The Indian EXPRESS
October 2025 Issue

SPECIAL EDITION

# PLUS+


## From Matcha to Meta
## Inside the Gen Z Spectrum

The Indian EXPRESS

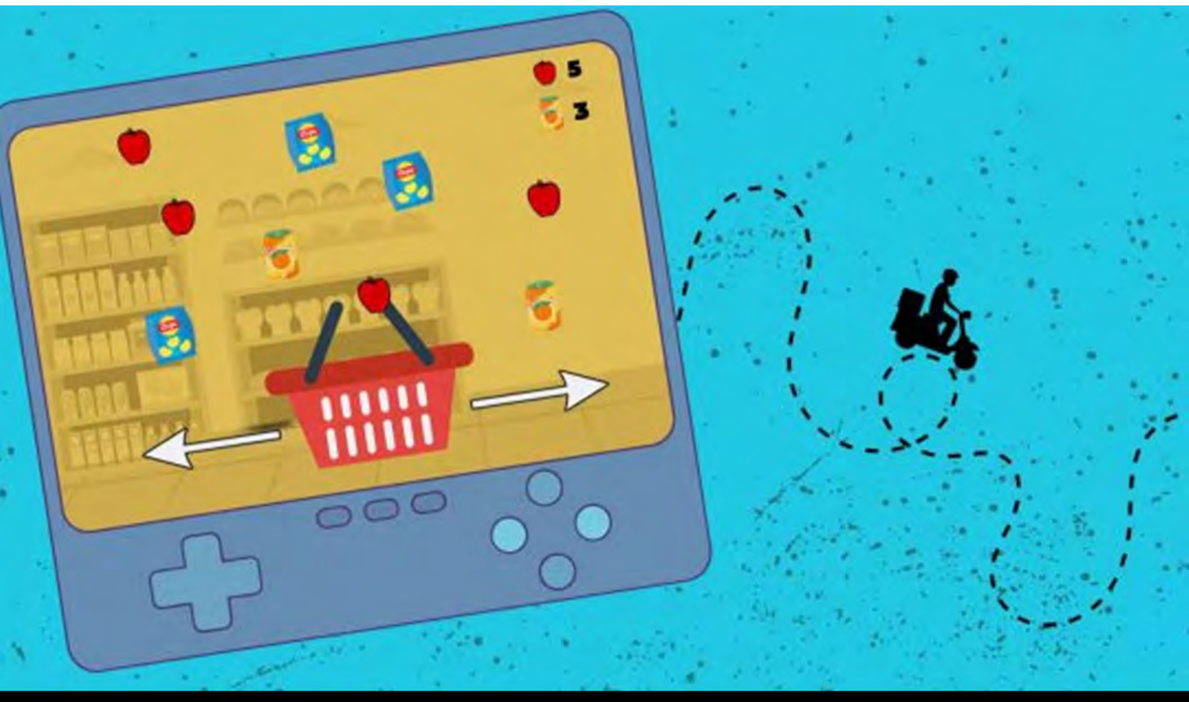
# INDEX

*From kirana nostalgia to digital burnout, irony-laden humour to quiet rebellion — Gen Z is redefining what it means to grow up in an age of endless scroll. In this month's issue, we dive into the moods, manias, and contradictions shaping a generation that's both hyperconnected and deeply self-aware.*

*We revisit the local kirana store through the eyes of a delivery-app addict, trace the slow fade of rock bands in the algorithm era, and sip on the internet's new cultural obsession — matcha. From Kota's relentless coaching corridors to the delulu dreams fueling self-belief, our writers unpack what it takes to find meaning amid metrics.*

The Indian EXPRESS

# INDEX



# Why I miss my local kirana store: Confessions of a serial delivery-app user

– *Karishma Ayaldasani*

It's been four years since I started using apps like Blinkit, Swiggy, and Zepto. For the first two, I barely thought about it. They were fast, convenient, and fit perfectly into the chaos of my college, living-in-Mumbai life. Surrounded by people all the time, in classes, the canteen, or even down the road, I'd do anything to avoid another social interaction. And the option of ordering something on a quick-commerce app offered just that comfort, a quiet pocket amid all the noise.

But something shifted when I moved cities for work. I was living alone now. Friends were far away, family even farther. Most of my time went

into figuring out money, rent, food, and the million other things no one warns you about. Now, I missed the tiniest interactions, the ones you don't even register when you're busy being social by default. Now, socialising took effort. And I started to realise what the convenience of delivery apps was quietly replacing: the walks I skipped, the conversations that never happened, the local prices I no longer understood. No one is as disappointed in me as my dad for not knowing how much a kilo of mangoes costs.

In a world constantly on the move, where workdays spill into late nights, where we live far from home and physical stores often feel out of reach, Q-commerce platforms have become an everyday essential. Need coffee? Bread? A razor? Tap a few buttons and it's at your door in ten minutes. These apps have nailed speed, range, and efficiency. It works — until it doesn't.

