperial Rome had ever been." This, he writes, was mainly due to the steady expansion of map literacy in Europe since 1450. Consequently, in India, cartography was used more for gathering information about the subcontinent, rather than for drawing lines.

"The one time that the British could use cartographic logic was the Partition," notes Edney. "But they don't, because the cartographic logic had nothing to do with South Asian governmental logic." The Partition, he says, was mostly based on census data regarding majority Hindu and majority Muslim districts, and thereafter the decision was more about how to apportion these districts so that we have, on one hand, a continuous territory with majority Muslims and another with majority Hindus and Sikhs. The precise borders between these territories remained relatively loose and porous for a long time and were fixed through wars and political negotiations in subsequent years.

Though devoid of cartographic logic, the Partition drew upon the previous colonial practices of imposing linear borders on alien territories. As Branch argues, by the time of the 1947 Partition, political borders were so deeply embedded in

the colonial psyche that there was never going to be a question of whether we draw a line. “The only question was, where do we draw the line?” he says.

And the borders never really disappeared long after colonialism. “It became the way in which we saw the world,” adds Branch.

Those arguing in favour of a bordered world have often stated that these lines of political division have enabled more efficiency in terms of trade and taxation. At the same time, though, territorial borders have given rise to some of the bloodiest conflicts in human history. “Borders,” says Branch, “are a route for violence to emerge that would otherwise not exist.” He adds, “You could not have had that kind of nationalist attachment to territory without this kind of mapped cartographic notion of the world.”



'We blur borders to survive': Life along the India-Bangladesh border

– Nikita Mohta

The Bengal-Bangladesh border, which makes up nearly half of the 4,056 km Indo-Bangladesh border, is distinct from other South Asian borders. Its agrarian landscape, interspersed with multiple waterways, complicates both the nature of the border and the task of guarding it.

Tilak Barman, a woman living in the Dinhata subdivision of Cooch Behar, explains this complexity. "There are some Indian villages, on the border, which are separated from the rest of India by a large water body and surrounded by Bangladeshi

territory," she tells indianexpress.com. One such case is the Indian village of Malopara, located near the Bongaon-Benapol border crossing in West Bengal. Though officially part of India, it is cut off by water. While border guards were posted there, the village was not included in the development programmes. Until the late 20th century, Malopara had no school, no electricity, and no health facilities. "How do you expect a pregnant woman in labour to cross the river and be brought to Indian territory? How do you expect the wounded to wait that long for treatment? Bangladesh is far more accessible," an anguished Barman says.

With inadequate healthcare and limited access to education, people in the Bengal borderland are left to fend for themselves. As bRman puts it: "We blur borders not as an act of rebellion, but as one of survival."

This is the story of the people who inhabit the region, and their negotiation with everyday realities.

A porous border

The Bengal-Bangladesh border stretches across 2,216 km, of which about 1,000 km runs through water. 1,647 km is fenced to control cases of cross-

border criminal activities, smuggling, movement of criminals, and trafficking. However, the fencing is neither continuous nor contiguous. “One of the most difficult international borders to be manned and secured is the Indo-Bangladesh border. Both closed and porous, it defies all established political norms and security measures,” writes researcher Aditi Bhaduri in *Women In Indian Borderlands* (2011).

Author Paula Banerjee adds, “53 rivers run across this entire region, which increases the porosity of the border. There is also a lot of river erosion. So topographically, nature denies this as a border. Because today if you mark it as one, then tomorrow, when the river shifts, the border becomes somewhere else.”

The border also cuts through houses. “So part of a house is on one side of the border, with the rest on the other side,” says Banerjee.

In *A Thousand Tiny Cuts: Mobility and Security Across the Bangladesh-India Borderlands* (2023), author Sahana Ghosh recalls that the border was first drawn as the India-East Pakistan border in 1947, and reestablished with Bangladesh’s liberation in 1971. During the 1971 War, India had opened its side of the border to host millions of Bengalis fleeing genocide. Thereafter, India

and Bangladesh inaugurated an Indo-Bangladesh passport, with visas issued at the local level to facilitate cross-border commuting.

She suggests that, in contrast to the India-Pakistan border, the eastern border is friendly. “The India-Bangladesh border is typically not viewed in exigent frames: it is not a place of territorial disputes (India-China), refugee crises (Bangladesh-Myanmar), or occupation and counterinsurgency (as in Kashmir, Mizoram, or the Chittagong Hill Tracts).” Yet, she notes, it is a heavily militarised border.

The Radcliffe Line

On 30 June 1947, six weeks before British rule ended, the Viceroy of India formed the Bengal Boundary Commission. This Commission had to decide where the new border between India and Pakistan was to be located. Sir Cyril Radcliffe, a British lawyer, was made chairman of the Commission, and the report was to be submitted by mid-August.

The instruction to the Commission was to draw a border that would separate the Muslim inhabitants from the non-Muslims population. They, however, could not agree about the best way forward. The decision was ultimately left to

Radcliffe alone. “Therefore, the Bengal border, more than any other twentieth-century border in the world, can be seen as the creation of a single individual,” writes academic Willem van Schendel in *The Bengal Borderland* (2004).



Cyril Radcliffe (Wikimedia Commons)

“I was so rushed that I had no time to go into the details…What could I do in one and a half months?” Radcliffe had said in an interview.

“The Radcliffe Line did not carve two halves out of the province of Bengal; it made the province fall into four large pieces,” wrote Schendel. The largest of the four was a group of 16 districts at the centre, which became East Bengal, later East Pakistan. Second was the Princely State of Tripura, which would formally merge with the Indian Union in 1949. Third, in the north, was the Princely State of Cooch Behar that joined India in 1950. Finally, to the west was a group of 12 districts that would be named West Bengal.

“In other words,” noted Schendel, “there was no sharp discontinuity between Muslim territory in Pakistan and non-Muslim territory in India… for half of its length, the border cut through areas where the same religious majority (Muslim, Hindu or other) dominated on both sides.” Interestingly, there were even stretches of the border where the Pakistan side was Hindu-dominated and the Indian side Muslim-dominated.

Post-Partition period

Among the man consequences of the Radcliffe Line were the issues of cross-border landholding, trade, and commuting — confusion that descended with the birth of a new nation. “People were terrified,” recalls Barman. “They feared invading armies would

come for their families and break into homes".

Schendel observed that the post-Partition period was awash with rumours of annexation. "Early worries of invasion and annexation faded into the background and a combination of instruments of control turned out to be reasonably successful," he wrote. In the months that followed, both states planned ways to police the border population, controlling cross-border movement, and invoking a sense of patriotism in borderlanders.

Known as border outposts (or BOPs), small camps manned by armed men sprung up in the area to patrol the border line. Over the next two decades, more specialised border security was handed control. Since then, the East Pakistan/ Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) and the Border Security Force (BSF) have been facing each other across the border line.

The role of the forces in controlling the flow of people and goods increased significantly in 1952 when the two states agreed to introduce a system of passports and visas. Until then, despite restrictions on movement of goods and money across the border, people could move freely between East Pakistan and India. "The new system," writes Schendel, "was a rather useful tool for securing the borderland."

Despite increasing surveillance, however, a state of ignorance among the masses continued to prevail. The border not only severed trade routes but also disrupted daily activities. “With the Partition and the Radcliffe Line, the area suddenly became a zone where people could no longer walk freely. From commuters travelling for work, to children attending school on the other side — all of these movements were stopped overnight,” says Banerjee.



