The Indian EXPRESS
April 2026 Issue

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THREATS. TALKS. REPEAT

The Indian EXPRESS

THIS ISSUE

- COVER : THREATS. TALKS. REPEAT

Dear Reader,

This month's cover story looks at a conflict looping on itself. The United States and Iran continue to oscillate between threats and negotiations, trapped by clashing aims and a deep trust deficit. We explain why neither side seems able to step off this treadmill. We also trace India's long, layered ties with Iran — from shared linguistic roots in Avestan and Sanskrit, to Persian's imprint on Bengal, and the merchants who helped make Hormuz a medieval trade hub.

Away from geopolitics, this issue pays tribute to Asha Bhosle, the legend whose voice broke many a silence.

Elsewhere, we report on Chennai's muralists edged out by digital campaigning, the rise of AI-mediated conversations, the quiet erosion of friendships, and the uneasy truth about owning your digital books.

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US-Iran diplomatic road long, ‘grand bargain’ goal

by C. Raja Mohan

As Washington and Tehran inch towards a second round of negotiations, the idea of a “grand bargain” is very much at the centre of the complex diplomatic dynamic between the two sides. For two adversaries locked in intense and seemingly irreversible hostility since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the very articulation of such an ambition marks a significant shift.

Yet the fragility of the moment is evident. Confusion over the opening

and closing of the Strait of Hormuz; arguments over rival blockades; US President Donald Trump's optimism Tuesday (April 21) about a "great deal," and his threats to attack Iran's infrastructure if Tehran doesn't agree; and the questions very late into this evening over Iranian participation underline the deep mistrust that continues to shadow the talks. If even preliminary coordination remains so contested, the path to a comprehensive settlement will be arduous.

The Trump administration, however, appears committed to thinking big. Vice President J D Vance, expected to leave for a second round of talks in Pakistan soon, has publicly framed the negotiations not as incremental diplomacy but as the quest for a "grand bargain" — an effort to secure a decisive, system-shaping agreement. The objective is expansive: a comprehensive settlement that trades limits on Iran's nuclear programme and regional posture for full economic normalisation and reintegration into the global system.

This ambition departs sharply from the logic of the 2015 nuclear deal, which was deliberately narrow and technocratic. That agreement sought to cap Iran's nuclear capabilities but did not address the broader sources of geopolitical conflict between Washington and Tehran, or the interests of US allies neighbouring Iran. The emerging framework now aims at broadening the settlement.

In its essence, the proposed bargain is sweeping. Iran would accept stringent and verifiable constraints on its nuclear programme, potentially including a rollback of enrichment levels, tighter inspection regimes, and limits on stockpiles of highly enriched uranium. More consequentially, Tehran would be expected to recalibrate its regional strategy — reducing support for non-state armed groups and scaling back its influence across theatres such as Gaza, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen.

In return, the United States would move towards dismantling its long-standing

and massive sanctions architecture against Iran. This would involve lifting both primary and secondary sanctions, unfreezing Iranian financial assets, and facilitating Tehran's return to global energy markets and financial networks. The end goal is not merely arms control, but a broader economic and political normalisation.

Recent reports suggest that both sides are exploring steps that will allow each to claim early gains while preserving leverage for subsequent stages. This, of course, is easier said than done. Powerful veto-wielders in both capitals can nix many elements of the proposed grand bargain.

Internal divisions in both Washington and Tehran help generate mixed signals, weaken negotiating credibility, and undermine the entire process. Any movement towards a grand bargain is likely to be in clearly defined stages.

The most plausible pathway begins with a political understanding — a broad

memorandum outlining principles of de-escalation, mutual recognition, and the desired end-state. This would then be followed by detailed technical negotiations on nuclear verification, sanctions relief, and regional security, with carefully calibrated sequencing.

Even here, the challenges are formidable. Verification of nuclear commitments, though complex, falls within the competence of established international mechanisms. Far more difficult is the question of regional behaviour. Measuring and enforcing limits on influence exercised through non-state actors presents a conceptual and operational challenge that diplomacy has rarely resolved successfully.

Sequencing remains another major obstacle. Iran will demand credible and front-loaded sanctions relief to justify concessions; the United States will insist on demonstrable compliance before relinquishing economic leverage. Bridging this gap will require a finely

balanced process of reciprocal steps, with built-in safeguards against backsliding.

Despite all the challenges, the logic of a grand bargain persists. After decades of coercion, confrontation, and failed incrementalism, both sides are confronting the limits of their current strategies. Although the obstacles are substantial, and the risks of failure high, the fact that Washington and Tehran may sit down for another round of talks is a cause for modest optimism.

(C. Raja Mohan is a contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express)

Why US and Iran are stuck in the threats-talks circle

by Bashir Ali Abbas

US President Donald Trump has announced that US representatives will be in Islamabad on April 20, and if Iran does not take the “very fair and reasonable deal” being offered, the US would “knock out every single Power Plant, and every single Bridge, in Iran.” Iran did not immediately confirm participation.

The first round of negotiations last weekend did not lead to an agreement. Statements from both sides have since shown they are stuck in a quagmire of

differing aims and a deep trust deficit.

Twin negotiations with different objectives

There are two distinct negotiating efforts constantly merging into each other.

The first is the historic political issue of US objections to Iran's nuclear programme, an approximately 30-year-old dispute that has featured in recurring, usually indirect, negotiations between Washington and Tehran.

The second is the more recent military issue of the US/Israeli war on Iran that began on February 28, and is now centred around Iran's control of the Strait of Hormuz.

Given that this new character of the Strait is a direct product of the war, the US looks to discuss it as part of the current ceasefire, and distinct from the nuclear issue. Functionally, this would mean Iran opens the Strait in return

for the US extending the ceasefire, and this enables negotiations for a broader political agreement — another nuclear deal.

For Iran, control of Hormuz is not a presumed temporary aspect. Iran now looks to use its Hormuz leverage to force a dilution of US demands and gain concessions across the board. This includes US guarantees against further attacks, unfreezing of Iranian assets, sanctions relief, and recognition of US rights to Iranian enrichment, among others.

This stark divergence is arguably why the April 11 Islamabad Talks yielded no outcome.

Fresh challenges

For Iran, extension of this ceasefire consistently included the need for Israel to stop attacking Lebanon, in return for opening the Strait (with continuing Iranian regulation), something Israel had stridently opposed. However,

ceasefire in Lebanon was announced last week, with Trump even saying in a social media post, “Israel will not be bombing Lebanon any longer. They are PROHIBITED from doing so by the USA”.

While Trump also explicitly de-linked the Israel-Lebanon ceasefire from the US-Iran talks, it is evident that Washington in effect is pressurising Israel to not bomb the negotiation efforts.

Whether that leads to peace and stability is a different question. The issues of disarming Hezbollah or Israel’s continued occupation of key Lebanese towns remain unaddressed. While Lebanon and Israel are conducting negotiations of their own, there is a very thin likelihood they will generate viable outcomes.

The possibility of disarming Hezbollah was considerably thin even in September last year, when the Lebanese government announced its commitment to do so. Now, with Iran’s ability

to provide a Hormuz-linked cover to Hezbollah, such disarmament is more unlikely. This leaves Israel in an untenable position.

Even if Israel acquiesces in the short term (long enough for the US to extricate itself from this quagmire), Washington itself has created new conditions through a US naval blockade of Iranian ports, which has disrupted but not halted Iranian oil shipping). This has caused Iran to make Hormuz's reopening further contingent on the US lifting this secondary blockade. On April 18 and 19, the IRGC Navy prevented both India and China-bound ships from transiting the Strait, with the former also facing gunfire.

Misreading signals

While both the United States and Iran ultimately desire a negotiated outcome, their determination to exit the war with some level of dominance over the other is creating a new escalation trap. From Tehran's perspective, even

if it is willing to concede the same unprecedented nuclear programme concessions to Washington as it did before the war, it cannot leave the table without securing a long-term insurance policy.

From Washington's perspective, not only must Iran not be allowed such insurance (which will also dent American deterrence) but must also appear to have ceded to immediate US-imposed terms.

There is the added problem of the US President seemingly misreading Iranian signals for negotiations by posting possible Iranian offers on social media. This forced Iran to further entrench hardline positions, and was evident on April 17/18.

At 6:15pm IST, Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi announced the opening of the Strait to all commercial shipping in line with the Israel-Lebanon ceasefire, but along the new "coordinated" route that Iran had created. Notwithstanding Iranian expectations of the US lifting its

blockade in return (even if sold as a US victory), at 6:57pm IST Trump posted that Iran had declared the Strait to be "fully open and ready for business and full passage". Crucially, Trump added, "but the naval blockade will remain in full force...until such time as our transaction with Iran is 100% complete."

Washington missing the off-ramp caused Tehran to harden, not dilute, its position. By 3:44am on April 18, Iranian Parliament Speaker MB Ghalibaf announced that "with the continuation of the blockade, the Strait of Hormuz will not remain open". Since then, the IRGC has reiterated Hormuz's closure, the off-ramp offered through Araghchi has been abandoned, and all Iranian actors are closing ranks around the hardline position of linking the current ceasefire talks with nuclear programme outcomes, removing the de-linking chance that the Lebanon ceasefire had offered.

Given the new US blockade, Iran's entrenchment of its own blockade,

and Israel's shaky acquiescence to the Lebanon ceasefire, there are enough variables threatening the talks. Still, the fundamental truth that the Strait cannot be opened through the quick application of military force remains true.

Even the new UK-France led European coalition (without the US) being mounted for Hormuz shipping is characterised as a "post-war" coalition, potentially mimicking the successful anti-piracy coalition that operated off the Horn of Africa across the 2010s.

Ultimately, the Iranian effort remains to prevent Washington from viewing the ceasefire objectives as 'terms of Iranian surrender' and to ensure equitable nuclear negotiations, which are still possible. The next round of talks in Islamabad should show how well Washington has or has not perceived Iran's position and its needs.

Bashir Ali Abbas is Senior Research Associate, Council for Strategic and Defense Research, New Delhi

US extends Russian oil waiver: How India gains

by Sukalp Sharma

Barely two days after US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said that the sanctions waiver for buying sanctioned Russian crude at sea won't be renewed, Washington has now made a U-turn and extended the waiver by nearly a month. This decision by Washington is expected to help India continue buying Russian crude in large quantities amid the squeeze on supplies from West Asia. According to industry experts, the decision to extend the waiver likely came after pressure from countries

buying Russian crude to partly offset the loss of Gulf barrels.

There is some hope that the disruption in West Asian energy supplies might ease a bit in the coming days amid a fragile peace between the US and Iran and indications that vessel movements through the Strait of Hormuz could rise going forward. But even then, it would take weeks and possibly months for energy cargo movements through the maritime chokepoint to pick up significantly and on a sustained basis. Moreover, the damage to energy infrastructure in the region due to the war could keep production and supplies capped for much longer. For major oil importers, the hunt for more non-West Asian barrels is expected to continue for the foreseeable future.

Had the Russian oil waiver not been extended, some adjustments and downward pressure on India's oil imports from Russia were likely, even

as Moscow was still expected to remain New Delhi's largest source of crude oil in the coming months, according to industry insiders and experts. Without the waiver, Indian refiners wouldn't have been able to take deliveries of Russian crude on sanctioned tankers or deal with Russian oil suppliers sanctioned by Washington, as that would have exposed them to the risk of attracting secondary sanctions from the US. India is the world's third-largest consumer of crude oil and depends on imports to meet over 88% of its requirement.

Washington's U-turn on Russian oil

According to a General License issued by the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) of the US Department of the Treasury, Russian oil and petroleum products loaded on tankers, including sanctioned vessels, on or before 12:01 eastern daylight time (9:31 am India time) on April 17 can be purchased and

received by most countries till May 16. The earlier waiver — issued in March — had expired on April 11.

“We will not be renewing the general license (sanctions waiver) on Russian oil, and we will not be renewing the general license on Iranian oil. That was oil that was on the water prior to March 11. So all that has been used,” Bessent had said at a White House briefing.

With global oil supplies hit due to the effective halt in vessel movements through the Strait of Hormuz amid the West Asia war, these waivers were aimed at allowing more barrels of oil to reach the international market, thereby easing the supply situation and exert downward pressure on spiralling oil prices. Experts saw these moves from Washington as part of Donald Trump administration’s effort to prevent a further and sustained spike in international oil prices — and the consequent rise in domestic fuel prices in the US — given the midterm

elections later this year.

But the Russian oil waiver attracted criticism from various sections in the US. Critics argued that it led to a windfall for Moscow, which would fund its war effort in Ukraine. Similar arguments were made against the waiver for oil from Iran, with whom the US was locked in battle in West Asia.

The sanctions waiver for Russian crude was first issued specifically for India in the first week of March, and was later extended to all other countries.

Move to benefit India

With the sanctions waiver for Russian crude now extended, India — one of the top two destinations for Russian crude — is a clear beneficiary. The earlier waiver had facilitated a rapid ramp-up of import of Moscow's oil by Indian refiners amid the major disruption in supplies from West Asia. Indian refiners

were also able to secure some cargoes of Iranian oil, marking the first deliveries of Tehran's crude to India in nearly seven years, although the volumes were insignificant when compared to imports of Russian crude.

Around 2.5-2.7 million barrels per day (bpd) of India's crude imports — accounting for around half of the country's total oil imports — have transited the Strait of Hormuz in recent months; the longer-term average is around 40%. Most of that supply is effectively offline due to the war.

While government sources maintained that India didn't require a waiver from the US for buying oil from Russia, industry experts said that the waiver indeed helped. That is because Indian refiners were now able to take deliveries of Russian oil even on tankers sanctioned or blocked by the US, and could deal directly with sanctioned Russian companies like Rosneft and

Lukoil. Moreover, it temporarily removed any friction between Washington and New Delhi over the latter's hefty purchases of Moscow's crude.

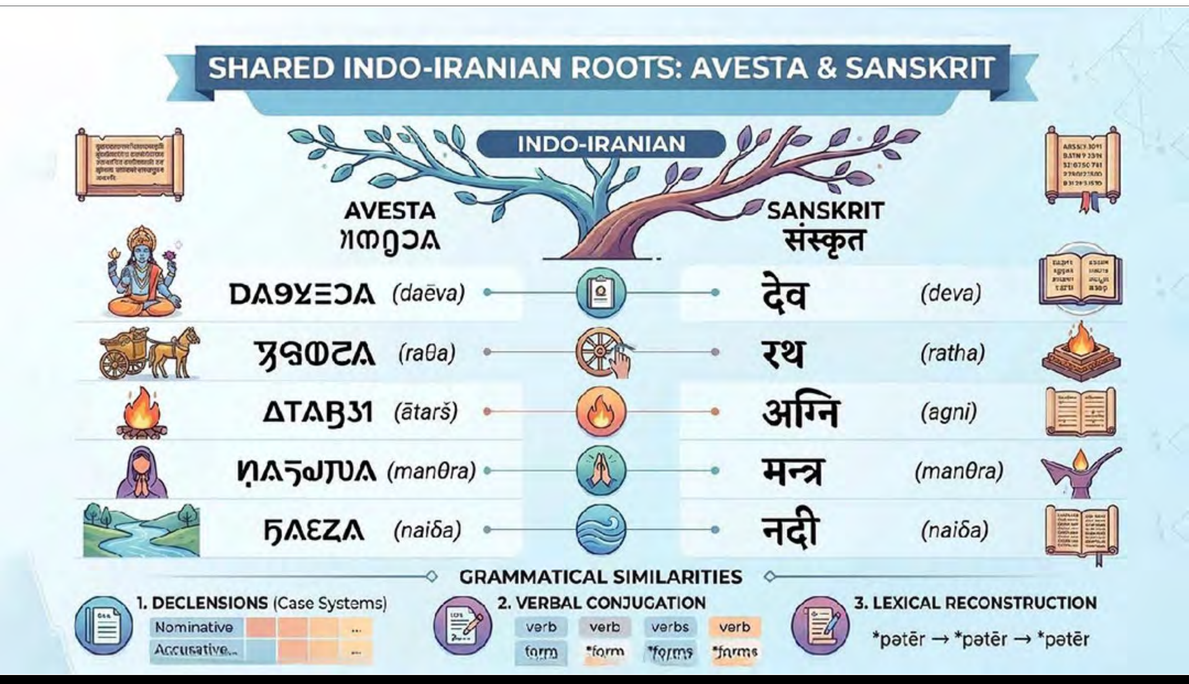
India's Hormuz exposure

***~2.6 million barrels** cross the strait daily*

Although India was buying significant volumes of Russian crude even before the West Asia war began, the quantity had reduced notably over the past few months, evidently due to the US imposing sanctions on Russian oil majors Rosneft and Lukoil, and amid trade pact negotiations with Washington. The US made a meaningful reduction in India's Russian oil imports a prerequisite for scrapping its 25% additional penal tariff on New Delhi.