What began as a fix for urgency became something else: a reflex. I wasn't ordering because I needed something. I was ordering because it was easy. Almost too easy.

I often think back to childhood. Growing up in a small town, buying chocolates or chips meant walking with my brother and friends to the neighbourhood shop. When my mother asked me to go get milk or biscuits for unexpected guests, I would throw a tantrum, wishing for the

fix I despise today. But those errands taught us things without trying to — how to spend, how to choose, how to talk to strangers, and sometimes, how to walk away without buying anything. It was all built into the experience, without ever seeming like a lesson.

That walk to the store was once forgettable, even annoying. Now, for many like me, it has become “the thing”. We force ourselves to go outside, to not order in, because the room can feel imprisoning.

In the age of instant gratification, everything’s designed to be faster, smoother, and frictionless. But in removing the friction, we also remove the feeling. Grocery stores used to be a little boring, a little messy, and sometimes unexpectedly lovely. You might chat with someone on the street, discover something new in the market, or just stretch your legs after a long day. Now? Sadness has a shortcut — a ten-minute delivery offering a dopamine hit that fades just as fast.

We also move less. Those mini walks to the store, the quick sprints before closing time, rushing to the stationery store to buy political maps for tomorrow’s geography lesson, have been replaced by a single tap. We are always on the go, but weirdly still. There’s no release, no break, no in-between space. It’s work, screen, delivery, repeat.

Socially, the gap widens too. The shopkeeper who remembers your favourite biscuit brand, the old aunty who asks where you have been — these tiny connections are vanishing. There's no credit system anymore, no end-of-month snack debt to settle. The trust your neighbourhood shopkeeper had in you, the nod that said "pay later", is gone.

And then there's awareness. When you stop visiting markets or shops, you lose a sense of what things cost, what's fresh, and what's worth your money. You stop comparing. You start buying what the algorithm suggests — another pen, a fancy drink, a lip balm you saw in a reel. It's easy to fall into "I see it, I want it" because the system makes you feel like you deserve it. And maybe you do. But maybe you just need to feel something.

These apps aren't villains. They are incredibly useful, especially when you're tired, sick, working late, just having one of those days, or even want a last-minute gift delivered to your doorstep. They do what they promise, and they do it well. But when we stop using them mindfully, when they become our first option instead of a last resort, we end up giving away more than just our money. We give away our movement, patience, curiosity, and our sense of place.

In a world already leaning toward loneliness,

where most of us are glued to screens and disconnected from community, even small things like going to buy milk or fruit can offer something grounding. You step out, you see people, you breathe. You feel like you are part of a world again.

So no, I am not quitting Blinkit. I will probably order from it this weekend. But I am also trying to walk to the store, one that is literally 200m away, more often. Not because it's cheaper (though it usually is), not because I need the steps (though I do), but because I want to stay in touch with the world outside my door.

Sometimes, what you really need isn't a ten-minute delivery. It's a ten-minute walk.


# Meta humour and brain rot

***– Sonal Gupta***

Gen Z thrives on meta humour. Memes reference older memes, slang mutates out of chat threads overnight, and emojis rarely mean what they depict. The Internet is one giant inside joke, and iykyk (if you know, you know).

This is where Aryan Khan's The Ba***ds of Bollywood has earned its fan following. It has triggered an Internet-wide easter egg hunt, and everyone seems to agree: it is pure 'brain rot' cinema. With self-referential digs, profanity-laced humour, and absurd plot twists, the seven-episode series is a hilarious take on the industry.

Brain rot, Oxford's 2024 Word of the Year, is both a diagnosis and a guilty pleasure. It describes the

supposed “deterioration” of one’s mental state due to the overconsumption of online content. But it has also become the Gen Z phrase for content that offers an escape from the everyday and mundane. The fun of brain rot lies not in its lack of sense but in its refusal to take sense seriously. It is when absurd plot twists meet slapstick humour, a series of mishaps, and a little bit of cringe.

## What works for The Ba***ds of Bollywood

Users have dedicated Reddit threads, X discussions, and Instagram reels to fish out the real-life references in the show and dissect each cameo.

There are obvious references, such as Khan’s dig at his drug-related arrest, with an actor that looks suspiciously similar to the real-life Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) officer Sameer Wankhede. He ended the scene with a cheeky, “Say no to drugs”. What makes it funnier is that comedian Samay Raina turned up to the show’s premiere wearing a T-shirt that read, “Say no to cruise”, referencing Khan’s arrest at a party on a cruise ship.

There is a nod to the Ananya Panday-Siddhant Chaturvedi banter over nepotism. Chaturvedi’s remark at Karan Johar’s roundtable – “The difference is jahaan humare sapne poore hote

hain, wahi inka struggle shuru hota hai (Their struggle starts where our dreams are fulfilled)" – became an iconic clapback to the nepotism debate. But Aryan Khan, a star kid himself, does not stop there. He hints that the industry is self-aware and unlikely to change. Cue Johar's line: "Don't mess with the movie mafia." If that rings a bell, it's because it is straight out of Kangana Ranaut's explosive 2017 Koffee With Karan episode, where she crowned Johar the "flag bearer of nepotism and the movie mafia."