The border fence close to the Hili Border station in West Bangladesh (Wikipedia)

Among the many cross-border commuters cited by Schendel were constable Nurun Nabi, whose home was in Murshidabad (India), though he was stationed at Tetulia (then, East Pakistan), and Binay Kumar Das, who was a constable in the intelligence service of Assam, with his home in Sylhet (then, East Pakistan).

Some inhabitants found that the new border sliced through their workplace. This was especially true for those working on the rivers and lakes, where the scarcity of bridges only added to the complexity. “There were other groups of people whose work took them to both sides of the border. Some of these, such as railwaymen, telegraph linemen and people quarrying stones along border rivers..,” added Schendel in his book.

Navigating borders and emotions

While border control helped navigate the chaotic situation, it also added an element of risk and vulnerability in people’s pursuits of meeting basic welfare needs. As Ghosh explains in an interview with *indianexpress.com*, “Imagine wanting to sell your crop as a borderlander, with the price in West Bengal being terrible and a lack of cold storage facilities... What do you do? Of course, you’re going to try to sell in the market where there is a better price, even if that’s in Bangladesh. But that means that you have to hide from the BSF. That means you have to undertake a clandestine crossing, which is criminal”.

Bhaduri, meanwhile, recounts the experience of Parweena Bibi, who lived in Hatkhola village in the Nadia district. “Our fields are on the other

side of the fence, and I tell you what a problem it is for me to tend to them," Bibi told Bhaduri. To go out to the other side, we have to keep our IDs with the border (security) people. When our children go to school, they have to keep their IDs. When my husband goes to tend to the fields, he has to submit the ID."

As a result, the border plots across the districts of Cooch Behar, Lalmonirhat, and Kurigram lay fallow for one or two seasons each year. "Landowners claimed that it is better to leave land fallow than negotiate the multiple kinds of costs that come with farming land that is the target of border security," writes Ghosh, explaining how this pattern has adversely impacted land prices. During a field visit to Jalangi, a village in Murshidabad district of West Bengal, Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, senior fellow, Observer Research Foundation (ORF), witnessed a similar situation. Many villagers depended on cross-border informal trade for their livelihood by selling everyday goods — such as hosiery — into Bangladesh. In an interview with *indianexpress.com*, Chaudhury recalled cautioning locals that such practices were illegal. A villager, however, explained the stark economic logic: "It takes me nearly three hours to reach Behrampur, the district headquarters, to sell goods, and I must also bear the costs of fuel and accommodation.

But Rajshahi, a village across the border in Bangladesh, is only a 30-minute boat ride away. Selling there is far more profitable."

Policy experts like Chaudhury have long argued for regulated mobility frameworks, such as work permits or Free Movement Regimes, to ease the burden on borderlanders. Yet such visions stand in sharp contrast to the present, where securitisation dominates."

Policy experts like Chaudhury have long argued for the introduction of work permits and the establishment of a Free Movement Regime (FMR) to ensure the safe and regulated mobility of people. Yet such vision stands in sharp contrast to the present.

In its 2023-2024 report, the Ministry of Home Affairs said: "In order to prevent illegal migration and illegal activities including anti-national activities from across the border, the Government of India had sanctioned the construction of border fencing with floodlights, in phases. The total length of India-Bangladesh border is 4096.7 km, out of which, 3196.705 km has been covered by physical fencing. The non-physical barrier will be in the form of technological solutions. Old design fences are being replaced with a new design fence."

Drawing the lines

For people living in these areas, “coming of age is very hard,” says Ghosh. “When young men and women go to the district capitals to attend college, they’re perceived as criminals and made fun of. Marrying is also very difficult when you belong to the borderland. “Families of prospective brides in border villages were very keen to find matches *bhitore* or inside, away from the border, but these were elusive…they had to offer substantially larger dowries in cash and kind,” she writes.

The border and its militarisation have disrupted the once-prevailing peace in the region. “The hatred and anger for the other side, in people’s everyday vocabulary, is a strange development. Maybe this is what it means to draw borders,” says Tilak.





The pose and the page: Inside the world of performative reading

– Aishwarya Khosla

On a wet summer evening in New Delhi's Khan Market, the queue inside Faqir Chand Bookstore moves in fits and starts, not because of billing delays, but because customers keep stepping back to capture the perfect shot: a brown paper bag centred in the frame, the faded red-and-yellow storefront behind them, sepia-toned and timeless.

The shop itself is a squeeze. At one end, readers brush past the billing counter, loudly arguing about philosophers, political theory, and the Partition. At the other, perusers, book in hand, pose for pictures, adjusting their smiles beneath

towering stacks of paperbacks.

“Our shop has become like a landmark, a cultural monument for Delhi,” says Abhinav Bamhi, 28, whose family owns the store. “Each day at 11:30 am, when I come to open the store, there are already people waiting. Some have connecting trains from Delhi, and have just stopped by to see the historic store they spotted on Instagram reels.”

Founded in 1931 and relocated to Khan Market in 1951, Faqir Chand claims to be the capital’s oldest surviving bookstore. Instagram has given it a second life. Customers pose and post custom-made totes and postcards against the green foliage that frames the tiny storefront, as if the building itself were an exhibit. Bamhi estimates 80 percent of visitors buy something. “And that is fine. Whether you are here to buy 10 novels or just to take a picture, you are part of the life of this place,” he says.

Many couples meet at the famous landmark for their first date. They tuck into the narrow aisles, pulling out Murakami or Rumi, not necessarily to buy, but to test compatibility, seriousness, or taste.

The aesthetics of reading

This tension, between reading as a private act

and reading as a public performance, has become sharper in the age of Instagram. Books are no longer only consumed; they are staged.

Dr Pranita Matanio, a vitreoretinal fellow at MM Joshi Eye Institute in Karnataka's Hubli, has watched this shift seep into homes. "I know people who have gone and bought entire boxes of second-hand 'intellectual-appearing' books to set up a bookcase," she says. "What is inside no longer matters. It is how it looks in your home, the impression it gives. A coffee mug looks so much nicer with a book and plant beside it, doesn't it?" It is now an aesthetic, an indicator of a certain lifestyle.

Retailers see the same. "People want to be seen reading certain books, or photographed against shelves," he says. "I see people filming themselves even before they enter," says Pankaj P Singh, CEO of Chandigarh-based bookseller and publisher The Browser.

Faking it, then making it

Performative reading — the habit of showcasing books mainly to signal taste or intellect — has become a cultural capital. In an age where reading has become a competitive sport, the focus has shifted from absorbing ideas to broadcasting progress: logging titles, posting artful photos, even skimming AI-generated summaries. The

irony is hard to miss. In trying to look well-read, many bypass reflection, retention, and the application of ideas.



In the age of performative reading, it is not enough to read a book, it must also be staged and posted. (Source: Pinterest)

Shivangi Sinha, a 24-year-old PR executive in Gurgaon, admits she once read performatively. But she isn't the only one. "I've seen friends buy thick philosophy books or award-winning novels they never finish, just to make themselves look a certain way."

“I would carry around titles that looked impressive and post aesthetically pleasing pictures of my ‘current read’ on Instagram. I was not uninterested in books,” she clarifies, “but I cared more about how it made me appear.” Somewhere along the way, though, she began to read. “The books I picked for their looks started to pull me in for their ideas.”

For Singh, this aspirational streak is a net positive. “Out of all the vices you can imagine, buying a book to appear thoughtful is hardly the worst. It at least puts you in aspirational mode. Sometimes pretending to be a reader is the first step toward becoming one.”

Others see less redemption in the trend. Pradipta Mandal, a content researcher and scriptwriter in West Bengal, has catalogued countless instances of performative reading in his circle. “I have seen many people carrying a fancy-looking book in their hands even when they have a backpack,” he says. “They usually have absolutely zero knowledge about the book, but it is the performative action they are after.”