In February, India had imported just over 1 million bpd of Russian crude, almost half of the 2025 peak of over 2 million bpd. Even with the significant reduction in volumes, Russia was India's largest source of crude in February, accounting for about fifth of its total oil imports.

Then, with the war in West Asia raging and the sanctions waiver in place, India's Russian oil imports nearly doubled to 2 million bpd in March, accounting for a whopping 44.4% of India's total oil imports for the month even as imports from West Asia crashed, according to tanker data from commodity market analytics firm Kpler. In the first two weeks of April, India's Russian oil imports averaged 1.6 million bpd.



The many links between India and Iran

by GN Devy

Setting aside current geopolitical tensions, if one were to ask which country west of India has historically had the most intimate cultural exchanges with South Asia, the answer would indisputably be Iran. Our cultural ties date back to prehistoric times, when the ‘out of Africa’ Homo sapiens moved along the Persian coast more than 60,000 years ago, and then to South Asia and further east a few thousand years later.

In subsequent millennia, there was further sharing of genetic stock, though the two populations mingled with different groups and evolved separately. More than 10,000 years ago, people related to the early Holocene population of Iran were already mixing with the earliest Indians. Their descendants saw the origins of agriculture in the northwestern part of the subcontinent and the subsequent urbanisation in the Indus Valley.

60,000 years

The earliest contact between the people of Iran and India traces to the 'out of Africa' migration along the Persian coast.

The contact between Iran and India continued beyond the Indus Valley Civilisation. By around the 15th century BCE, it received a new impetus through language. During the early Vedic period, and later throughout the millennium-long medieval ages, Indian culture absorbed influences from Iran, shaping

its identity beyond what easily comes to the mind of a contemporary Indian.

Shared linguistic roots: Sanskrit and Avestan

Sanskrit — one of the few foundational languages of India — belongs to the Indo-Aryan language family, which had a clear link with the Indo-Iranian language family not just through their common ancestry in the Proto- Indo-European language(s). Even after the spread of the Proto from Sintashta southwest to Iran and Syria, and southeast towards Afghanistan and Punjab, the number of words they shared was amazingly large.

The branch of the Proto spreading southwest became the Iranian languages, the one spreading towards India became the Indic. One form of Iranian — known as the Gathic — produced the Avesta, committed to writing in the 2nd century BCE but having originated nearly a thousand years earlier.

Vedic Sanskrit, likewise, having originated around the 15th century BCE, got committed to writing in the 3rd century BCE. Both these were carried forward primarily in oral tradition for a millennium or more. It was by bringing the two in close comparison with that of classical Western languages that linguists during the 19th century could reconstruct the Proto Indo-European language and its many branches.

Zoroaster or Zarathustra preached about Ahura Mazda, based on the idea of a moral order as the very foundation of all that exists. In the Vedas, the Iranian ‘Ahura’ is ‘Asura’, and the moral order is ‘rta’.

In ancient Iranian tradition, the entire central Asia is described as ‘Airyanem Vaejah’. The metrical verse in the second millennium BCE in Iran was known as Gatha, meaning ‘recited or sung verses’. The word is used in many Indian traditions with identical meaning. For instance, the 17th-century Marathi saint Tukaram’s compositions are known as

Tukaram's Gatha.

Numerous words in ancient Iranian sound almost identical to Sanskrit if one were to change the 'h' sound to 's'. For instance, the 'seven-stanza' text in the Gathas is Haptanghaiti, reminding us of a much later Indian text, Gatha-Saptashati. Similarly, the 'good dominion' Iranian Gatha is Khshathre-Gatha, immediately bringing to mind the Mahabharata concept of kshatra-dharma.

What is even more remarkable is that the poetic meter in ancient Iranian poetry was very close to the Vedic meter known as Jagati, particularly the three-foot form, the Tristubh.

The reason for these similarities is simple: they are descendants of a shared linguistic and musical ancestry. And it is not only in poetry and music that the shared ancestry is manifest; it is also seen in the names of gods and some key philosophical concepts.

For instance, the Iranian ‘Asha’, the ultimate form of truth, is no further from the Upanishad’s ‘Isha’. Likewise, the Avestan terms ahura, daevo, havan, yasna, zaranya, naman and sena are, respectively, Vedic Sanskrit’s asura, deva, havan, yagna, hirnaya, naman, and sena. Scholars have produced lists of hundreds of such words to show the kinship between the Indo-Iranian and the Indo-Aryan languages.

The Iranian ‘Asha’, the ultimate form of truth, is no further from the Upanishad’s ‘Isha’.

Of course, contemporary Persian is not exactly a descendant of the Avestan language. Avestan ceased to be a spoken language and became a liturgical language in Zoroastrianism. A Western Iranian language, modern Persian evolved from its earlier stages of Old Persian and Middle Persian (Pahlavi). Sanskrit, meanwhile, developed alongside the Prakrits and in interaction with ancient Dravidian languages.

Persian influence in medieval India

India's cultural and linguistic contact with Iran appears to have persisted long after Sanskrit ceased to be widely spoken and Avestan declined in Iran. Al-Biruni (973-1050 CE), a scientist and explorer who travelled to India and East Asia, was an Iranian who spoke Persian and Arabic. His travel accounts remain one of the trusted sources of Indian history.

Al-Biruni did not, however, leave any lasting impact on his Indian contemporaries, unlike Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Balkhi, immortalised in history as Rumi. Born in 1207 CE in Afghanistan, Rumi underwent a transformation after meeting Shams of Tabriz in 1244 in northeastern Iran. Born out of this encounter was Sufi philosophy and poetry. The spirit of Rumi's verse deeply influenced the newly emerging languages, the Bhashas, of the last millennium.

While the tradition of poetry known in India as ‘Bhakti literature’ had started growing in the south, it was after Sufism found hospitable ground in India that it blossomed in the north. Apart from producing many great poets in several of India’s medieval languages, the Bhakti movement posed a serious challenge to the idea of social hierarchy rooted in Varna.

The Persian language had a sway across the length and breadth of India for several centuries, beginning with the Sultanates to the end of the eighteenth century. It also gave rise to several phenomenal literary artists, including Ferdowsi (940-1020), Nizami Ganjavi (1140-1203), Saadi Shirazi (1209-1291), Hafez Shirazi (1325-1390), Urfi Shirazi (1555–1591), and Abdul Qader Bedil (1642–1720).

Enduring legacies in modern India

We often forget that the very first book written by social reformer Raja

Rammohan Roy was composed in Persian. When the East India Company's first office started functioning in Surat, Sir Thomas Roe had to conduct business by employing Persian translators to communicate with local Indian officials.

It should be noted that Persian was not 'imposed' by the medieval rulers. During the same centuries, Indian languages like Marathi, Bangla, and Kannada flourished. Persian, the language of Iran, had simply become the lingua franca for India.

For example, we notice that the letters written by Chhatrapati Shivaji to Aurangzeb were drafted in Persian. The number of words that Persian gave to Indian languages far exceeds those later contributed by English. Words like *roj* (day or daily), *sadak* (street), *aaj* (today), *darawaza* (door), *band* (closed), *kagaz* (paper), *dak* (mail), *bazar* (market), *sarkar* (government), and many more are primarily Persian loan words.

More importantly, Persian brought to

India a new sense of colour and texture, enriching the arts, architecture, and music. What we now celebrate as the Indian musical tradition was shaped by Amir Khusrau, who, though not from Iran, conducted most of his artistic and intellectual activities in Persian. Khusrau can rightfully be regarded as the person whose contributions laid the foundation for many of India's enduring musical traditions.

> ***The number of words that Persian gave to Indian languages far exceeds those later contributed by English.***

The profusion of Persian terminology among India's music community stands as a witness to how deeply India owes its music to Persian, a language born in Iran. In fact, the British, wary of the Persian influence on Indian cultural life, passed an Act to replace Persian with English as the language of official and intellectual transactions.

It was in recognition of these links, and out of a deep respect for the Sufi poetry and music, that Rabindranath Tagore paid a visit to Bushehr, Shiraz and Tehran in Iran in 1932. He was welcomed and honoured there as one of their own.

Similarly, Jawaharlal Nehru, during his visit to Iran in 1959, recounted the deep cultural links between the two countries.

Today, as Iran faces attacks from Israel and the United States, I, as an Indian, think of how an ancient civilisation related so closely to ours is being wiped out by relatively new countries that have little understanding of why and how civilisations emerge, thrive, and survive—not only through weaponry and military might, but also through music, poetry, spirituality and deep rooted resilience.

Israel and America may succeed in destroying a civilisation, but will they ever succeed in creating one?

Indian merchants and the rise of Hormuz in global trade

by Nikita Mohta

Long before Indian merchants began populating the Strait of Hormuz, Jagadu Shah — also known as Jagdusha — was already navigating these waters. A 13th-century Jain merchant from Kutch in Gujarat, he owned a fleet of ships that carried him westward to Persia, Arabia, and Africa. Jagdusha, however, was not an isolated figure, but part of a much wider web of Indian Ocean commerce.

In an interview with indianexpress.com, historian Radhika Seshan explains that

coastal trading networks extended from Gujarat along the Makran coast, around the entrance to the Persian Gulf, and further west toward the Red Sea. “While the precise scale of this trade and the identities of those involved remain uncertain, there is evidence of its deep antiquity: from the third century CE onwards, a Tamil-Brahmi inscription has been found on the island of Socotra, off the coast of Abyssinia (modern Ethiopia).”

Within this broader commercial world, Hormuz emerged as a key nodal point. From around the 13th century, its prominence grew steadily, and under the Safavids in the 16th century, it became a crucial strategic centre. Indian merchants, interestingly, appear across nearly all stages of this story.

The dawn of commerce in Hormuz

According to author James Onley in The Persian Gulf in Modern Times (2014), “The Gulf’s trade links with India extend

back into antiquity, as evidenced by the countless Indian artifacts one finds in Bronze Age archaeological sites (from 2300 to 1000 BC) and modern-day museums in the GCC states, Iraq, and Iran."

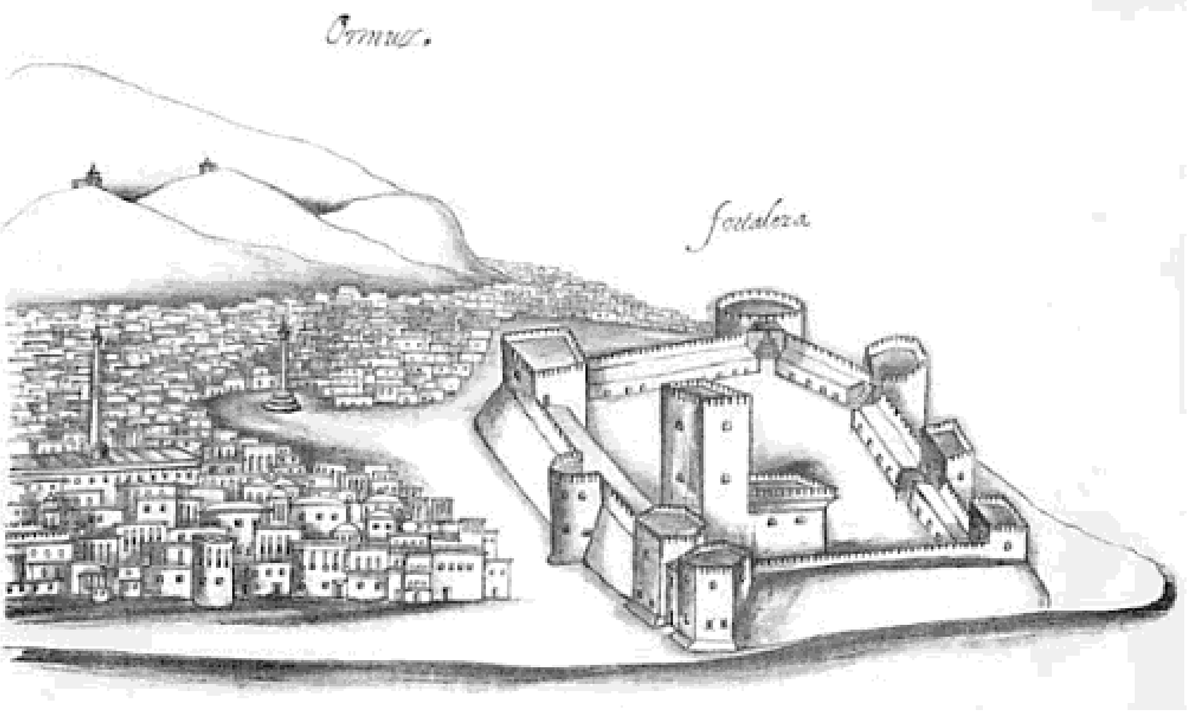
While there may have been an Indian mercantile presence in the Gulf since the Bronze Age, the earliest account we have of an Indian community there comes from a 916 AD book by the Arab historian Abu Zayd Hasan, referring to over 100 Hindu merchants at the southern port of Siraf, Iran.

2300 BC

The Gulf's trade links with India extend back to the Bronze Age.

Maritime and business historian Chhaya Goswami, speaking with indianexpress.com, adds, "Maritime linkages between India and the Persian/Arabian Gulf region trace back to the time of the Indus Valley Civilisation (ca. 2500-1500 BCE), with the port site of Lothal at the

head of the Gulf of Cambay standing as a striking early hub of seafaring activity. Although Gujarat lay beyond the trans-Indus satrapies recorded in Darius I's inscription at Naqsh-e Rostam, there is strong evidence to suggest that maritime trade flourished between the Persian Gulf and Gujarat's ports during the Achaemenid period, alongside overland commerce channelled through Taxila…"



The city and fortress of Hormuz in the 16th century, (Wikipedia)

The Jagaducharita, a 13th-century verse text, offers glimpses into the life and trade of Jagdusha on Persian waters. "The Jagaḍūcarita mentions the port of Hormuz on the Persian Gulf,

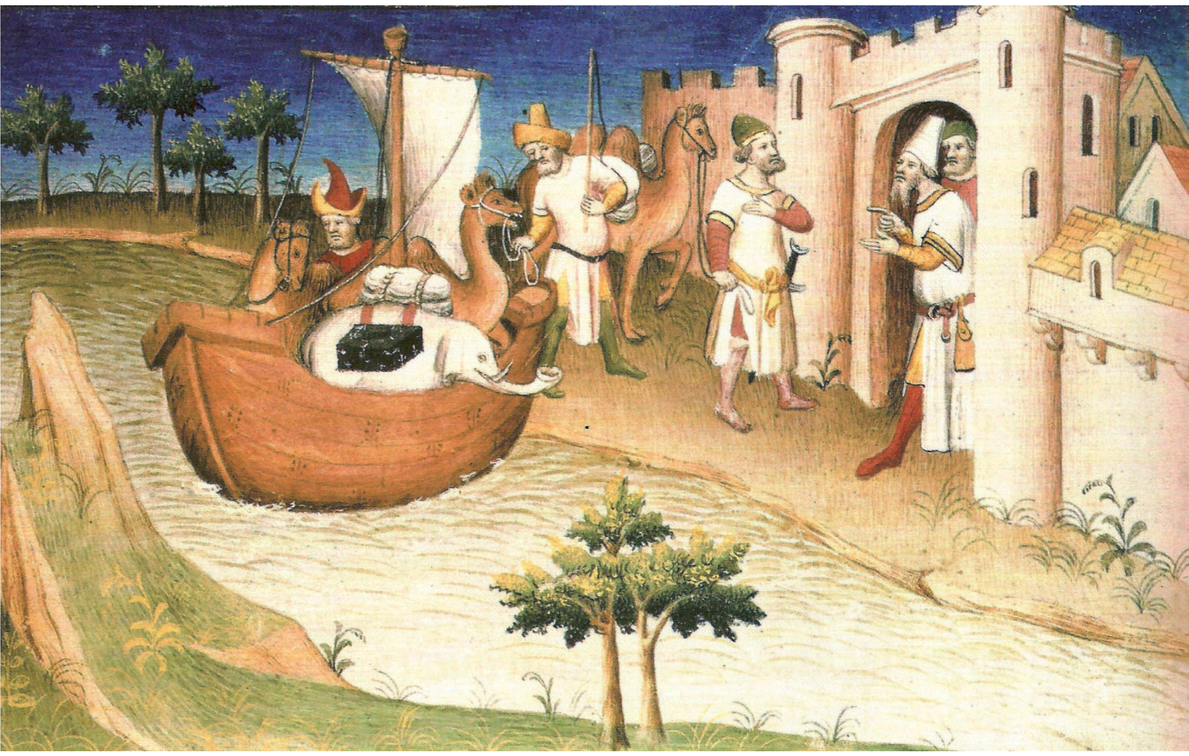
where the merchant prince Jagaḍūsha Datar from Bhadreshwar (a coastal town in Kachchh) conducted trade with Persia through an Indian agent named Jayantasiṁha stationed there. An inscription also records a Hormuzi nākhudā (ship-owner) who came to Somnath on business, attesting the importance of maritime links between the Persian Gulf and western India…"

> ***"Maritime linkages between India and the Persian/Arabian Gulf region trace back to the time of the Indus Valley Civilisation."***

She adds, "His trading partners from Hormuz regularly visited Bhadreshwar, and Jagaḍū took responsibility for providing them with a space for religious activities. This suggests a reciprocal relationship: the merchants relied on Jagaḍū for trade and livelihood, while he, in turn, met their religious and social needs."

During the 14th century and at the

beginning of the 15th century, Hormuz came to be known as the most important commercial maritime stopover in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf region. Academic Mohammad Bagher Vosoughi notes in *The Persian Gulf in History* (2009), "Hormuz was the only city in the East in which economic activity was accompanied by political independence. The king, the merchants, and the administrative system, in mutual cooperation, facilitated commerce."



Marco Polo with elephants and camels arriving at Hormuz from India (Wikimedia Commons)

Goswami says that Marco Polo, in his late thirteenth-century account, describes Hormuz as a bustling port,

receiving ships from India laden with textiles, spices, and luxury goods. It reads: “Merchants come thither from India, with ships loaded with spicery and precious stones, pearls, cloths of silk and gold, elephants’ teeth, and many other wares, which they sell to the merchants of Hormos, and which these in turn carry all over the world to dispose of again.”

Indian dominance in the Gulf trade

Many Indians in the pre-oil Gulf were merchants or members of merchant families. “They can be placed into seven main groups,” writes Onley, “Banians (Hindus and Jains); Khojas, Lawatiyya, Bohras, and Memons (Muslims); and Catholics and Anglicans (Christians).” The vast majority of these merchants originated from the five regions closest to the Gulf — Rajasthan, southwest Punjab, Sindh, Kutch, and Gujarat — although they also had a substantial presence in Bombay by the 19th century.

Between the 10th and 16th centuries, however, many Indians in the Gulf were Gujarati Jain merchants (known as Shravaks) from Jamnagar, Porbandar, Diu, and Cambay in Gujarat, who accounted for most of the Indian presence in the Gulf before the late 16th century. “The presence of 2,000 Gujarati households, both Hindu and Muslim, on the island gave Hormuz the feel of an Indian city,” writes Onley.

The products transported between Iran and India via Hormuz included foodstuffs, aromatic and medicinal drugs, mineral water, various metals, textiles, and jewellery. India exported staple foods such as rice and pulses, wheat, and oil, for which there was considerable demand. The famed raw cotton of western India was also highly sought after in West Asian markets.

This exchange, however, was not one-sided. “Bullion, woollens, and horses attracted particular attention for India. The exotic special items such as wines, silks, carpets, rosewater, and medicinal

gum resin," notes Goswami in her work *Transregional Trade and Traders* (2019), "only made the import consignments from West Asia more profitable. However, the chief corollary of the entire trade with West Asia was bullion." In the 1540s, Onley notes that 46 per cent of Hormuz's customs revenue came from Indian imports.

> ***"Between the 10th and 16th centuries, however, many Indians in the Gulf were Gujarati Jain merchants."***

Vosoughi notes that Hormuz had a customs house called 'bangsar,' a word of Hindi origin meaning storehouse. Portuguese historians have also mentioned the active presence of Iranian merchants in Cambay, Calicut, Bengal, and Malacca.

Pearls, horses, and slaves

Interestingly, the Gulf's most notable exports were pearls, horses, and dates.

They were purchased by Indians and taken to India, where they were sold on the world market. Because of this, and the monopoly Indian merchants enjoyed in the Gulf credit market, Indian ports became banking centres for the Gulf—notably Bombay in the 19th and 20th centuries.

“In addition, the importation of African and Indian slaves to Hormuz and, most important of all, the export of horses to India should be mentioned,” writes Vosoughi. Since the climate of southern India was not suitable for raising horses, the Bahmanid kings in the northern Deccan and the Hindu kings of the Vijayanagara region were regular customers. He notes in his essay that a horse could fetch a price of up to 300 Ashrafis, equal to 320 Réis.

“In 1506, three thousand horses were exported to India, and this amount reached ten thousand head in 1567,” he notes.

Gujarat, whose location on the

northwest coast of India made it a suitable trading partner for Hormuz, was one of the regions that imported horses.

9th-century drawing of a pearl diver (Wikipedia)

Marco Polo reportedly noted that Gulf merchants refused to allow horse doctors to travel to India, ensuring that large numbers of the animals died each year and thereby sustained demand. “The horse trade also attracted small ‘pedlars’ like the Russian Afanasio Nikitin who embarked at Hormuz with his horses in a small tava boat bound for India,” writes Onley.

The trade in slaves, who were employed in military forces or as servants, also formed part of the commerce between these two regions. In search of better employment opportunities and economic conditions, Iranian youths departed for India from various regions. Vosoughi notes that there were around 10,000 to 12,000 Iranian warriors in the Deccan. In addition to human resources, instruments and equipment used in India's military affairs were also imported from Hormuz.

Another group of prominent Indians in the Gulf comprised pearl merchants. Onley explains that Indian pearl merchants visited the main pearling centres of the Gulf during the summer pearling season from May to October — principally Bahrain and, during the Portuguese era, Hormuz and Bandar Kong in Iran, as well as Julfar (Ras al-Khaimah) — where they purchased pearl harvests from their Arab and Persian counterparts.

Hormuz in the age of the Portuguese

During the 15th century, on the eve of the arrival of the Portuguese in the East, Hormuz enjoyed such a high status that the reputation of its wealth enticed Europeans. “The merchants and traders of the different areas of the region, whether Iranian, Arab, Indian, or African, engaged in commercial transactions in a peaceful environment. Above all, the economy and society of Hormuz during the fifteenth century had a multinational character,” writes Vosoughi. According to Seshan, “It is a classic example of an island with virtually no natural resources of its own — so much so that the Portuguese described it as a ‘barren rock.’ Yet, its strategic significance grew immensely under their control.”

Tomé Pires, one of the first Portuguese visitors to Hormuz at the beginning of the 16th century, writes, “This city has beautiful walls and houses with terraces and beautiful towers and citadel and is one of the four largest cities of Asia…”.

Dinner in a Portuguese household at Hormuz (Wikipedia)

A notable feature of the 16th- and 17th-century Gulf was that the vast majority of Indians came from Gujarat. Interestingly, the Arabs had adopted the term Banian from the Gujarati word for merchant, vaniyo. The Portuguese adopted the term in the 16th century, and when the English, Dutch, and French arrived in the 17th century, they too adopted it. Some of the wealthiest Banians were also sarrafin, lending money and providing credit to Arab and Persian Muslims.

However, the Portuguese presence soon posed a threat to the merchant

base. In The World of the Indian Ocean Merchant (2001), a compilation of essays by the late Professor Ashin Das Gupta, he notes that “The Gujaratis were rising to commercial prominence, but not always and not necessarily fighting the Portuguese.” He explains that Gujarat’s expanding trade at this time accepted Portuguese control when unavoidable and defied Portuguese regulation when possible. “Thus, a Gujarati vessel would normally keep a Portuguese cartaz [naval trade licence], but once out in the open sea would not necessarily obey the cartaz. This, in a nutshell, was the Gujarati response to the Portuguese in the sixteenth century.”

Seshan argues, “In 1622, a joint English-Safavid force attacked and captured the port of Hormuz. After this, it came entirely under Safavid control, and while Hormuz remained important, its geopolitical significance declined somewhat compared to its pivotal role under the Portuguese.” This shift drove Hormuz’s Indian community to nearby Bandar Abbas and Muscat. Following the fall of Hormuz, Bandar Abbas’s

population rose to 1,400-1,500 houses by 1670, of which one-third belonged to Indians, mainly Banians.

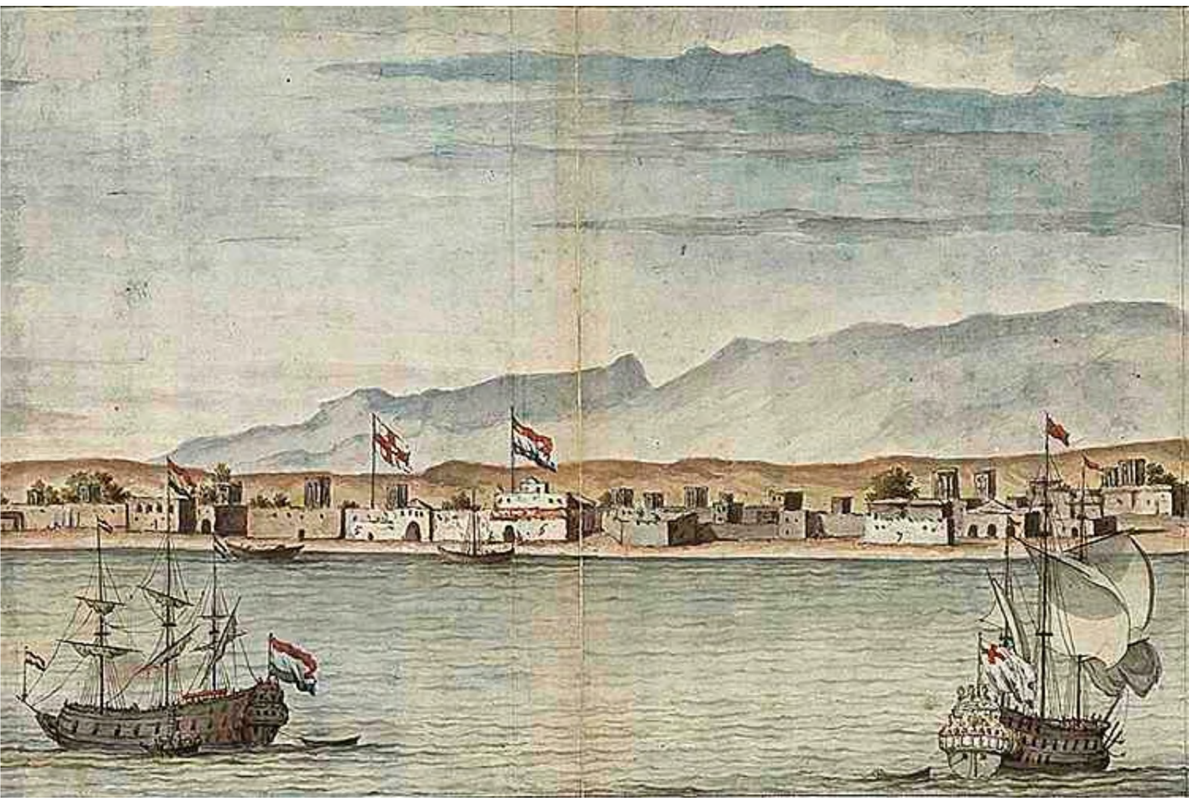
The shifting fortunes of Gulf trade

“The fall of Portuguese Hormuz and the establishment of Bandar Abbas in the 1620s opened the Persian Gulf more effectively than before to the merchants of this Coromandel port,” writes Das Gupta. An added impetus to expansion was provided by the desolation of Gujarat during the famine of 1630-32.

“Over time,” says Goswami, “Basra (in present-day Iraq) emerged alongside Bushehr and Bandar Abbas (in present-day Iran) as the three principal ports of the Persian Gulf. Together, they became the main arteries of maritime trade and the broader amphibious network in the region.”

Her research indicates that Gomrun/Gombroon/Bandar Abbas is chiefly interesting because, although it was once a prominent port, by the mid-

eighteenth century, it had lost much of its significance. The European powers had retreated, and after Nader Shah's death in 1747, general disorder dramatically altered the balance of power and trade in the Gulf. Following the death of Karim Khan Zand, of the Zand dynasty of Iran, in 1779, Persian control weakened rapidly as the country descended into civil war. The three major ports of the Persian Gulf, i.e. Bandar Abbas, Bushehr, and Basra, experienced a significant decline.



English and Dutch trading posts in Bandar Abbas in 1704 (Wikipedia)

By the late 18th century, the Persian Shah's control over ports, islands, and coastal districts along the Gulf

had further eroded. “While this was not a total collapse, political records clearly indicate a marked weakening of authority. In such turbulent times, Muscat was in ascendance,” she says. The Gulf increasingly became a theatre of conflict, with Arab powers taking the lead in controlling the straits and much of the maritime trade.