He recalls the frenzy that ensued when Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian* won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2024. “Two of my friends immediately asked me for it. At that time, I did not have a hard copy. Later, when I finally got one, I told them, they couldn’t care less. It wasn’t cool anymore.”

For Singh, this too fits a longer history: “A book has always been a lottery. Long before social media, brilliant authors went unnoticed while weaker books rose. Social media hasn’t changed that probability. It is still maybe two percent, but it has made the world noisier.”

From community to content

Yet not everyone who shares their reading publicly falls into this category. For some, posting online can be a form of accountability, a way to join communities of fellow readers, or simply an entry point into the habit itself.For Kerala-based sisters Anjali S, 32, and Gayatri S, 27, known on Instagram as @bookstersisters, the evolution of performative reading is most visible in Bookstagram itself. Anjali, a doctor now based in Nagpur, was the “book dragon” of the family. “She used to read hundreds of books a year,” Gayatri recalls. “But she had no one to discuss them with, so she basically forced me into reading when I was a kid.” Gayatri, now an IT professional in Chennai, laughs at the memory: “I was a picture-book girl. She wanted a debate partner.”

In 2018, they launched their account as a shared creative outlet. “Back then, Bookstagram felt intimate,” Gayatri said. “Posts were simple — pictures of pages, shelves, or the book you were reading. The captions were long. Comments

turned into discussions. It was organic, and the community felt small and close."

The pandemic changed that. With Instagram pushing video, reels became the currency of visibility. "There was a huge shift," Anjali recalls. "Suddenly, reading was trendy... At first, we were happy. We thought, Wow, more people are discovering books."

But quickly, they saw a new kind of hollowness. "Recommendation posts started flooding the platform, but they did not even make sense," Gayatri says. "\We realised people were just generating lists with AI... There were no reviews, no personal thoughts."

The sisters, who have over 4,000 followers, tried chasing the algorithm themselves. "We attempted reels and trending sounds," Gayatri admits. "But we both have jobs. We're doing this for fun. We realised we couldn't keep up with the number game. So we went back to what we love — honest recommendations."

They have also watched the rise of "performative book clubs," where attendees pay fees not for reading or discussion, but for the photo opportunity. "We know people who don't participate in actual reading groups but post pictures from these paid clubs," Gayatri said. "Sometimes even the so-called 'discussions' are AI-generated."

A cultural phenomenon

Anish Mundra, 27, a PhD scholar at NIT Jalandhar researching screen cultures around Delhi, sees performative reading not just as a fad, but as a cultural phenomenon shaped by media, attention spans, and algorithms. “I think this phenomenon has really saturated public spaces,” he says. “You cannot always tell how much is performative and how much is genuine, but it has definitely grown over the years.”

Mundra traces part of the shift to pop culture. “In the 1990s, a nerd character in Friends or Indian shows like *Hum Paanch* and *Khichdi*, or films like *Main Hoon Na*, were mocked. Glasses and books were signs of being uncool ‘nerds’ or ‘geeks’. But in the 2000s, with shows like *The Big Bang Theory*, suddenly the geek was celebrated. Sheldon became iconic. That shift in representation matters. Add *Instagram*, *TikTok*, and *BookTok*, and reading has turned aspirational.”

Books, he argues, have become social signifiers. “Carrying a book signals depth. It allows others to slot you into categories: existential philosopher, countercultural rebel, romantic idealist. Taste has become shorthand for identity performance.” He adds: “Now, books are props in the theatre of self.”

Still, he sees value in the trend. “Depth is scarce in a world of endless shows and surface-level

content. So even when people carry books as props, they're at least gesturing toward depth. That counts for something."

Not all argue. Rana Preet Gill, author of *The Ghadar Movement: A Forgotten Struggle* (Penguin Viking), draws a sharp line between readers and performers. "I think people who truly read never actually pose with books," she says. "For me, reading is therapy. Real readers do not seek external validation. They read for the pure joy and thrill of discovering something new, not for likes and comments."

Coping, branding, survival

Aditi Kumar, consultant psychologist and expressive arts therapist at Artemis Hospitals, sees performative reading as a coping mechanism in an anxious, validation-driven society. "Reading is becoming the new trending attractive bit in the sense of who you are as a person," she says.

For her, the phenomenon is a blend of insecurity and the hunger for relevance. "We haven't found meaning in ourselves, so we are finding meaning in external validation. Social media makes it easy to create content that looks deep enough. You can even ask AI to summarise a novel. The information is there, but adding aesthetics and your own voice makes it appear more profound. It gives the illusion of depth."



Why the iPhone Air could be a confusing choice for Indian customers

– Nandagopal Rajan

While the ultra-thin iPhone Air gained all the eyeballs at the Apple event on September 9, the fact is that this could be the start of something new for Apple, as well as the smartphone industry. For Apple, this new iPhone is coming in place of the iPhone Plus models that have been in vogue for years. But unlike those larger iPhones, this one also offers access to the Pro processor range of Apple silicon.

While Apple thinks the phone will cater to those who need a thin and light iPhone with Pro features, the device puts it in a strange position, especially in price-conscious markets like India.

Consumers will ask if this is a larger iPhone or a cheaper iPhone Pro. But when compared to basic iPhones, this has just one camera, though the price is more than the regular iPhone. Then this will be catering to those who want a more powerful and slim device, but are not really too bothered by its camera capabilities.

Ranjit Atwal, Gartner's Senior Director Analyst based in UK, said he did not think the iPhone Air is targeted at India, "especially given the price and compromise on camera". "Yes, it's confusing, especially given they didn't promote the pro chip with AI use cases," he said in response to emailed questions, adding that this is, however, a growing requirement for pocketable smartphones and "this is meeting that need".

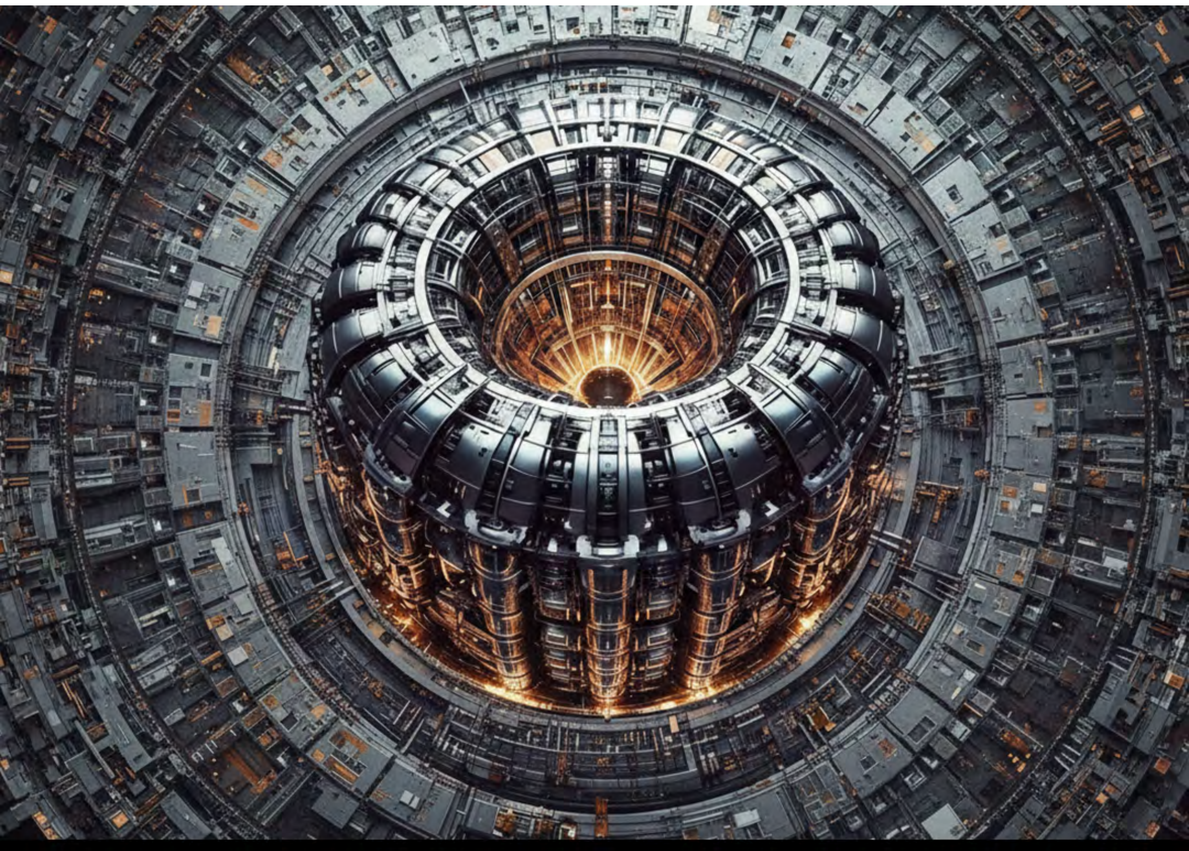
Francisco Jeronimo, Vice-President EMEA, Devices (Data & Analytics) at research firm IDC, said this is not the start of a new segment, but targets the same market as previous Plus models. Positioned between the standard iPhone and Pro versions, this follows the pattern established with Air versions of MacBook and iPad, he told indianexpress.com.