Seshan, concluding her interview, cautions, “Narrow channels are always at strategic risk. These points act as pivotal chokepoints, making them inherently susceptible to attack,” yet reminding us that sea transport is far cheaper than land transport, and goods transported overland at prohibitive cost arrive late or fail to move efficiently.

“Maritime openness is therefore essential to sustain world trade and global momentum. History repeatedly teaches this lesson, yet it is often forgotten — except by those in power who realise that controlling these chokepoints allows them to monopolise commerce,” she adds.

When Persian served in Bengal as the language of power and culture

by Nikita Mohta

When Persianised Turks linked to the Delhi Sultanate extended their authority into the Bengal delta in the early 13th century, Islamic culture gradually took root in locally distinctive forms. This process became especially pronounced after the mid-fourteenth century, when Bengal's Muslim rulers cut ties with the sultans of Delhi. From 1342 until the Mughal conquest in the early seventeenth century, a succession of independent dynasties governed the region. During this period, Persian functioned as both the language of

administration and the medium of courtly life.

Historian Richard Eaton notes in an interview with indianexpress.com that Bengal functions as a linguistic archive of an earlier Persian world. “India becomes like a deep freeze container that preserves this much earlier vocabulary. Words that disappeared from Persian centuries ago still survive in Bengali — *piyala* (cup), no longer used in Iran, and *aasta* (slow), replaced today by *yavāsh*. Even common expressions like *griftar kora* (to arrest) derive from Persian.”

An interesting Bengali proverb, dating back to the era when Persian served as the administrative language, writes academic Ratul Ghosh in his email interview, is *Ārśi ārśi ārśi/ Swāmī yena bale phārsi*, meaning, ‘Mirror Mirror Mirror/ May my husband speak Farsi’. Ghosh explains that it calls back a time when proficiency in Farsi would secure employment in the administration. “This long cohabitation with the

Persian language and a courtly culture rooted in Turko-Persian traditions played a pivotal role in shaping the middle Bengali language, literature, and culture, which eventually entered into the complex trajectories of colonial modernity in the nineteenth century".

Persian in Mughal political culture

Although Persian was present in regions such as Sind, Multan, and Punjab before the twelfth century, it was the Turkish conquests in northern India and the rise of the Delhi Sultanate that enabled the language to assume a far more prominent and sustained role.

"Despite the considerable cultivation of Persian in pre-Mughal India," notes historian Kumkum Chatterjee in *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India* (2009), "it was undoubtedly the Mughal imperial state which presided over the 'most productive — perhaps even incomparable — efflorescence of Persian literary culture' in India."

A religious assembly at Akbar's court (Wikipedia)

The centrality of Persian to Mughal political culture was firmly established under Akbar who declared it the official language of governance. Chatterjee further argues that Persian possessed a unique capacity to function as an effective medium of governance.

Sanskrit, though prestigious and sacred, was not considered suitable for a Muslim ruling elite, while regional vernaculars were often viewed as too limited in scope for imperial administration.

Persianate Bengal through the ages

Persian did have a fair presence in pre-Mughal Bengal. Academic Thibaut d'Hubert notes in *The Persianate World* (2019):

"What can be gathered from the sultanate period shows that Persian was mainly used in urban centers — that is in Gaur, Pandua (near Malda in today's Indian state of West Bengal)...There is no doubt about the fact that Persian was used at the

court as a language of communication, as well as in the chancery's administration, if perhaps not to the same extent that it was used in the neighboring kingdom of Jawnpur and in later, Mughal times."

Chinese travellers too, notes d'Hubert, observed the use of Persian at the Bengal court, identifying it as the second language of the kingdom after Bengali. Court protocol, titulature, and architectural forms further indicate the influence of Persian models in the political idiom of the period.

With Bengal's formal incorporation into the Mughal Empire in 1576, these influences converged with existing regional traditions. Notably, Bengal's integration into the empire brought an influx of migrants of Iranian and Central Asian origin, many of whom served as bureaucrats and officials appointed by the imperial administration. These individuals acted as important carriers of Persianised culture in eastern India.

Within this milieu, Mughal courtiers

were expected not only to be conversant with Persian literature but also to compose poetry and cultivate a taste in music. The early-eighteenth century marked a further evolution with the rise of Murshid Quli Khan, who asserted autonomy from the Mughals and established a polity encompassing Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa.

Murshid Quli Khan (Wikipedia)

The Nawabs of Murshidabad now devoted much of their energy to

consolidate a financially stable state while balancing autonomy with nominal allegiance to the Mughal centre. At the same time, they actively fostered a cultural environment rooted in Mughal traditions.

“This culture, with its Islamicate character, was also strongly coloured by a Persianized ethos. The nawabs of Murshidabad welcomed and honoured Muslim holy men and scholars, made visits to tombs of pirs, and showed an appreciation for Persian poets and writers…” Chatterjee notes.

Persian as cultural capital

Persian came to function as the dominant language of public administration, revenue accounting, and courtly communication, and it was widely used on coins and inscriptions.

As epigraphist Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq notes in *Epigraphy and Islamic Culture* (2016):

“Nowhere was Islamic culture in Bengal expressed more vividly or distinctly than in the region’s rich tradition of public inscriptions, recorded either in Arabic or in Persian.”

In this administrative order, proficiency in Persian became indispensable for upward mobility. As Chatterjee observes, “Persian proficiency was in fact the necessary first step for a person with ambitions in administrative service at all levels. The nawabi administration in Murshidabad and its subordinate administrative headquarters at Dhaka, Patna, and Cuttack required employees who could create, maintain, and oversee records of various government departments that were in Persian…” Zamindars too were required to maintain accounts in Persian, creating further demand for scribal and clerical expertise.

This environment also shaped formal systems of education. Although distinct ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ educational traditions existed, there was a shared

sphere of career-oriented learning that both Hindu and Muslim elites actively participated in. This form of education was closely tied to acquiring literacy, often proficiency, in Persian.

Local elites supported this through land grants for the establishment of schools. Elite family histories reflect this sustained investment in Persian. A zamindar from southern Bengal, Raja Pratapaditya's lineage demonstrates how for at least two generations prior, male members of his family cultivated education in Persian, alongside Bengali and Nagri.

Persian literacy also enabled gentry families to build networks with aristocratic and even royal households. Chatterjee further notes that the largest number of Bengali Hindus associated with Mughal administration came from the Baidya and Kayastha jatis. "But there were other upper-caste Hindu jatis in Bengal, Brahmins included, who also participated in this kind of bureaucratic culture based on Persian literacy."

Persian loanwords in Bengali

A significant number of Persian loanwords entered Bengali during this period. According to Ghosh, the predominance of Persian is particularly evident in domains of judiciary and administration. He lists: Āin ‘law’; Nāliś ‘complain’; Peẏādā ‘bailiff/peon/foot-soldier’; Barˈkhāsta ‘to suspend’; Bājeẏāpta ‘to confiscate’; Bakhśis ‘tip/alms’; and in registers of nobility and lifestyle, (Ātar ‘perfume’; Jāmā ‘garment for upper-body’; Khuśi ‘happiness’; Rojˈgār ‘income’ etc.).

“Another way to trace Persian influence is to study the folk literature of Bengal, particularly that composed by Sufi/Muslim authors, or by the followers of heterodox folk religions such as the Bāul/Phakirs. These texts vividly demonstrate how Persian and Arabic loanwords have been absorbed into the Bengali lifeworld.”

Interestingly, he adds, there are some

hybrid words in Bengali with Persian roots, such as: *Phi-bachar* (every year), where ‘phi’-is from Persian, and ‘bachar’ is derived from Sanskrit.

Persian among other languages

However, the status of Persian in Bengal was shared, to varying degrees, with other languages as well. Under the pre-Mughal sultans of Bengal, vernacular literary production — particularly in Bengali — received significant patronage. The results of this are visible in the composition of several Bengali Mahabharatas associated with authors such as Kavindra Parameshwar.

Arabic, too, served specific administrative and symbolic functions, appearing on Hussain Shahi coinage and inscriptions, and occasionally in bilingual Arabic–Persian epigraphic forms.

She argues that Persianate culture, expressed through dress, speech and literary taste, belonged largely to the

public sphere inhabited by aristocrats and service gentry. In contrast, more domestic settings tended to adhere to Sanskritic-Brahminical norms.

> *"[Persian] did not supplant the regional Brahminical culture and its practices. Instead, Persianization coexisted with Bengal's own variant of regional Brahminism as a complementary cultural trajectory, each with its own perceived functions and domains."*
>
> ***- Kumkum Chatterjee***

Yet Persian proved so entrenched as a language of governance that the East India Company, after assuming sovereign control over parts of India in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, continued to use it in much the same administrative capacity.

"To talk about the influence of Persian literary and philosophical traditions in Bengal," says Ghosh, "one may name stalwarts such as Raja Rammohun Roy

(who was also the founder editor of the Persian weekly Mirat-ul-Akhbar) and Maharshi Debendranath Tagore (Rabindranath's father), two trailblazing figures of Bengali modernism, who were also the founding fathers of the Brahmo Samaj. The influence of Persian poetry (particularly the ghazal) played an important role in shaping the literary idiom of many modern Bengali poets, most important among whom was Kazi Nazrul Islam, the national poet of Bangladesh…"

Kazi Nazrul Islam (Wikipedia)

The decline of the status of Persian language historically, he notes, began under British colonial rule, particularly through the efforts of administrators, missionaries, and intellectuals such as Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, Henry Pitts Forster and of course William Carey. “They regarded Persian influence on Bengali as artificial or imposed…The decisive moment came with the 1837 legislation that replaced Persian with the vernacular and English in judicial and revenue proceedings.”

“In conclusion, as a Bengali,” Ghosh writes, “I can only say that the Bengali identity in the present — shaped simultaneously by the colonial modernity, postcolonial cultural negotiations, and a deep connection to our unique heterogeneous, layered, and multilateral past — remains indebted to the Persian linguistic, literary, and cultural heritage.”

IN MEMORIAM (1933-2026)

Asha Bhosle: The legend whose voice broke many a silence

by Suanshu Khurana

Asha Bhosle, one of the most remarkable voices in Indian film music with over 12,000 songs to her credit, was never regarded as the country's nightingale. Post independence, the nation's careful conscience had already given the coveted title to her older sister Lata Mangeshkar, who sang delightfully, piously and with a voice that soared over a generation's lives.

But an astute Bhosle, who passed away in Mumbai at 92 after a chest infection, recognised this early on and sang what was left, from where she could: the street, the nautanki stage, the cabaret floor and the club back rooms thick with smoke. This voice was wild, could shake a leg and take one's breath away. It seemed to know what a party smelled like, what a dance floor felt like at 3 in the morning and what desire actually sounded like when it ceased to be polite. These were mostly places the nightingale wasn't going to find or inhabit and that is where the brilliance of Asha Bhosle unravelled. With her range, she could sing just about anything: there was the sultry nightclub number, the flirtatious song, a rhythm-driven ditty to the delicacy of a classical ghazal, with none of them ever out of place and absorbed into her voice with effortless conviction.

Actor Smita Patil, in the British Film

Institute's documentary, Asha (1986, Neville Bolt), says how Bhosle's voice "isn't flat or sweet".

Asha Bhosle died at 92. (Photo: Express Archive)

Born in Maharashtra's Sangli, Bhosle grew up in Kolhapur, where the Mangeshkar family moved from Pune after Dinanath Mangeshkar's demise, so that their eldest daughter Lata, 13 then, could work in the robust Marathi film industry of the city. Bhosle, nine then, was already captivated by English-language cinema. She was interested in films like *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1943), and the musicals of Fred Astaire as well as

the vibrant, sensuous performances of Portuguese-Brazilian actor and samba singer Carmen Miranda. She would come home, drape a dupatta, and sing ‘Mama yo quiero’ while dancing like Miranda. “My mother thought I was crazy,” says the singer in the documentary.

> ***“It has a bit of a ‘come on’… it has life in it. It’s like the goddesses in India — she is the coquette, she is the pure, she is all of it.”***

After her Marathi debut at 10 with ‘*Chala chala*’ in *Majha Bal* (1943) and a Hindi solo in *Raat ki Rani* (1949), Bhosle came to the industry with Geeta Dutt, Shamshad Begum and more recently, Mangeshkar, ruling the charts. In a film industry that operated under the tidy moral logic of the heroine and the vamp, Bhosle got what was left by the others and slowly began making her mark.

This is when the then 16-year-old

eloped with 31-year-old Ganpatrao Bhosle, her elder sister's secretary. The two got married against the family's wishes, had three children and divorced in 1960.

In 1953, Bhosle sang for Bimal Roy's *Parineeta*, starring Ashok Kumar and Meena Kumari, followed by the song '*Nanhe munne bacche*' in Raj Kapoor's *Boot Polish* (1954), and '*Chhod do aanchal*' with SD Burman (Paying Guest, 1957), which got her some attention. But the real breakthrough came with composer OP Nayyar, who turned her fledgling career around with BR Chopra's *Naya Daur* (1957). But what really glistened was the sensuous '*Aayiye meherbaan*' (*Howrah Bridge*, 1958), and then there was no looking back. She sang some of her best — '*Ye reshmi zulfo ka*', '*Deewana hua badal*', '*Jaaiye aap kahan jaayenge*' and songs from *Kashmir Ki Kali* (1964), among others, with Nayyar.

A FEW OF HER FINEST

1957	***Chhod do aanchal*** Paying Guest
1958	***Aayiye meherbaan*** Howrah Bridge
1964	***Deewana hua badal*** Kashmir ki Kali
1965	***Ye hai reshmi zulfo ka*** Mere Sanam
1971	***Dum maaro dum*** Hare Rama Hare Krishna
1981	***In ankhon ki masti ke*** Umrao Jaan

In 1963, came Bimal Roy's poignant *Bandini*, with S D Burman's setting of Shailendra's lyrics, '*Ab ke baras bhej bhaiya ko baabul*', with the wistfulness of a married woman pining to see her family.

The rollicking ’70s are where Bhosle’s career got a new lease of life with R D Burman, whom she married some years later, at the helm. She could cry and laugh in a song, use dialogues, and play with her breath to produce some absolutely slick and sensuous cabaret pieces, such as ‘*Piya tu ab toh aaja*’ (*Caravan*, 1971), the phenomenal neon-hued ‘*Duniya mein*’ (*Apna Desh*, 1972), the smooth ‘*Chura liya hai tumne*’ (*Yaadon ki Baraat*, 1973) that followed the clinking of the bottles, the steamy ‘*Aao na*’ (*Mere Jeewan Saathi*, 1972), the tipsy ‘*Aao huzoor*’ (*Kismat*, 1968) and ‘*Dum maaro dum*’ (*Hare Rama Hare Krishna*, 1971), a piece that became synonymous with rebellion as Zeenat Aman smoked and sang with abandon.

Her classical prowess was heard and applauded in Muzaffar Ali’s *Umrao Jaan* (1981), for which Bhosle won her first National Award, over 30 years after she first began singing. In the later years,

Bhosle also recorded private ghazal albums with Pakistani singer Ghulam Ali besides tribute albums for Noorjehan, Farida Khanum and Mehdi Hassan. She also collaborated with US-based sarod maestro Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, under whom she began learning in 1995 as his “gandabandh shagird” (student for life). Their album together, titled ‘Legacy’, was nominated for a Grammy, making her the first Indian playback singer to be nominated for a Grammy. She was nominated again in 2006 for a collaboration with an American string quartet called Kronos Quartet.

Till the end, Bhosle kept singing, unafraid of experimentation. Two years ago, on her 90th birthday, she performed a concert and just as the spotlight came on, the power in her voice set the club ablaze.

On Chennai's walls, a fading art

by Nithya Pandian

On a ride from Chennai's Anna University to Adyar or Mylapore, it is hard to miss the murals of Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin near the Gandhi Nagar bus stop. At times, portraits of his father and former chief minister M Karunanidhi accompany them.

For over 35 years, this wall has remained a dedicated canvas for Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) leaders, not just during election season, but year-round. The murals are the work of 56-year-old Parimalam Perumal, who has spent

decades documenting political shifts through his art.

“I was a construction worker before I became a full-time political muralist... Small projects came my way in my early twenties. Since then, I have never looked back,” he says.

But this election season, typically the busiest time for muralists, has been unusually dry. Artists attribute it to the rise of digital campaigns and political parties’ growing reliance on attention-driven marketing.

From mass communication to fading medium

Political murals in Tamil Nadu trace their origins to the Self-Respect Movement of the 1940s, when social reformer EV Ramasamy’s followers used public walls to spread his messages challenging caste discrimination. Over the decades, murals became a powerful tool for political communication, shaping public memory.

A mural featuring a portrait of late Tamil Nadu chief minister M Karunanidhi (Photo: Nithya Pandian)

"Dravidar Kazhagam is the first political movement that used public spaces for political messages across the state. It was one of the ways to carry the radical messages of EV Periyar on the Self-Respect Movement," says art director Trotsky Marudu, noting their later use during anti-Hindi agitations.

"When printing press technology evolved in cinema, the painters found alternative livelihoods as letter artists, signboard artists, political muralists, banner and poster artists for small businesses," he adds.

In most localities, walls are informally “owned” by political parties, regardless of who is in power. Local leaders secure both public and private walls, often paying lease amounts ranging from Rs 10,000 for a 10x10 ft space to Rs 20,000 annually for a 30x10 ft wall.

The wall used by Parimalam in Adyar, for instance, was secured by a local DMK functionary in 1989. “This is a mutual understanding between parties. We don’t cross each other’s paths,” he says.

Any walls that are poorly maintained or left unused for over two years can be claimed by other parties for their political messaging.

Once secured, murals typically take two to three days to complete. One day is needed for the background, and two days for sketching and painting.

However, this system is beginning to change. In some places, artists now paste digitally printed images and add hand-painted election campaign

messages, says Krishna Kumar, an artist from Vyasarpadi.

Fewer orders, shrinking opportunities

But today, the very walls that once carried political messaging are losing relevance.

Vasudevan, a 47-year-old muralist from Vyasarpadi, says he received nearly 30 orders in the three months leading up to the 2016 assembly elections. By 2021, that number had dropped to three, partly due to Covid restrictions. This year, he says, he has received none. “I used to paint (portraits of) leaders from DMK and Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK). This election, I have not received a single order.”

After three decades in the profession, Vasudevan now supplements his income by painting school walls and taking up corporate projects.
According to Vijay Krishna, Deputy President of the Tamil Nadu Artists

Association, this has been one of the worst election season for muralists. “Not just portrait painters, even letter artists who write political messages or announcements of *Maanaadu* (general meetings) have stopped getting assignments,” he says.

“A significant number of artists today are either unemployed, forced to take up alternative jobs, or have reduced their practice to a part-time pursuit due to lack of consistent opportunities.”

A changing landscape

Parimalam Perumal has spent decades documenting political shifts through his art. (Photo: Nithya Pandian)

The decline is also shaped by changing urban spaces.

Artists say political murals are more common in north Chennai than in the city's south and central parts, where private property dominates, and residents are less receptive to political imagery.

Vasudevan, who painted a wall near a hotel in Nungambakkam in central Chennai for nearly 30 years, lost that space after redevelopment. Parimalam, who once painted at five locations in Adyar, an upscale neighbourhood in Chennai, now has only three.

"People here are reluctant to see such artworks in residential areas," says Naveen, Vasudevan's son. "But in North Chennai, even small homeowners would let us use their walls for political murals."

Low pay, job uncertainty

Even when work is available, earnings

remain low and inconsistent.

Artists are typically paid per square foot — up to Rs 40 — with materials such as paints and brushes supplied by local party workers. Naveen says his father earned Rs 300 a day two decades ago; today, it is about Rs 1,200, a modest increase given inflation.

The lack of formal contracts adds to the precarity.

“Unlike conventional studio-based work, our artists undertake physically demanding assignments that require extensive travel and long working hours under harsh weather. Despite the intensity and complexity of this work, compensation remains inconsistent and often inadequate,” says Vijay Krishna.

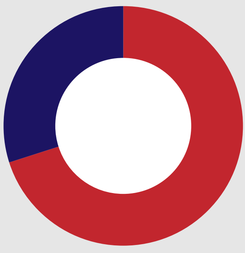
“In many cases, artists are engaged informally, leaving them vulnerable to delayed payments, underpayment, or, in extreme situations, non-payment even after completion of work.”

The rise of digital campaigns

Artists attribute much of the decline to the rapid expansion of digital campaigning.

Election campaigns now rely on teams of social media managers, video editors and content creators, producing a steady stream of posts, reels and videos.

70%



The share of political campaign budgets now going to digital - social media ads, YouTube content, TV placements, and influencer promotions according to Chennai-based campaign agencies.

A Chennai-based digital marketing firm that has worked on the 2021 assembly elections and 2024 Lok Sabha elections said it charges up to Rs 1 lakh per client for regular digital campaigns, with costs rising to Rs 10 lakh during elections. “During election season, we expand

our teams, hire photographers and videographers, and produce exclusive content," a manager said. The firm also uses AI tools to enhance video output.

Another agency working with multiple ministers said funds are increasingly directed toward online campaigns, including social media ads, YouTube content, television placements and influencer promotions. According to the agency, as much as 70% of the budget is now allocated to digital campaigning.

Digital versus traditional

In most areas, walls are informally "owned" by political parties, regardless of who is in power. (Photo: Nithya Pandian)

However, not all experts agree that traditional methods are fading.

Gayathri Lakshminarayanan, Principal Consultant at PlanPol, a political consulting firm, says parties still spend up to 60% of their budgets on traditional campaigns.

Digital campaigns, she says, have a short shelf life, whereas a mural leaves a lasting impression. “Our attention span is reduced to less than a minute, and social media campaigns, particularly on Instagram, have a limited impact on users. It was not the same for offline campaigns… Think about a mural that you see every day when you are on your way to the office and to home for nearly two to three months. It leaves an impact on people.”

Another consulting firm noted that campaigns are increasingly designed to target younger, digital-native voters, prompting higher spending on platforms like Instagram and YouTube. “Technology evolves, so we have to come

up with different modes of campaigns to attract them," the firm said.

What voters see

For some voters, digital platforms have already become the primary source of political information.

Geetha, 39, a Chennai resident, says she gets more information about elections and candidates from social media. "It gives you all the information that you need."

Others recall learning politics through murals. M Nandakumar, 27, says they helped him identify leaders and party symbols growing up. "People would look at murals to memorise leaders' names. At polling booths, we knew which symbol to press," he says, comparing today's banner culture to fast-changing Instagram trends.

An art form at a crossroads

Historians and artists emphasise that

political murals are deeply tied to Tamil Nadu's cultural history, interwoven with cinema and mass politics.

Marudu traces the tradition to early 20th-century artists like K Madhavan. In north Chennai, wall paintings thrived alongside film culture, with fans creating large murals for actors-turned-politicians like M G Ramachandran and Rajinikanth.

That tradition persists, but is under strain, caught between changing urban landscapes, shifting campaign strategies, and the rise of digital media.

For muralists like Parimalam and Vasudevan, the question is no longer just about fewer walls, but whether the age-old craft still has a place in the future of political campaigning.

Beyond the Bills

by Liz Mathew

"In our experience of 11 years of the BJP in power, if the BJP gives it in writing that they will appoint a woman Prime Minister, even then we will not trust them."

Samajwadi Party (SP) president Akhilesh Yadav's sharp retort to Union Home Minister Amit Shah's offer during the Lok Sabha debate — that the proceedings be paused for an hour so he could bring an official amendment to increase the number of seats per state by 50% — sums up the state of politics at the moment, where trust deficit

is a problem big enough to dissolve the traditional methods of dispute resolution that helped keep the system going despite the cross-aisle differences.

Senior Lok Sabha MPs admit there used to be a “strong internal mechanism” between the ruling and Opposition parties that used to help them work out unanimous formulae when it came to issues of national importance. Delimitation, for example. “In 2001, before the delimitation exercise began, there were multiple rounds of intense discussions between the two sides. Then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and then Home Minister L K Advani had a robust communication line with senior Congress leaders, for instance, Pranab Mukherjee. They made every decision after negotiations and discussions. But the communication lines are completely broken now,” said a senior BJP leader.

A senior Congress leader said there was “no proper communication” from the government or “prior discussions” for even a “crucial and pathbreaking piece of legislation”.

“There is a complete breakdown in the consultation process when it comes to pushing Bills. The BJP seems to believe in bulldozing the decisions and always wants to flaunt its so-called majority even after it lost it in the Lok Sabha polls in 2024. It does not believe in federalism and wants a presidential form of government where the PM is the first and last word on everything,” he said.

The special sitting of the Budget Session that was convened to fast-track the implementation of the women’s reservation law passed in September 2023 saw 103 MPs participate in the debate. In the end, the NDA failed to muster up the numbers to cross the two-thirds majority threshold required to push through the Constitution (One Hundred And Thirty-First Amendment) Bill, 2026 — that was brought in along with the delimitation and union territories Bills to advance the implementation of the women’s reservation law in an expanded House — with the outcome illustrating the deepening fault lines.

BJP response, Opposition criticism

The BJP, in response, has decided to launch a wide-ranging campaign against the Opposition, painting it as "mahila virodhi (anti-women)". But the Opposition believes the ruling party won't be in a position to take advantage of women's sentiments because of the parallel narrative around delimitation — that the BJP was using women as a shield to damage the federal balance — and the criticism around the way the government brought in the three Bills.

The sentiment behind Akhilesh's remark in the House — which he repeated outside Parliament too — was reflected in every public gesture of Tamil Nadu CM and DMK chief M K Stalin. In a detailed post, he explained his party's position and targeted the BJP over the lack of consultation. "We want the Women's Reservation Bill to be implemented NOW. Tamil Nadu was among the earliest to implement reservation for women in local bodies ... Our concern is with delimitation, which

requires careful thought to ensure it is fair, especially for southern states. We asked for consultation, clarity, and consensus. At the very least, the Bill could have been delinked and implemented. The NDA could have delinked it. They chose not to. They could have used this time to consult states on delimitation. They chose not to. They could have addressed these concerns in the Bill. They chose not to …”

The chronology of events leading up to the special sitting of Parliament shows why the DMK and the others in the Opposition believe that the trust deficit has widened. On March 22, in the middle of the Budget session, Amit Shah called Opposition leaders individually and in smaller groups to discuss ways to fast-track the implementation of women’s reservation in time for the 2029 Lok Sabha elections. Many major parties skipped Shah’s briefing and instead asked for an all-party meeting. The parties that attended the briefing heard him out, but they also sought a detailed discussion, saying it could

be held after April 29, when polling concludes in West Bengal. However, the government went ahead and announced the April 16-18 session, and in the draft Bills circulated earlier this week, the Opposition saw an attempt to alter the nation's "constitutional fabric" rather than simply empowering women.

The Centre's defeat in the Lok Sabha is expected to reverberate across the political landscape in the coming days, with the immediate impact likely to be felt in poll-bound West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, both Opposition-ruled states. However, given that the DMK has countered the BJP's narrative by underlining that it wants women's reservation to be implemented immediately, and the TMC is a party known for its pro-women policies and for giving women adequate representation (38% of its MPs are women), the ruling party's charges are unlikely to stick to these parties.

For now, the Opposition appears to be the most united it has been since the emergence of the BJP as the dominant

political force on the national stage.

This was evident as Opposition leaders met on Saturday morning in the aftermath of dealing the BJP its first major legislative loss since it came to power over a decade ago. There is an acknowledgement in the Opposition that while the parties have their own individual identity and particular political interests that may often be at odds with each other, on larger questions of national importance, they cannot allow the BJP to have its way like earlier. While the role played by each party in defeating the Bills was acknowledged, there was effusive praise for the Samajwadi Party, all of whose 37 MPs backed the Opposition's attempts to stop the government in its tracks, even though Uttar Pradesh would have been a beneficiary of the delimitation exercise.

Is AI rewiring how we connect?

by Bijin Jose

For a 26-year-old IT professional in Delhi, it is now easier to ask AI than to ask her colleagues.

“I hesitate a lot in meetings. It would be daunting for me to raise my hand and clear my doubts in a room full of people. But things have been different since I started using AI chatbots,” she said, requesting anonymity because her company discourages the use of AI tools. “Now, I feel it is the best way to avoid awkward situations.”

She does not consider herself a textbook introvert. Yet her reluctance to engage with her peers has found an outlet that limits real-world interactions, a pattern that mental health professionals say is becoming increasingly common.

Since ChatGPT's launch in November 2022, AI chatbots have moved well beyond productivity tools. They are now used to process emotions, rehearse conversations and seek advice — roles once reserved for friends, colleagues or therapists.

Speaking the language of AI

Therapists say the consequences are beginning to surface in how people communicate.

"People come to therapy already speaking the language of AI," said Sarthak Paliwal, a psychotherapist, faculty member at OP Jindal Global University's Jindal School of Psychology

& Counselling, and founder of the mental health platform .Khair. “Instead of raw feelings or spontaneous opinions, what we sometimes hear is a sanitised, processed version of their thoughts. They’ve already discussed the issue with an AI system and arrived with a kind of algorithm-shaped narrative.”

Part of his work, Paliwal said, has become helping clients reconnect with their own voices and question their reliance on algorithm-driven conversations. “It’s almost like people bring a pre-processed version of their feelings.”

A thinking partner

For some, the change happens gradually.

“I did not plan to use AI every day,” said Anjali Chandak, a 24-year-old communications professional from Jorhat, Assam. “It slowly became part of my routine, and then one day I realised

it was always there.”

For many users, AI has become a private sounding board. (Image: FreePik)

Chandak now estimates she spends more than 10 hours daily interacting with ChatGPT. “It is the place where most of my thoughts go first…I process ideas, rehearse conversations, and draft messages there before speaking to someone.”

The appeal, she said, is simple – AI offers a quiet environment, one where there is no pressure to respond immediately, no risk of judgement, and no fear of saying something imperfect. “By the time I speak to someone, I feel

clearer and less overwhelmed."

But the same habit also replaces small, spontaneous interactions that might otherwise happen with friends, colleagues, or family members.

Comfort, avoidance, and isolation

Dr Deeksha Kalra, a psychiatrist at Artemis Hospital, Delhi, warns that the relief that comes from avoiding social discomfort can reinforce withdrawal.

> ***"I process ideas, rehearse conversations, and draft messages there before speaking to someone."***

"AI chatbots have the potential to reinforce behaviours associated with introversion or social withdrawal. By allowing individuals to avoid uncomfortable social environments,

they may create a pattern of negative reinforcement," she said.

She draws a distinction between discomfort and disorder. "Introversion itself is not a pathological state. Introverts often function well socially but prefer solitude. The concern arises when AI becomes a substitute for human connection rather than a supplement. In such cases, individuals who are already prone to avoidance or social withdrawal may find it easier to retreat further into their cocoon."