"The key difference from Plus models is that the distinct visual design creates stronger purchase motivation. Previous Plus models struggled because older Pro generations offered better specs at similar prices. Air offers differentiated aesthetics and form factor innovation," he explained.

There is a possibility of a new emerging set of users who need more computing power on a device, especially for AI workflows. Along with design-conscious buyers prioritising aesthetics over advanced features, Jeronimo too said there could be those who “want more than standard iPhone offers when upgrading”.

In markets like India, he agreed that the single camera limitation may impact adoption and “creates perception of downgrade despite ‘Pro-level’ positioning. The iPhone 17 (256 GB) is priced in India at Rs 82,900, while the iPhone Air (256 GB) costs almost Rs 40,000 more at Rs 1,19,900. This is just Rs 15,000 less than the iPhone 17 Pro (256 GB) offering three professional-grade cameras. This is why Jeronimo agrees that the iPhone Air pricing may be “too high for mass market adoption”.

This could trigger more competition from Chinese brands offering similar thin designs at $300-400 price points. The Tecno Pova ultra-thin model has a design comparable to the iPhone Air and Galaxy S25 Edge, but at a fraction of the price. “Chinese vendors are likely to capture the thin phone market in price-sensitive regions,” Jeronimo said, adding that the iPhone Air is, however. likely to succeed in premium markets like US and Northern Europe.



Bottling the Sun: Why nuclear fusion is now an engineering challenge

– *Shravan Hanasoge*

For millennia, humans looked up at the Sun in awe and reverence. Ancient civilizations worshipped it as a god, prayed for its warmth, and feared its eclipse. The source of its eternal fire remained a mystery. That mystery was solved in 1939, when physicist Hans Bethe revealed how the Sun, and billions of other stars, truly shines: through nuclear fusion, the merging of hydrogen nuclei into helium at unimaginable pressures and temperatures.

Science had at last given an answer to what had once seemed divine, solving a thousands-

year-old mystery. Bethe was reported as saying that he hit upon the answer by looking through the periodic table step by step. “So you see,” he said, “this was a discovery by persistence, not by brains.”

Every second, our Sun fuses about 600 million tons of hydrogen into helium, releasing a flood of light and heat that sustains life on Earth. This process — nuclear fusion — is nature’s ultimate energy source. Under the Sun’s immense pressure and temperatures of around 15 million degrees Celsius, hydrogen nuclei overcome their natural repulsion and merge, releasing energy because a small amount of mass is converted into pure energy.

Einstein’s equation E = m c^2 tells us why fusion is so powerful: even a tiny loss of mass corresponds to a vast gain in energy. In fact, a single glass of seawater, if its hydrogen were fully fused, would contain enough potential energy to power a city for a day.

The human quest for stellar fire

For nearly a century, scientists have dreamed of recreating this stellar fire on Earth. In the 1950s, laboratories began pursuing two main strategies:

- Magnetic confinement (tokamaks), which use powerful magnetic fields to hold plasma in a doughnut-shaped chamber.

- Inertial confinement, where lasers blast tiny fuel pellets, compressing them to extreme temperatures and pressures.

But fusion on Earth is even harder than in the Sun. Without the Sun's crushing gravity, experiments must reach temperatures over 100 million degrees Celsius. As one physicist put it, "containing plasma is like trying to bottle lightning."

Why is fusion so hard to contain?

The challenge of fusion is not in making the reaction happen — it's in keeping it under control. To fuse nuclei, hydrogen gas must be turned into plasma, a special state of matter where atoms are stripped of their electrons, leaving behind a hot, electrically charged soup of nuclei and free electrons. Plasma is not solid, liquid, or gas; it's closer to a living flame, constantly shifting and unstable.

At fusion conditions, the plasma must be heated to over 100 million degrees Celsius. No material container on Earth can withstand that; it would vaporize instantly. Instead, scientists must hold the plasma without touching it — either with powerful magnetic fields that bend the particles into a looping path, or with lasers that compress a fuel pellet for a fleeting moment.

The problem is that plasma is inherently restless. It writhes and twists like boiling water, develops

turbulence, and constantly tries to escape. In magnetic systems, if the plasma touches the reactor walls, it cools and the reaction fizzles. In laser systems, even the slightest asymmetry in the squeeze causes the pellet to blow apart before ignition.

This is why fusion has taken so long: not because the physics is unknown (hydrogen bombs prove fusion works), but because doing it in a controlled, continuous, and useful way is a monumental engineering challenge. As one scientist joked, “We’re not trying to make the Sun. We’re trying to make the Sun sit still inside a bottle.”

Breakthroughs in fusion experiments

Despite the challenges, progress has been steady. In 2022, researchers at the U.S. National Ignition Facility announced a landmark result: for the first time, a fusion experiment produced more energy than the lasers required to spark it, a milestone known as “ignition.”

The mood in the lab that morning was electric. As dawn broke over California, word spread that the data showed a true net gain. Exhausted scientists, many of whom had spent their entire careers chasing this milestone, popped champagne at 3 a.m. One veteran reportedly remarked, “I can finally retire knowing we lit a star in a lab.” It wasn’t yet practical power, but it was proof of principle — and a vindication of decades of perseverance.

Meanwhile, ITER, a massive international project in southern France, is building the world's largest tokamak, aiming to demonstrate sustained net energy gain in the 2030s. Around it, a growing network of researchers continues to chip away at problems in materials, superconducting magnets, and plasma stability.

Commercial ventures in fusion

For decades, fusion was the realm of government labs and global collaborations. But in recent years, commercial ventures have entered the race, reflecting growing confidence that fusion may eventually leave the lab. These companies are experimenting with smaller, more flexible designs, often using advanced magnets or alternative confinement methods.