Part of AI's appeal, Paliwal said, is the absence of social consequences.

"In therapy, there is still a person in front of you," he said. "Someone who may judge you or form an opinion about you. AI will offer acceptance to both rational and irrational thoughts."

That quality draws users who find human interaction unpredictable or

exhausting. But it also carries risk. According to Kalra, heavy reliance on chatbot interactions may inadvertently reinforce avoidance for people with social anxiety. “It has become a space to vent, seek validation, and be a one-point source for almost all information, for which previously interacting with another human being was a necessity.”

> ***“AI has become a space to vent, seek validation.”***

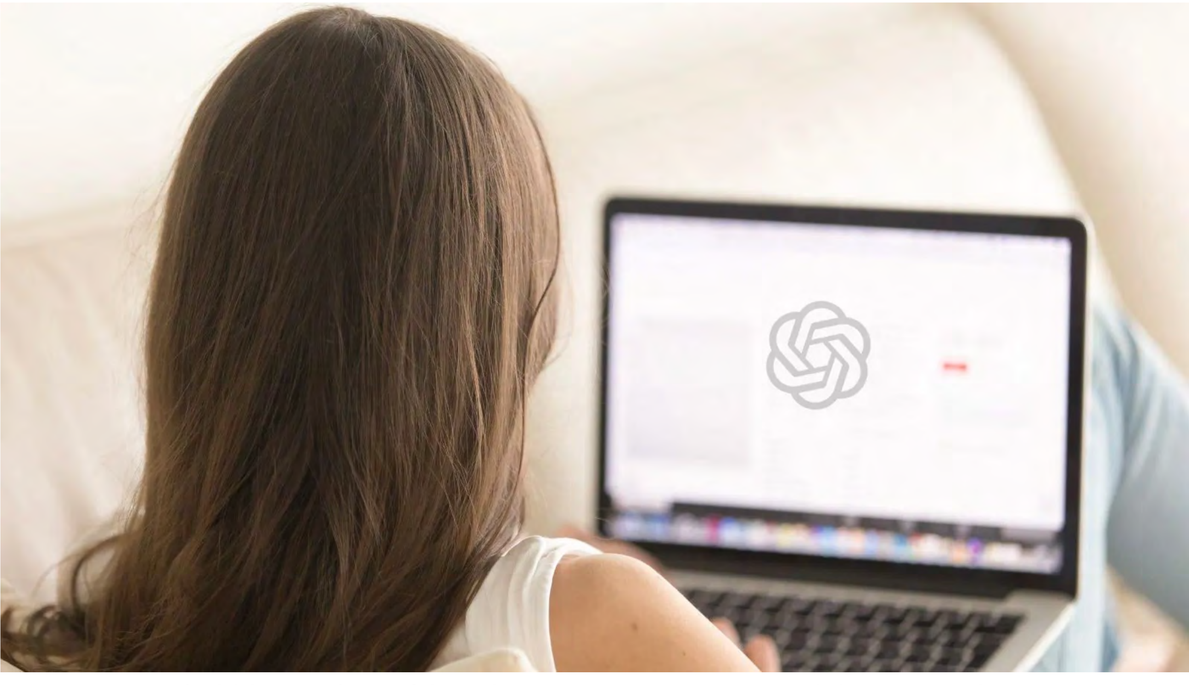
Studies warn that such behavioural changes may end up aggravating ‘psychotic symptoms’. A 2026 study led by psychiatrist M. Keshavan from Harvard Medical School, titled *Do Generative AI Chatbots Increase Psychosis Risk?*, flagged a potential for AI chatbots to exacerbate or influence psychotic symptoms.

The paper’s findings reflect a broader concern: that AI chatbots may end

up mirroring, validating, and even amplifying delusional thinking, especially in people vulnerable to psychosis. This is mainly due to the design of AI chatbots, which are often programmed to be overly agreeable at all times. A Rolling Stone report, published in May 2025, said that talking to ChatGPT can lead one to religious delusions of grandeur.

Data misuse and unease

Not everyone, however, finds the experience reassuring.



AI may feel like a safe confidant, but growing unease around data use and privacy is making some users hesitate before sharing their deepest concerns. (Image: FreepPik)

A 37-year-old finance professional from

Pune, who spoke on the condition of anonymity due to strict confidentiality norms at their workplace, described a moment when AI's limits became clear. "I described a situation to Duck.AI, a privacy-focused AI chatbot platform, to ask if it thought I had hurt a friend I hadn't spoken to in some time. The responses sounded like they came from a considerate person, but they always ended with a new question. After a point, I didn't feel comfortable asking more."

"I was wary that in some way or another it could use my responses to manipulate another person who may be emotionally vulnerable," she said.

Experts say such concerns, while understandable, point more broadly to how user data shared with AI systems can be misused. Dr Srinivas Padmanabhuni, CTO, AiEnsured, a Bengaluru-based AI company, said that while direct manipulation of individuals

via someone else's disclosures remains a grey area, the underlying risks of data misuse are real.

"The spectrum ranges from conversations being used to improve models to more harmful scenarios like targeted phishing or deepfake creation," he said. In such cases, personal information or behavioural patterns inferred from chats could be exploited to deceive or emotionally influence vulnerable individuals, sometimes resulting in financial loss, identity theft, or reputational harm.

Not everyone sees isolation

Some argue the opposite – that AI is not pushing people inward but sharpening how they interact.

For Shyam Arora, CEO and founder of Meon Technologies, a Noida-based SaaS company, the technology is doing the opposite: making human interactions

more meaningful by removing unnecessary friction.

“In terms of frequency, my interactions with people have not really changed,” Arora says. “But the depth of conversations has.” In his experience, AI tools help process information faster, allowing discussions to focus on decisions rather than basic alignment. “Earlier, meetings often involved spending time getting everyone up to speed,” he says. “Now people arrive better prepared.” That shift, he argues, improves the quality of collaboration rather than replacing it.

“AI clears the clutter,” he says.

Despite its usefulness, Arora does not see AI replacing human expression. “AI can help structure thoughts. But leadership communication is about conviction, and that happens in real human exchange,” he says.

For 45-year-old Ekta Saxena, founder

of Gurugram-based digital magazine OpinionsAndYou, the technology has quietly entered multiple parts of daily life. She avoids AI for core writing but uses it to brainstorm and reduce what she calls “drudgery.”

Yet, even she has noticed it entering personal life in unexpected ways — from meal planning to social messaging. “I see emails and even WhatsApp messages generated through AI. Friends are using it to send congratulatory messages.”

The convenience raises a broader question: When machines start drafting personal communication, what happens to authenticity?

What it means for human connection

Whether AI will amplify introversion depends less on personality and more on how individuals integrate it into their routines.

For some, it functions as a practice arena that improves communication with others. For others, it risks becoming a comfortable substitute.

Introversion, psychologists note, is not about avoiding people but about preferring environments that allow reflection and controlled interaction.

“I see this as a societal issue as much as a technological one,” Paliwal said. Conversations with people involve disagreement, vulnerability, and emotional nuance that algorithms cannot fully simulate.

As AI becomes further embedded in daily life, the question is not whether people will talk to machines — they already do. It is how those conversations reshape the way people talk to each other.

Apple@ 50: The iPhone's long shadow on consumer technology

by Anuj Bhatia

Every week, I follow a rule: I pick one item from my massive vintage tech collection, check whether it's working or needs repair, and write a short note on how it shaped the tech landscape. While cleaning my closet recently, I happened to find the first iPhone, something I thought I had lost right as Apple turned 50. It brought back memories of buying it in New York for just $20 in used condition back in 2017. I consider it my best purchase ever.

Over the years, I have added several

Apple products to my collection, from vintage Macs and iPods to accessories, some of which are rare and difficult to find elsewhere. Yet, the first iPhone stands out as a product with a transporting quality; it sums up what Apple truly represents. Perhaps not surprisingly, the iPhone represents the best of Apple in a single product — one that continues to profoundly influence modern technology, even though its foundation was laid years ago. I still find the same quality in the iPhone Air, which has been my primary phone ever since it launched last year.

Why Apple is Apple today — and how it has retained its mindset — has a lot to do with what founder Steve Jobs wanted Apple to be. Jobs left the company in 1985 and didn't return until 1997. But Jobs established the company's emphasis on industrial design. In fact, many say Jobs prioritised design over technology. This goes back to the 1980s when Jobs deeply cared about design, which allowed him to differentiate his company's products from the PCs of the

day, which often looked little evolved from hobbyist boxes.

Although Apple made many products (many considered classics, and several failed along the way), the iPhone is considered the crown jewel in Cupertino's sprawling empire. It's almost absurd to think that Apple had no prior experience designing phones, no trained engineers, no designers with cellular expertise, and no contacts in the cellular industry. Initially, Apple had wanted to make a tablet, a real tablet with no stylus, supporting multi-touch displays, and running Mac OS X.

The team had different ideas, and the easiest way seemed to be adding phone features to the iPod. But Jobs being Jobs, put the tablet project on hold, and work on the iPhone began. This was also a time when all kinds of phones existed: Slider phones, flip-to-open phones, QWERTY keypads, you name it. Jobs, however, had a different approach to making a phone. Instead of hardware, he wanted to focus on software. There was

an idea of how to fit a computer in your pocket.

With the help of talented designers, Jobs helped abandon non-intuitive user interfaces in favour of something simple and easy to use.

Once Jobs unveiled the iPhone in 2007, the way the world viewed a tech product completely changed. The iPhone revolutionised how we use phones even today, thanks to UI features like Slide-to-Unlock. For the first time, a phone was appreciated for its industrial design. After that, there was no looking back for Apple.

Many consider the iPhone to be a gorgeous piece of technology, but it was more than that. It was a display of innovation, from the reimagined user interface with no buttons to the way users interact with a single piece of glass. It also introduced a central repository for discovering new applications. The influence of the App Store, which launched in July 2008

to support the iPhone 3G's release a few months before Android's own marketplace debuted, is no small feat. The Ubers, Snapchats, and millions of other apps wouldn't exist without smartphones, and the iPhone was and remains the foundation of the category.

Looking back, the first iPhone may not seem advanced, but it represented a tremendous amount of work to make something easy to use — and no company has proven the principles of human interface design more convincingly than Apple. Jobs, alongside his frequent collaborator and industrial designer Jony Ive, pushed hard to design a product that wasn't the device customers thought they wanted — it was about the user experience: How a single product could bring information to a mobile screen, provide services and apps, and offer the ability to edit spreadsheets and documents, watch videos, send emails and texts, play games, and take photographs—all in the palm of your hand.

The iPhone changed a lot in the industry. A design-led approach was virtually unheard of before the iPhone. Apple's engineers and designers developed new technologies and helped shape the company's product design process. It was a complete shift: Apple brought marketing, engineering, and user-experience teams together. One result of that focus is Apple's ability to create products with emotional value, a strategy that has worked well for the company.

April 1976

Apple was founded 50 years ago.

Today, Apple makes billions of dollars from a single device that has shaped modern technology and pop culture. For me, though, the iPhone is Apple's biggest comeback story. But as Apple enters its second half-century, questions about its future are emerging. Wall Street and consumers are looking for the next iPhone moment, and the question

is whether Apple is ready.

Even though Apple is aggressively pushing the iPhone in emerging markets like India, it has already peaked as a consumer product. Over the years, Apple has marginally upgraded the iPhone, but there haven't been any sweeping design changes like those that once defined the device in its heyday.

Sure, the iPhone remains iconic and has spawned an entire ecosystem of products like the Apple Watch and AirPods, all hinging on the iPhone's popularity. But Apple is now at a point where it needs to decide whether it wants to continue selling the iPhone for the next 50 years or pivot to something else — a new product category where it has struggled to find a successor to the iPhone.

A smartphone, a story

by Shruti Kaushal

The Indian household isn't just about the daily hubbub of life; it is also a site of invisible labour. This labour is essential — encompassing elaborate kitchen management, cleaning every nook and corner almost daily, and grocery shopping — yet it often goes unacknowledged and is paid peanuts. However, in a curious twist sparked by social media and smartphones, that "invisible" labour is beginning to become visible. Today, domestic workers are emerging from obscurity not just as house helpers but as content creators with larger agency, audiences, and

identities.

The shift is often catalysed by the very households in which they work. When Archana Puran Singh first introduced her domestic worker and cook, Bhagyashree, in her vlogs during Covid-19, no one could have fathomed that these casual, unscripted glimpses of their bond would provide visibility to a community often ignored. The validation did not stem from pity, but from the very formula for finding an audience online: relatability.

In 2024, another star was born out of Farah Khan's kitchen, Dilip. The resident of Bihar became a viral phenomenon not just among celebrities in Mumbai but also in his village, Madhubani. So much so that the filmmaker also visited his native place. From bagging an ad with Shah Rukh Khan to building a three-story, six-bedroom bungalow, the internet's favourite Dilip has now become a household name.

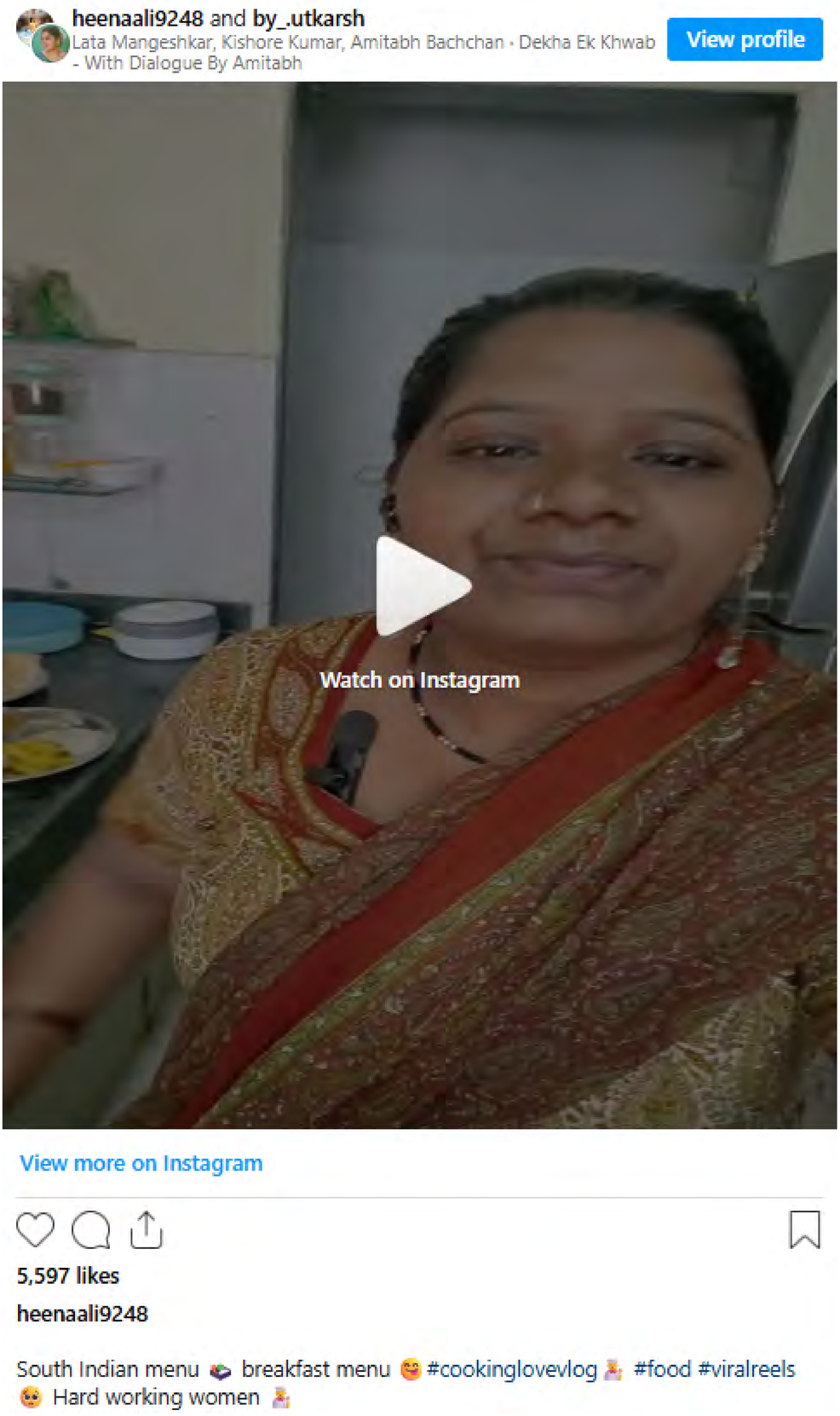
However, these moments are not

isolated to celebrities or public figures. Indian social media today has birthed several such domestic workers, who document their cooking, dancing, share slices of their daily routines, or just offer life hacks.

For Heena Ali, a domestic worker in Malad, Mumbai, it all began with a casual conversation with her employer, who suggested that she record her daily life and cooking videos for Instagram. The 35-year-old went on to appear on MasterChef India auditions. “I got a call from the MasterChef India team. They saw my videos on Instagram. I cleared two auditions but couldn’t attend the final one due to my daughter’s exams,” Ali told indianexpress.com.

Platforms like Instagram and YouTube are allowing anyone with a smartphone to create and distribute content. For domestic workers — many of whom have practical knowledge, from regional cooking techniques to home management skills — this offers a chance to monetise expertise that has

long been undervalued. But the story is more layered than a simple narrative of empowerment.



With the help of her employer, who later left the city, Ali managed to create her

community of over one lakh followers and nearly 6,000 subscribers on her YouTube channel. However, being a domestic worker in India has several setbacks, inadequate wages being one of them. “I still don’t get paid enough despite being a content creator and the fact that I was a part of MasterChef India. People simply say they can’t afford it. I have been waiting for brand collaborations, but even they don’t pay me,” she said.

For 30-year-old Prasoon Dargarh, content creation began in the most ordinary of spaces, his kitchen. “For the past three years, Didi and I have been working together in the kitchen. During our evening cooking time, we would chat, share stories, and bond like brother and sister. One day, we casually decided to record these moments and post them online. The video unexpectedly went viral, and that’s how our journey began,” Dargah shared.

“Didi” is Sapna Jamadar, 29, his house help, now a content creator. Beyond

cooking, she brings creativity to the table. “She has a strong interest in home decor, knitting, and loves experimenting with new dishes,” Dargarh added.

> ***“I still don’t get paid enough despite being a content creator and the fact that I was a part of MasterChef India.”***

Their content thrives on authenticity. “Nothing is scripted or altered; it’s all real and organic,” he shared.

Create your own identity

For Jamadar, the decision to be on camera was about dignity and identity. “I wanted to create my own identity in this world. People often think that the work we do in others’ homes is not very valuable, and I wanted to change that perspective. Bhaiya (Prasoon Dargarh) supported me throughout and always guided me, which gave me confidence,” she said.

Understanding social media took time, but today, the two function as equals, boasting nearly one lakh Instagram followers. “We’ve received around 98% positive feedback,” he noted. “People recognise me for my work and my recipes... Even at my son’s school... that makes me very happy and proud,” Jamadar said.

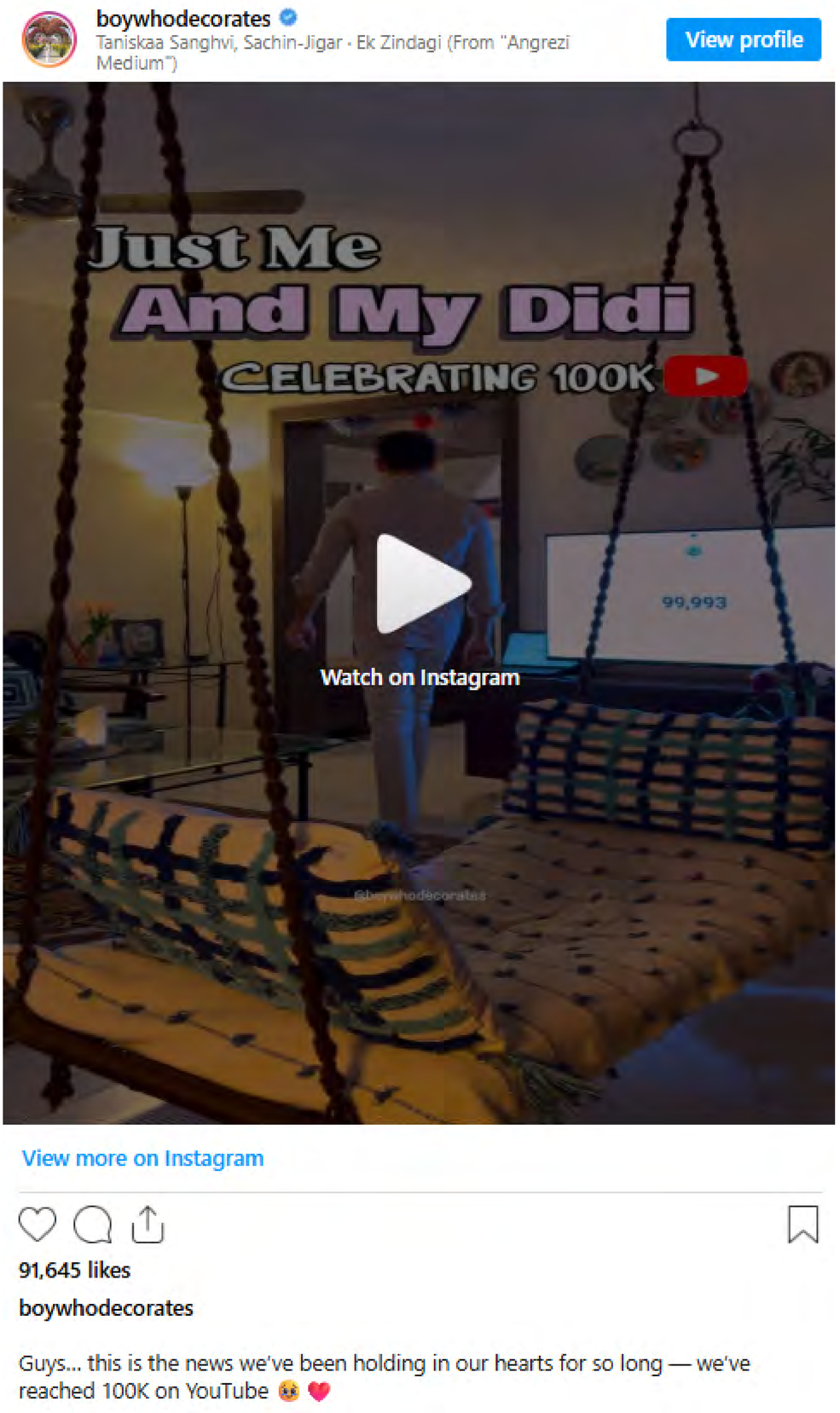
The two recently reached a lakh subscriber on their YouTube channel. “Reaching 100K on YouTube in just 2.5 months has been truly overwhelming for both of us,” he shared.

> ***“I wanted to create my own identity in this world.”***

A journey that began with spontaneity

The rise of domestic workers as content creators in India is no longer a one-off trend. It is becoming a powerful reflection of changing household dynamics, aspirations, and visibility. For

Krutika Mittal, 33, and her cook, Dipu, 27, this journey began not with strategy, but with spontaneity.



“Honestly, it wasn’t a planned decision,” Krutika shared. “We were just capturing our everyday kitchen moments, and

people really connected with his simplicity and skills."

"I realised that this could give him recognition beyond just our home, so I supported the idea naturally as things grew." At the heart of their content is a conscious effort to preserve dignity and authenticity. "We keep it very real and respectful. We only show what happens naturally in our daily routine, mainly cooking and light moments. I make sure nothing feels forced or uncomfortable for him," she explained.

Over time, Krutika also took on the role of guiding Dipu through the unfamiliar world of social media. "Initially, I explained it in a very simple way that people enjoy watching our videos and appreciate his work... I guide him through the technical and brand side of things."

For Dipu, the transition has been surprising. "Didi started making videos while I was cooking, and people liked it. I didn't think much at first, but when I

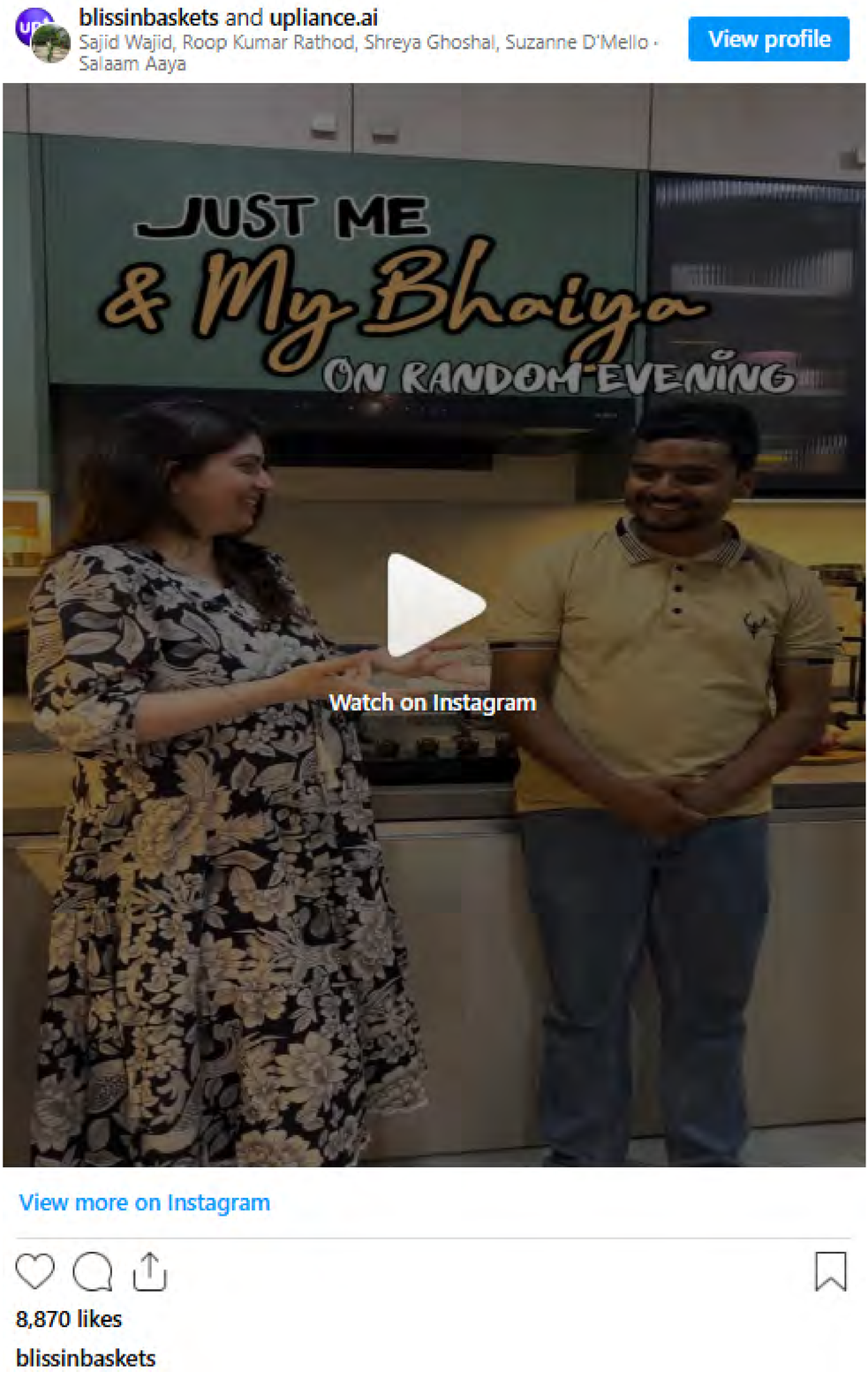
saw people appreciating my work, I felt happy, and we continued," he shared.

Now, people recognise him with his social media content. "It feels good when people respect my work. I feel very happy about good comments. It motivates me to do better. And I tell Didi to ignore bad comments. She is like my big sister, and I don't care what people say," he shared.

In a heartfelt note, Dipu also addresses speculation around earnings. "I just want to say, whatever Didi gets from brand collabs, she also gives me my share from that, be that whatever amount. Apart from my salary, I never asked for it, Didi knows better," he said.

However, as heartwarming as such partnerships appear, mental health experts urge caution. Dr Pavitra Shankar, Associate Consultant, Psychiatry, Aakash Healthcare, highlights the psychological complexities behind this trend. When domestic workers feel obligated to participate, "they might feel

anxious or even exploited, especially if they are not sure what the boundaries are.” The inherent power imbalance can make it difficult to refuse, leading to “emotional distress and low self-esteem.”



Social media exposure, particularly for individuals unfamiliar with public scrutiny, can be overwhelming. “If they get comments or are trolled, it can affect their mental health,” the expert notes, adding that sudden visibility may heighten vulnerability to “anxiety or depression.”

To mitigate these risks, experts emphasise the need for structured support like clear consent, financial transparency, digital literacy, and access to counselling. Dr Shankar believes, “empowerment should not come at the cost of health.”

While social media can open doors, it also demands responsibility. The challenge lies in ensuring that recognition does not come at the expense of autonomy, so that dignity remains at the centre of every story told.

Friendship drift: The loss no one talks about

by Swarupa Tripathy

I didn't realise friendships could just... disappear. Not with a fight, not with a door slammed shut, but with the slow, almost imperceptible fading of a signal. Like a radio station you can no longer tune into.

The realisation came to me through my oldest, closest friend. We had been inseparable in the way only childhood friends can be. The kind of closeness where you exist in each other's daily orbit as a matter of fact, not effort. We talked every single day. Phone calls that wandered through heartbreak

and job crises and the particular terror of uprooting your life and moving to another country.

When she left to go abroad, and I left for Glasgow, the distance didn't dilute us. If anything, those years of geographical separation somehow kept us closer; the time zones made our conversations feel precious and deliberate.

Then we moved back to India. She moved after nearly a decade away, I after three years in Scotland. We were finally in the same country, in the same time zone, sometimes even in the same city. I imagined us picking up exactly where we'd left off.

Instead, something strange happened. We were closer in miles yet apart in almost every other way. When we met, the ease was missing. The rhythm was off. We had both changed and had become, without quite noticing, different people. Her job kept her up through the night; mine had me on a nine-to-five clock. Our routines, our

references, even the things that made us laugh, had diverged. We tried to rebuild the old rapport, and in trying, discovered there was a gap where the automatic understanding used to be.