Bill Gates, through his Breakthrough Energy initiative, has backed several fusion efforts, seeing the technology as a long-term climate solution. Other private investors and public–private partnerships have also joined in. None of these ventures yet produce electricity, and practical power plants remain years away, but the shift is important: fusion is no longer seen only as a scientific experiment, but as a technology with potential commercial pathways.

If achieved, fusion would be a revolution in energy. Its fuels — isotopes of hydrogen like deuterium and tritium — are abundant, found in seawater and lithium. Unlike nuclear fission, fusion leaves

behind no long-lived radioactive waste, and there is no risk of runaway meltdowns. Its main byproduct is helium, an inert and harmless gas.

The British astrophysicist Sir Arthur Eddington, who first proposed in 1920 that stars shine through fusion, once asked: “What appliance can contain such prodigious energies as those which supply the Sun?”

A century later, humanity is closer than ever to answering his question.

The road ahead for fusion

Fusion is not here yet. But the dream is moving from physics journals into engineering blueprints. Each advance — whether in giant projects like ITER, in national labs, or in cautious commercial ventures — brings us closer to the day when humanity might light its cities with the same fire that fuels the stars.

The challenge is immense, but so is the reward: a clean, safe, and virtually limitless power source for a planet in desperate need of one. Bottling a star is no longer just poetry. It is an engineering problem waiting to be solved.

(Shravan Hanasoge is an astrophysicist at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research)



How Mammootty taught generations of men to cry

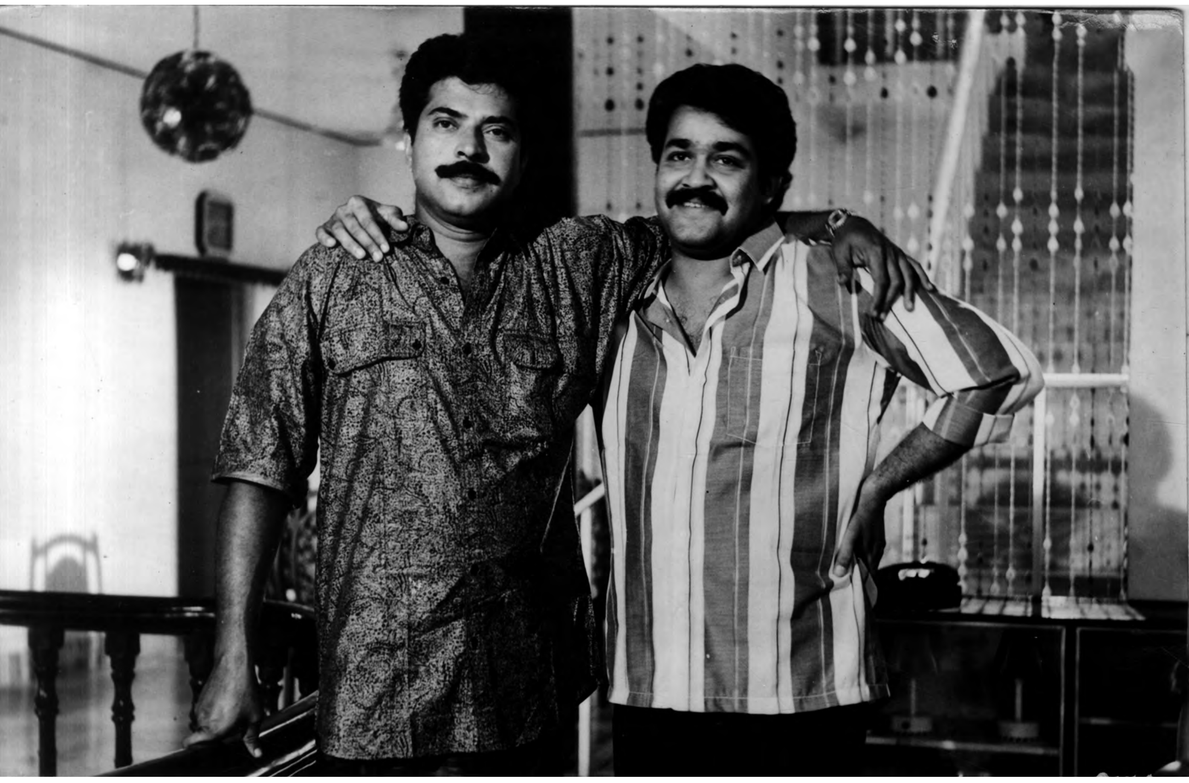
– *Anandu Suresh*

Upon being taunted by police officers after revealing that the Rs 3 lakh in his possession is for the treatment of a little girl unrelated to him, Balachandran (Mammootty) reminds them that they shouldn't disrespect a commoner who has approached the station seeking help. Smack! A blow lands across his face from one of the khaki-clad giants. In the subsequent moments in *Kaiyoppu* (2007), we get to see not only the soul of Balachandran but also why Mammootty is often regarded as the GOAT.

Unlike the many hypermasculine characters the Malayalam megastar has played over the years, Balachandran here is an altruist, even a simpleton at times. While his fear — mirroring that of every average person — at being in the police station is evident from the start, his body language upon receiving the slap also suggests this may be the first time he has received a physical blow. He loses balance and staggers, needing assistance from another cop to walk away. In his intense monologue, a minute later, Mammootty also showcases the intricacies of voice acting, demonstrating brilliantly how to play with the sensation of a 'lump in the throat', thus communicating different levels of sadness and desperation with finesse.

Legendary director Fazil, who has delivered several classics with both iconic thespians, once observed that, among the two, Mammootty is a better actor than Mohanlal. He reasoned that if Mammootty, despite his many shortcomings and limited skill set, managed to hold his own against Mohanlal, a jack of many trades, then the former is undoubtedly the better actor. It's doubtful if anyone else has summarised their careers, talents, and the unofficial 'clash of the titans' going on between them for the past four decades in a more profound way.

Although Mammootty has long been hailed for his beauty, physique, and mannerisms, which have positioned him as the poster boy for Malayali masculinity, he does have many limitations as an actor. Several things that come naturally to Mohanlal, including comedy, dance, and action, don't come as easily to Mammootty. His lack of physical flexibility, probably accentuated by his decades-old leg injury, is also a significant shortcoming for the actor.



Fazil observed that if Mammootty, despite his many shortcomings and limited skill set, managed to hold his own against Mohanlal, a jack of many trades, then the former is undoubtedly the better actor. (Express archive photo)