I felt rejected. I felt guilty. Most of all, I felt confused because nothing had gone wrong, not really, and yet something had changed. I had never expected that the person I once spoke to every single day could feel, one day, almost like a stranger. And she felt the same.

What I didn't know then was how ordinary this experience is. And how little we talk about it.

'It only hits you later'

Rutuja Sonawane, a 27-year-old PR consultant from Mumbai, lost touch with most of her college friends in the blur of early career survival. She remembers a senior colleague warning her: "Plan that trip now, because once people leave, they don't really stay." "I didn't believe her then," says

Sonawane. “But a few years later, I find myself going back to that line a lot. Because that’s exactly how it happens — you don’t realise it in the moment. It only hits you later, when the people you spoke to every day are no longer part of your everyday life.”

She describes it as “a strange kind of loss, because nothing really happened. We just moved, focusing on career growth”. Now, she makes friendships differently, “knowing they might not all last forever, and that doesn’t make them any less real. Some of them become distant, some become occasional check-ins, and some quietly turn into your network.”

Maulii Kulsreshtha, 25, pinpoints the moment she noticed a friendship fading with quiet precision:

“I noticed it when our conversations became less frequent and less natural. The moment I hesitated to share something with them, I knew something had changed. It felt quiet and a bit strange, not painful,

just a subtle realisation that we weren't as close anymore."

When she tried to reach out, the effort felt unreciprocated. "I made sense of it by accepting that if a connection needs constant pushing from one side, it's already changing. It wasn't just me — it was the dynamic shifting on both ends," she adds.

For Monica Kamath, a 33-year-old communications consultant, the experience comes with a particular quality of hope rather than grief. "I've had many friendships fade in and fade out over time, but somehow I have always reconnected with many at later stages of life," she says. "There is a sense of loss, but not without a sense of hope that we will pick things up from where we left off." She is what she laughingly calls "a hopeful platonic," someone who believes proximity and shared context are the great engines of friendship, and that when those shift, the connection goes into a kind of suspension rather than ending altogether.

Why your late 20s are the crucible

There's a reason this particular decade is so fertile for friendship drift. Aarti Belani, a trauma-informed, queer-affirmative therapist and founder of Therapist.talks, sees the pattern repeatedly in her work. She frames it as an interaction between systemic pressures, life-stage transitions, and shifts in individual identity, all converging at once.

"Economically, the current times are urging us to prioritise survival," she explains.

"When sustenance feels like it still needs to be achieved, socialisation takes a backseat."

The cost of living, career pivots, marriage, and relocation all of these create a kind of centrifugal force that pulls people in different directions. But, she notes, "this does not mean that the need for belongingness has gone away.

It means that loneliness is now more common than it ever has been".

The internal shifts are just as significant as the external ones. Friendships formed in school or college were built on proximity and shared circumstances. As people grow into more deliberate versions of themselves, those old bonds can start to feel like clothes from a different era.

Puja Roy, a health psychologist and art therapist at The Empathy Couch, adds, "Life starts getting messier and busier. Work takes up more space in your mind, relationships get serious, and your free time vanishes. You lose those old routines — seeing friends at school or after work — which made everything effortless. Suddenly, keeping in touch means you actually have to try."

She also notes a shift in how people allocate their emotional energy: "As people get older, they become pickier about who gets their energy. So it's rarely dramatic. Most of the time,

friendships fade because everyone's stretched thin."

The cost of living, career pivots, marriage, and relocation all of these create a kind of centrifugal force that pulls people in different directions. (Source: AI Generated)

This is backed by research. According to a 2025 study titled, 'With or without you: Understanding friendship dissolution from childhood through young adulthood' published in the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, "Just as the provisions and functions of friendship evolve across development, developmental factors may also shape whether, how, and why friendships end, as well as the emotional implications of these ruptures. Individual characteristics, such as increases in autonomy, as well

as contextual shifts such as school transitions and the expansion of social networks, are likely to impact experiences with friends."

The grief of a goodbye nobody said

The most psychologically complex aspect of friendship drift is the absence of closure. Unlike a romantic breakup, or even an explicit falling-out, friendship drift offers no clear narrative and that ambiguity, it turns out, can be more difficult to process than a clean ending.

Belani explains the mechanism: "Lack of clear endings or ambiguity means that there is often no clear narrative or understanding to anchor the loss we are faced with, making rumination and prolonged confusion sit within us — sometimes for even years."

The feelings of grief, pain, confusion, and low-grade sadness are real, but they are hard to locate or name. "We might sit in analysis paralysis for a long time,"

she says, “different ‘what ifs’ that cloud our mind.” Avoidance often follows: burying yourself in work, clinging more tightly to current relationships, or becoming quietly anxious about new ones.

Roy states, “When a friendship just drifts off without anyone saying ‘it’s over’, you are left hanging. There’s no explanation, so you end up replaying what happened, trying to make sense of it.”

A clear ending, she acknowledges, hurts more acutely, but it gives you something to grieve. Drift, by contrast, leaves you doing forensic work on a scene with no crime.

Guilt, self-blame, and the healthier frame

One of the most common emotional responses to friendship drift is internalising it as personal failure. Did I do something wrong? Should I have reached out more? Was I a bad friend?

Belani offers a more nuanced reframe:

"Drift in friendships isn't often about just conflict. Sometimes when things fade out without explanation, that's our first assumption — that something might have gone wrong. Drift is also about bandwidth, changing needs, and evolving selves. It's a quiet and gradual realignment rather than a deliberate ending."

When we understand drift as something that emerges from all sides, from circumstance, from growth, from the shifting of two selves moving in different directions, we stop placing the full weight of a relationship's arc on our own shoulders.

"A healthy reframe," she says, "is recognising mutual effort, life circumstances, and social bandwidth. Some relationships serve a purpose during a specific phase of life and aid our transformation."

Roy echoes this, stating, "Friendships are shaped by the context they grow in—

place, time, and mutual needs. When that context shifts, the relationship often does too." The friendship was real. It mattered. Its ending doesn't erase what it was.

Kulsreshtha, for her part, found equanimity through acceptance: "I focus on appreciating what it was instead of overthinking why it faded, and that helps me let it go without holding onto it too tightly."

What a meaningful friendship looks like now

Something else shifts alongside the friendships themselves: the definition of what a good one looks like.

In your early 20s, friendship is often about frequency and fun. The people you see all the time, the group chat that never sleeps. By your late 20s, the metric changes. Kulsreshtha says, "In my early 20s, it was mostly about fun and hanging out. Now, a meaningful friendship is deeper — it's about who

truly understands you, who's there in the hard moments, and who makes you feel seen."

Kamath has arrived at a simpler, more elastic definition: "To me, friendships are those that allow you to pick things up from where you left off. People move, opportunities come, priorities change, and life stages evolve — but somewhere through it all, you are witnessing and cheerleading for each other's growth."

How to navigate it

Both experts offer practical counsel for people navigating this terrain, whether they are trying to hold on or let go.

Belani urges people to treat social connection with the same intentionality as other life priorities: "Prioritising to connect with friends and significant others as an important part of life instead of relying on just crumbs of quality time is the first change we all need to embody."

Research, she notes, is unambiguous on this: stable, high-quality social relationships significantly enhance both mental and physical well-being. But maintaining them requires moving beyond passive check-ins. “Express care consistently and directly. Meet people where they are, and hold space for how connections might evolve across time — it might not mirror the past,” she explains.

When letting go is the answer, she advises against the internal tribunal: “Allow space for mixed emotions without assigning self-blame. Drifting apart is a common life experience, not a personal shortcoming. Relationships can be meaningful even if they aren’t permanent.”

Roy’s advice is disarmingly practical: “Checking in now and then, being honest about what you can handle, and allowing the relationship to shift if necessary.” And if the drift is irreversible? “Not all distance means rejection. Often, it’s just life getting in

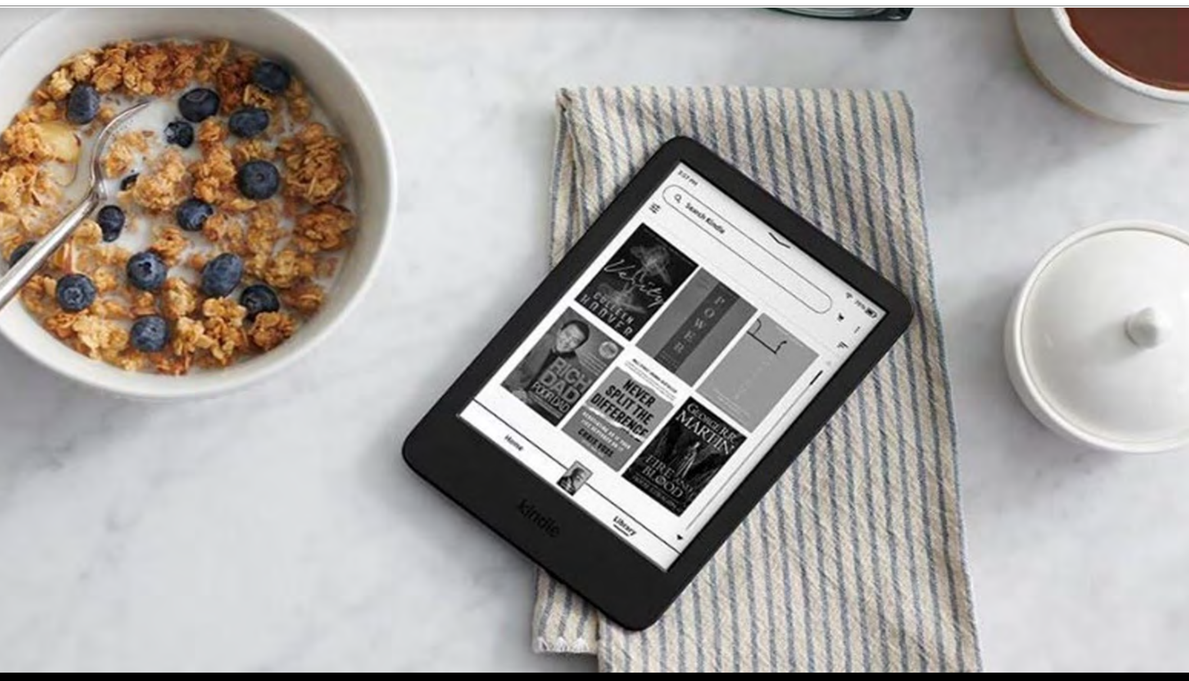
the way or priorities shifting. Seeing it that way makes it easier not to blame yourself."

My best friend and I still talk. Not every day, not even every week, sometimes. But when we do, there's something new in it: a kind of deliberateness, a choice to show up that wasn't required when we were younger and proximity did all the work. We have had to grieve the version of the friendship that no longer exists, and slowly, awkwardly, build something suited to who we are now.

It's different. It's also, in its own way, more intentional.

The friendships of our late 20s ask something of us that the friendships of our youth never did: they ask us to choose each other, not just to fall into each other by circumstance. Some friendships will survive that test. Others will fade quietly without a goodbye.

Both, in the end, are part of a life lived honestly.



Dear reader, the Kindle was never really yours

by Aishwarya Khosla

Amazon, in its infinite wisdom, has decided that Kindle devices released in 2012 and earlier have had enough of working a bit too well for their age. These sturdy reading companions — the sort that could survive Armageddon — are to be put out to pasture effective May 20.

The devices still in full possession of their faculties that have been handed redundancy notices include the Kindle Keyboard, Kindle Touch, Kindle 4 and 5, and the first-generation Kindle

Paperwhite, among others. The notice itself is warmly worded, but that has done little to comfort readers for whom these devices were ride-or-die companions through the thick and thin of life — the book read and re-read hundreds of times, never fraying or falling apart.

Books already downloaded may still be read, but no new ones may be purchased, borrowed, or downloaded. And should you deregister or reset the device, you will not be able to re-register it. The library, in other words, is bricked. One either buys a new Kindle or risks losing it entirely.

In memoriam

As I read disgruntled users reminiscing about how their Kindle had been passed down from a grandparent, or was the first gift from a spouse, I look at my own Kindle Paperwhite, bought in 2018 with my first salary and the starry-eyed conviction that I would conquer my Everest-high TBR list in no time.

Now, jaded and juggling subscriptions, I find myself imagining the object's wake: black devices laid neatly on a silk tabletop, flowers heaped nearby, the largest wreath from Amazon with a condolence card offering 20 per cent off. Teary whispers of, "they don't make them like that anymore."

A stark reminder that digital ownership is an illusion; our Kindles may belong to us, but only until the terms change.

The mourners, in my imagination, are those venting on social media. There is the man who owned four Kindles across 17 years and wants you to know the transition to e-readers was, on balance, good for his back. There is the woman who read Middlemarch twice and is unsure whether she is grieving the device or the version of herself who

had the time and fortitude to read it not once, but twice. And there is the person — immediately recognisable as a kindred spirit — who had 473 books in their library, of which they read 150, and who feels the loss most keenly. Not for the unread books, but for the idea of themselves as someone who might get to them someday.

In the kitchen, inevitably, there is a man stuffing forkfuls of lasagna into his mouth while evangelising about what he considers the greatest discovery since paper: Calibre.

For the uninitiated, Calibre is free software that manages e-books outside Amazon's ecosystem. The Calibre man has the expression of someone who has been right for 15 years and has finally been vindicated. Nobody can stand him. Everyone wishes he would leave.

Limited ownership

The rest of us knew, of course. This is what nobody will say directly, though

everyone is thinking it with great intensity: we knew we did not own the books. We knew that, against better judgment, we had entered a landlord-tenant arrangement with Amazon. But over the years, we hung pictures, repainted the walls, and began to think of the place as home. The terms and conditions said otherwise, in the font size designed to be agreed to rather than read.

The Kindle is not even the first landlord to do this. iTunes purchases have vanished, digital film libraries revised, game platforms shuttered mid-save. The Kindle is only the latest chapter in a longer discovery: that digital ownership was always a kind of fiction.

Why did we do it then? Because the Kindle understood something important about readers: what we wanted more than books was to be a person who read books. Someone who always had something on the go, who travelled light but read heavily, who carried an inexhaustible portable library. This was

the stuff of bibliophiles' dreams.

Now, some tenants in the older flats have received notice to vacate, with 20 per cent off the next tenancy if they sign before June. One customer, quoted by The Register, put it well: "A discount on something you hadn't wanted to spend on in the first place is a lopsided deal." Amazon's response has been to restate that the devices were supported for 14 to 18 years, that technology has moved on, and, well, these things happen.

> ***" The Kindle understood something important about readers: what we wanted more than books was to be a person who read books."***

But these things do not simply happen; they are decided. Older Kindles were also the affordable ones — the entry point for readers who could not upgrade every few years, for whom this is not an inconvenience but a loss. There is also the small matter of perfectly functional devices now destined for landfill, in a year when Amazon will no doubt publish

a sustainability report.

As I read the terms and conditions I once ignored, I wonder if my first salary — and subsequent purchases — might have been better spent on a bookshelf.

I look down at the Kindle in my hands. Somewhere in its accumulated annotations are traces of a younger version of myself, and I am always surprised by her — sitting in a matchbox-sized room, having one-sided arguments with authors.

The Kindle was mine, I had assumed, until the dying light — something that would be pried from my cold, dead hands with Herculean effort.

It is mine, Amazon has clarified, only for as long as the arrangement remains mutually convenient. It is also, I would argue, a cruel thing to do to a reader who was only trying, with her first salary and optimistic heart, to become a little more formidable.