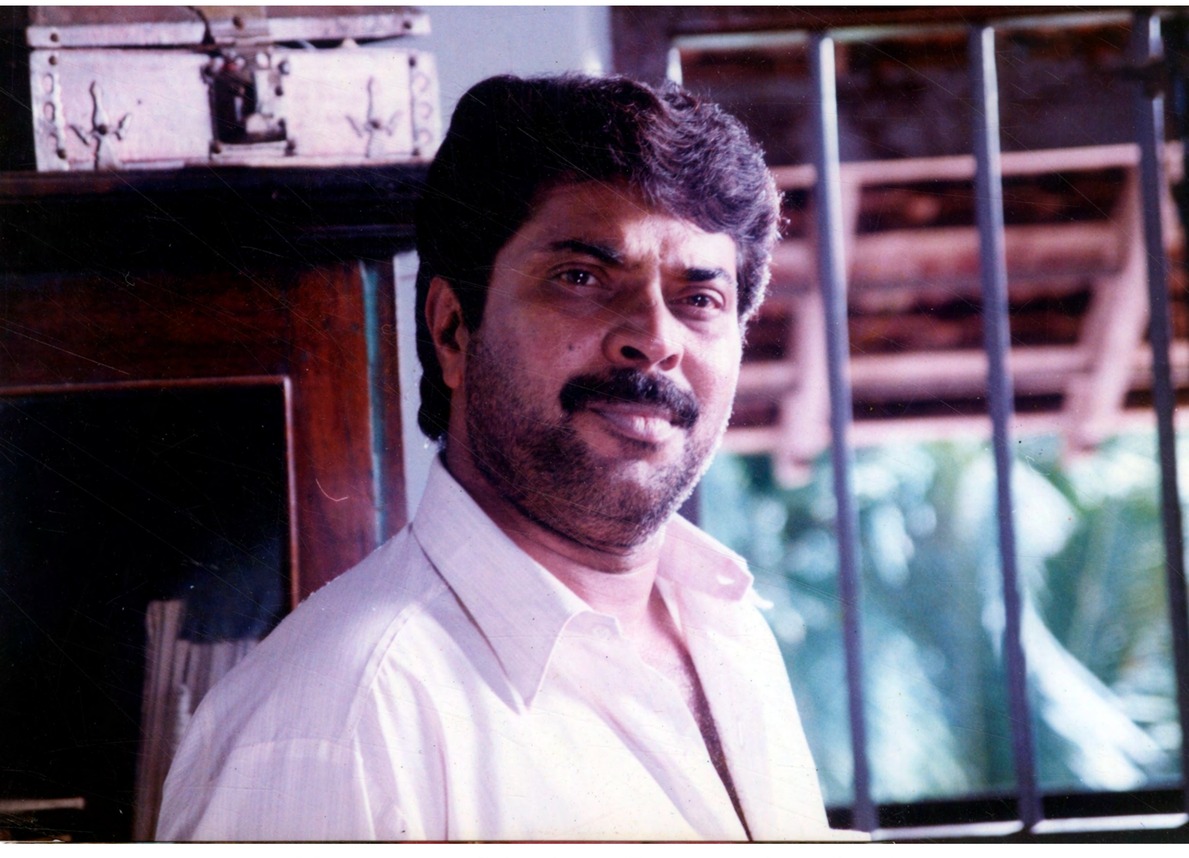
Despite all these challenges, Mammootty has managed to stand toe to toe with Mohanlal for the past four decades, and that is the result of sheer hard work. "I am not a so-called born actor," he has often stated. The brilliance of Mammootty is that he has only rarely made

the audience feel this. “If I put in the effort and keep polishing my skills, I can shine brighter,” he once said during an interview. The 74-year-old thespian has done this without fail all these years, thus placing himself as one of the finest actors in Indian cinema, with three National Film Awards for Best Actor to his name — the second-most by any Indian actor, a record he shares with Kamal Haasan and Ajay Devgn.

Among the many skills that Mammootty has acquired over the years is his ability to effortlessly portray emotional scenes, conveying vulnerability and thus striking a chord with audiences. Much like the moment in Kaiyoppu, there are several instances where Mammootty delivered outstanding performances in tearful scenes, moving the audience. The beauty of his portrayals lies in the fact that he never goes out of character for dramatic effect to add an extra layer of sorrow, even though this might create a greater impact on the audience. Instead, he sticks to the right meter, expressing intense emotions with minimal expressions — sometimes through his quivering voice, twitches on his face, or simply by shedding or withholding a tear — completely based on the character’s nature and the emotional weight of the moment.

Take, for instance, his performance as Captain

Thomas in cinema legend P Padmarajan's *Koodevide* (1983). While Mammootty brilliantly maps his character's emotional arc from start to finish, the restrained way he expresses his grief is particularly noteworthy. The only instance where he resorts to loud expressions is when the brake of his jeep has snapped and is about to ram Ravi (Rahman), whom he had been chasing with the vehicle. Immediately afterwards, Mammootty denies Thomas the luxury of shedding even a tear, thus emphasising the remorse the rigid Army officer feels towards himself. Although Padmarajan, being a meticulous director, would have given clear instructions to Mammootty, the actor's ability to pull this off highlights his growth as an actor, in contrast to his initial caricatured performances.



Mammootty in Sukrutham. (Express archive photo)

In the emotional moments in movies like *Aa Raathri, Kanamarayathu, Ente Upasana, Adiyozhukkukal, Aalkkoottathil Thaniye, Thinkalaazhcha Nalla Divasam,* and *Anubandham*, too, Mammootty manages to dive deep into the characters' souls and extract their raw emotions with precision. He does not rely on his stock skills but treats each role as unique, striving to bring out its nuances. Even in tearful moments, Mammootty's performances do not strike similarities; instead, he manages to reveal the essence of the character he's portraying and the absoluteness of its predicament. By adding a layer of helplessness to the character's emotions and a shade of innocence and contrition in his eyes, he hits the audience square in the chest, moving them to tears. From *Nirakkoottu, Yathra,* and *Poovinu Puthiya Poonthennal* to *Thaniyavarthanam, Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha,* and *Mahayanam*, his ability to portray emotional moments while staying true to the respective characters shines brightly.

On the other hand, in movies like *Kottayam Kunjachan*, where a bit of humour needs to be blended with the tears, or *Aavanazhi* and Inspector Balram, where the tears should be in constant conflict with the toxic masculinity of the roles, Mammootty magically brings forth a brilliant mix of everything. Even when characters have condemnable traits, Mammootty's intense and

anchored performances ensure that we too feel for these people when they are at their emotional lowest. Yet, the cries of Antony (*Kauravar*), Putturumees (*Soorya Manasam*), Achootty (*Amaram*), Devaraj (*Thalapathi*), Balachandran (*Pappayude Swantham Appoos*), Narasimha Mannadiyar (*Dhruvam*), Meledathu Raghvan Nair (*Vatsalyam*), Ravishankar (*Sukrutham*), Sanker Das (*Azhakiya Ravanan*), Madhavan Kutty (*Hitler*), Ravindranath (*Arayannagalude Veedu*), Arackal Madhavanunni (*Valyettan*), Major Bala (*Kandukondain Kandukondain*) or Amudhavan (*Peranbu*) do not appear the same as the actor knows well when to make his characters weep, whimper, sob, or wail.

With no dear ones by his side and an image as the tough guy, Sathyaprathapan in *Chronic Bachelor* (2003) has forgotten how to cry, and in such moments, Mammootty shows him immediately becoming awkward and pulling back into his cocoon, as he doesn't know how to express his emotions. However, in *Kaazhcha*, we see the actor as Madhavan, a man who has no shame in showing his vulnerable side. His bond with Pawan (Yash Gawli) is, in fact, held together by tears; and as he pleads with the authorities for the boy's custody towards the end of the film, Mammootty ensures that not a single audience member leaves with dry eyes.



Mammootty in Sagaram Sakshi. (Express archive photo)

In *Thommanum Makkalum, Rappakal,* and *Rajamanikyam*, on the other hand, he showcases three different cries from three distinct uneducated rural characters. Whether in *Karutha Pakshikal, Palunku,* or *Ore Kadal*, he ensures that the tears belong to the characters and not to him. As Fahadh Faasil once rightly pointed out, in *Big B* (2007), Mammootty demonstrates the art of crying without actually showing himself to cry through his conscious half-successful efforts to hide his tears.

While he delivers a more expressive performance in *Varsham*, in tune with the film's tone, he demonstrates in *Unda* that the depth of sorrow and humiliation can be conveyed through subtle shifts in voice modulation without resorting to extremes. Even as he portrays Luke Antony's (*Rorschach*) tears turning him into a vengeance machine, Mammootty brilliantly differentiates

between the emotional lows of James and Sundaram in *Nanpakal Nerathu Mayakkam*, based on their socio-economic backgrounds as well.

One of the greatest, though indirect, 'advantages' Mammootty has always received is being widely regarded as the Valyettan (Elder Brother) of the Malayalam film industry. In a culture where men are raised to believe that "boys don't cry", seeing on screen a figure revered as the unofficial yet bona fide patriarch may have also been subconsciously influencing audiences, prompting them to empathise with Mammootty's emotional expressions immediately. Regardless, just as the many shades of laughter he has portrayed have sparked discussions, his tears also deserve equal recognition as the megastar has delivered a unique cry for nearly every shade of character he has taken on.



Why Janhvi Kapoor's Param Sundari revives cross-language casting debate

– Cris

Actors have, since the beginning of Indian cinema, hopped borders, crossed over to work in films that spoke languages other than their own. No one seemed to mind that the first actress (Sharadha) to win the National Award for a Malayalam film came from Andhra Pradesh. The very essence of acting was, after all, pretence — why not go all the way and adopt a foreign tongue?

Back then, dubbing artists became the voice of the non-native actor. When time passed and methods changed, more films embraced the authenticity of the voice and insisted on every actor dubbing for herself. But filmmakers did not always enforce authenticity in casting. A Tamil actor played Malayali and flaunted a broken, in-

between language, a Bollywood actress played Tamilian and stuck to accented Hindi, and at least two Hindi actors tried to pass off as Malayalis in recent years and succumbed to stereotypes.

Why Param Sundari missed the mark

In the last two weeks, Param Sundari has received the maximum flak a film could, for its portrayal of the Malayali heroine, stereotyped in every single way a Malayali woman could be, and given the voice of an actor who could not pronounce the name of her character right. Thekkepaatil Sundari – mispronounced 'Thekkapetta' Sundari – in Janhvi Kapoor's broken Malayalam, became the perfect tool for trolls that have not stopped even after the film came out and got critiqued for more reasons than mere miscasting.

When Janhvi pronounced the name as 'Thekkapetta' and put 'Sundari' next to it, it translated to 'betrayed beautiful woman' in Malayalam slang. 'Thekkuka' is slang for betrayal, and 'thekkapetta' would mean 'the one betrayed'. It did not help the film that the term has, in recent years, taken on a misogynistic flavour, used mostly by men to derogate women who broke up with them.

Social media influencers had a field day, dressing themselves into caricatures of the Malayali stereotype the film projected – women with Rapunzel hair [wigs], saying they prefer Mohiniyattam costumes at home, insisting on

wearing jasmine flowers before going to the restroom, and carrying coconuts in their hands at all times. Imagination ran wild. Many asked seriously, why could they not cast a Malayali to play a Malayali, so that it would be her Hindi which might be flawed, and not the other way around.

Accent is no barrier, caricature is

Authenticity is often the compromise that filmmakers make to get the actors of their liking into films of another language. In Malayalam cinema, after Sharadha, came a series of actors from other states who not only played the native woman but also won admirers for passing off as one — Zarina Wahab, Sumalatha, and even Sridevi (late actor and Janhvi's mother) were household names for the audience. The only difference was that their stories were authentic — written by Malayalis — and their voices, dubbed, unless they played the non-Malayali.

The practice was not limited to women. Senior male actors like Amol Palekar, Om Puri, Naseeruddin Shah, and Anupam Kher played Malayali men, struggling to pick the nuances but making convincing portrayals of their characters. Mammootty and Mohanlal comfortably transformed into unforgettable Tamil characters. Shah Rukh Khan admirably pulled off his Tamil debut in Hey Ram. Skills overcame differences, as long as the representation was paid heed to, and the culture was respected.

Tamil cinema welcomed Simran, a Mumbai-born Punjabi, another Mumbaikar Jyothika, and the Malayali Nayanthara as their top heroines for years on end. Dubbing helped until some of them learnt the language well enough to give voice to their characters. Hindi cinema, too, threw the doors open for several South Indian actors, including Rekha, Sridevi, and Deepika Padukone, who learnt or knew Hindi. Bollywood even extended patience to British actor Katrina Kaif with her accent.

Casting other-language actors needn't be a frowned-upon practice, especially in times that more and more borders are drawn to separate man from man. You only need to write around it. Years ago, when Tamil actor Bhagyaraj played a Palakkad Malayali, it was forgiven since Palakkad belonged to both Malayalis and Tamilians. Or remember when Mani Rathnam played it smart, casting the Shimla-born Preity Zinta as Shah Rukh Khan's Malayali fiancée? He kept the Malayalam only in the intro of a song, and with Preity calling her dad 'Acha' – a word used in Hindi and Malayalam, to mean 'good' in one, and 'father' in the other.

It is when the characters look like caricatures of a state or its people that the audience takes offence. In The Kerala Story – a film much critiqued for its poor portrayal of the state – Shalini Unnikrishnan, the Malayali heroine, is a template of the cliche that Malayalis are reduced to. Unsurprisingly, she has the ground-sweeping

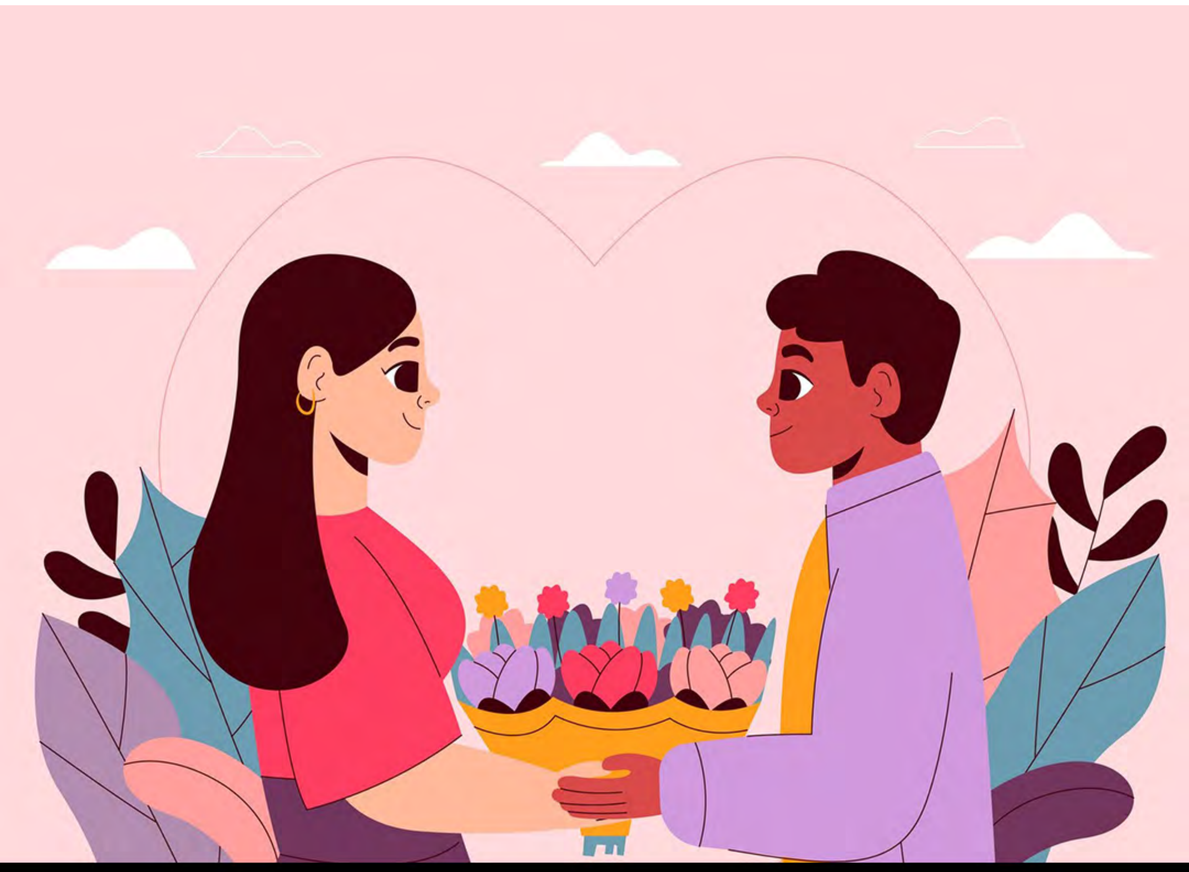
hair, and of course, the string of jasmines on them, kasavu (golden-bordered) sarees and skirts, and spends her leisure time dancing with kathakali performers. But the bigger misrepresentation was the butchering of the language.

Tamil speakers were not happy with the “Lungi Dance” or Deepika Padukone’s portrayal of the quintessential Tamil girl in Chennai Express. Neither was Alia Bhatt’s portrayal of the Tamil bride in Two States taken well.

Let’s not forget, even native speakers have been accused of butchering the language. At one point, faking an accent and pretending to know little of one’s mother tongue was considered ‘cool’. The trend was critiqued even within the movies. In Thenali, Kamal Haasan famously mocked an anchor’s anglicised Tamil, capturing the absurdity of such “stylish” practices, as he called them.

Lines, therefore, needn’t and shouldn’t be drawn between languages or states. Let’s hope our writers and filmmakers will keep the doors open while they scout for cast, but create convincing portrayals, and keep out the stereotypes, unless it is to satirise.

Cris is a freelance writer



The 'princess treatment' in modern dating

– Swarupa Tripathy

Do you enjoy being a "passenger princess"? Or perhaps you appreciate a partner who picks up the bill on the first date, opens doors for you, or surprises you with flowers?

Sowmya P, 22, described the first experience of someone opening a door for her as "magical". That simple gesture introduced her to the world of "princess treatment" — the practice of showering a partner, often a woman, with lavish attention, gifts, and care. "I realised what I'd been missing, those little gestures that make you feel truly special."

This concept isn't new. Traditionally, men

were expected to provide, and women were expected to receive. But with women today being independent and educated, many insist they don't need such gestures. Yet paradoxically, the old idea has returned, rebranded and embraced by both genders.

But beneath the Pinterest-worthy gestures lies a complex web of expectations, dependencies, and evolving gender dynamics reshaping how young Indians approach love.

Redefining romance

"Princess treatment, to me, means making a woman feel special through thoughtful gestures," explained Jaideep Mitra, 30. "It's romantic generosity when it's genuine. But if it turns into an expectation, it creates pressure and loses sincerity," he told indianexpress.com.

For Kailasa Vaishnavi, 25, it extends beyond material gestures. She says that it's not about luxury or being put on a pedestal. "It's when someone is attentive, listens, and makes you feel valued without you having to ask for it."

Counselling psychologist Sumithra Sridhar believes Gen Z has latched on to the idea because it fills a communication gap. "Most haven't seen their parents articulate needs in healthy ways. Princess treatment is essentially one partner saying, 'I want to feel cared

for,' and the other responding," she notes.

Digital amplification

Dating apps have fuelled the trend. Ravi Mittal, founder and CEO of QuackQuack, said, "Mentions of princess treatment are rising — and it's not limited to women." He has observed that men also want to be pampered, and women love when partners are confident enough to say so. "Times are changing, and gender roles, too."

He also spilled the beans on the profile trends he noticed: "There's a lot of 'spoil me' and sometimes a little louder, 'I know my worth' bios. They are mostly playful demands, but also a subtle indication that chivalry is expected and appreciated." The algorithms actively facilitate these connections, pushing users toward matches who fit the "treat me well" category.

The psychological impact

Psychotherapist Sakshi Mandhyan warned that while constant admiration can boost self-esteem, "over time, it may also create dependency, making people rely on external validation."

Hiteshree M Dudani, co-founder of Moon Minds, has seen this play out, stating that many women "begin to rely on their partners for things they were perfectly capable of doing before. They still can, but may start

doubting themselves without checking in first."

For those with past relationship trauma and low self-worth, the effect can be heightened. "At first, it feels healing," Dudani said, adding, "but if the care suddenly changes, they may internalise it as their fault."

Sowmya resonated with this. She told indianexpress.com, "It makes me feel cherished — but at times, also emotionally dependent. In the beginning, that dependence can be scary."

When romance becomes control



The meaning of princess treatment shifts across contexts. (Source: Freepik)

The line between care and control is thin. "If gestures are conditional or transactional, they become tools of control," warned Mandhyan. Vaishnavi has experienced this: "Sometimes it comes with hidden strings, like expecting you to

be less assertive or return the kindness in ways that serve them more."

Beyond traditional gender roles

The meaning of princess treatment shifts across contexts. Mittal observed geographic differences. "For urban users, it is more playful and to a large extent, asserting, 'this or nothing.' And for small-town daters, it is not so much a matter of self-worth; gestures are linked to genuine love and care. 'Princess treatment' equals 'this one is serious'," she said.

For queer individuals, the concept takes unique dimensions. Mannika, a community member, opened up about this, explaining, "It is a privilege that was perhaps invisible due to our own invisible, rather unaccepted, identities till late 2018. So, I think princess treatment at the time of dating would be amazing — that means we can do things for each other, openly, that we perhaps couldn't do as a couple."

However, she also warned that if the onus of giving the princess treatment always falls on one partner, it can take the individuals who are dating or in a relationship to extreme adherence to conventional heteronormative gender roles. They prefer being "with a Muggle (commoner), because they're magical (and royal) in their own ways!"

The challenge of reciprocity

Balance is key. According to Mitra, reciprocation doesn't mean matching gestures one-to-one. "It's about understanding emotional needs and responding with care."

Dudani challenged gendered assumptions, stressing that conversations around 'princess treatment' often focus on how it makes women feel in heterosexual relationships. "But this assumes women need more care than men, which is both sexist and limiting. Men also enjoy being cared for and given the 'prince treatment'."

Vaishnavi has found her balance. For her, the magic is in reciprocity. "I love romantic gestures, but I also make sure I'm showing up for my partner in ways that matter to them." That way, she believes that no one's just performing care; "it becomes a shared experience."

The role of social media

Platforms can distort expectations and create unrealistic benchmarks. Sridhar said, "Extravagant proposal or anniversary videos create pressure to perform romance in ways that might not match one's values or lifestyle."

Setting healthy boundaries

Experts stressed that communication,

transparency and reciprocity are key. “Couples should discuss what these gestures mean to each of them, agree on mutual respect as the foundation, and ensure that affection is not used as a bargaining tool,” said Mandhyan.

Sridhar advocated viewing such treatment as “a part of the relationship, rather than define it.” Sowmya has set clear boundaries, “For example, if I’m treated to an expensive restaurant, I make it clear, both to myself and my partner, that it doesn’t set an expectation for every future date.”

Is this a sign of regression?

Mittal noted it as cultural evolution, mentioning, “It’s no longer about men buying chocolates after a fight. The onus of making their partner feel special is not on one gender solely.”

Yet concerns remain. “Healthy ‘princess treatment’ is about appreciation, not entitlement. It helps to identify and nurture the warm, sustainable middle ground between the lows of bare minimum effort and the highs of constant pampering,” Mandhyan said, adding, “When both partners feel valued and respected, such treatment becomes a source of shared joy rather than imbalance.”

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