But perhaps what turns the entire debate on its head is the ending of the show (no spoilers here), which has left everyone wondering: is there a real-life parallel lurking behind that finale, too?

Redditors also dug deep to uncover a treasure trove of more subtle references. For instance, if you take a closer look at the text messages received by Ajay Talwar (played by Bobby Deol), you would see chats with "Sunny" (Deol's real-life brother) and "Ranvijay Singh" (his on-screen rival in Animal).

Several cameos sprinkled across the storyline have generated much intrigue as well. There is Orry with his controversial jacket. Emraan Hashmi, the OG lover boy for a generation who grew up watching his films, finally gets the acknowledgement he deserves. Arshad Warsi returns in a get-up similar to his most-loved role as 'Circuit'.

Many have also argued that the show hinges on these high-profile cameos and self-digs to make up for the lack of compelling storytelling. One user called it a “glorified spoof with a big budget”. But for others, it is this nonsensical structure that works. It is the perfect example of that one viral meme, “Never let them know your next move”.

## A Bollywood template

Bollywood has been belting out ‘brain rot’ cinema even before the term entered our vocabulary. Driven by masala, comedy of errors, and the nonsensical, brain rot has long been the national pastime.

Several audience reviews of the series have drawn comparisons to Farah Khan’s style of direction. Her films, like *Tees Maar Khan* and *Happy New Year*, both heist comedies, thrive on caricatures, chaos, and wildly inventive (often delightfully wacky) plots that exist only to entertain. She is also the queen of self-referential cinema. *Om Shanti Om* pays homage to classics like *Karz*, *Dream Girl*, and *Mother India*. Meanwhile, *Main Hoon Na* slips in references to *Sholay*, with “Dhanno” painted on the back of a rickshaw and Satish Shah channelling a hilariously Gabbar-esque energy.

And no conversation around brain rot cinema can be complete without the mention of the

2000s era of Indian cinema, when Priyadarshan delivered films that went on to attain cult status. *Malamal Weekly*, centred on an entire village that pursues a dead man's lottery winnings, is now celebrated for its unforgettable one-liners and performances. *Hera Pheri*, once just another exaggerated comedy, has transformed into an internet legend, feeding memes even today and cementing Paresh Rawal's place in cinematic history. Films like *Garam Masala* and *Bhagam Bhag* followed similar trajectories, becoming pop-culture staples years after their debuts.

Anees Bazmee's *Welcome* is another standout example of this genre. Nana Patekar's resigned "*Seh lenge thoda*" has morphed into a universal WhatsApp reaction. Majnu Bhai's absurd horse painting adorns walls and t-shirts. And Mushtaq Khan's immortal "*Meri ek taang nakli hai*..." line still resurfaces whenever audiences want to call out obvious PR gimmicks. The baton was later picked up by Rohit Shetty in the 2010s, with entertainers like *Golmaal*, *Bol Bachchan*, and *All The Best*, which leaned unapologetically into chaos, slapstick, and melodrama

These movies break away from the mould of more serious cinema. Brain rot does not mean "bad" cinema. It is the kind of entertainment that works precisely because it is outrageous, exaggerated, and joyfully illogical.

# Where did all the rock and roll bands go?

***– Vaishnawi Sinha***

I was eight years old, maybe younger, when I heard ‘Smells Like Teen Spirit’ by Nirvana. It was my first taste of rock and roll, and it opened my soul to a sound I didn’t know existed. I remember jumping up and down in the living room with my brother as Kurt Cobain screamed in the backdrop of wailing electric guitar on VH1. I think it’s safe to say that I knew the kind of music I would be obsessed with for the rest of my life before I knew that mitochondria are the powerhouse of the cell.

My deep fascination with this raw, uncut genre only grew in my teen years — not just because of my inclination, but because of how it influenced the culture around me. I remember my dad listening to Pink Floyd and Dire Straits at house

parties with his friends. I remember teenagers around me taking guitar lessons, modelling their entire personalities after the legendary Axl Rose. I even remember begging my mom to buy me my first band t-shirt when I was just 11 years old — an oversized, grey top with the album art of The Beatles' 'Abbey Road' printed on it.

In the early 2000s, independent music burst onto the Indian scene. As the obsession around rock and roll grew, so did the local bands, who may have started out with Led Zeppelin covers but soon found their own sound. It seemed that the thirst for rock could never be satiated — until today, when the craze seems to have died down.

Nearly two decades later, the sound and soul of a genre, which once breathed second life into some of the biggest music movements of the time, seems lost. But for the veterans of the genre, rock and roll will survive as long as the spirit of rebellion is alive.

## The not-so-quiet shift from guitars to soundboards

In a candid conversation, legendary musician Subir Malik reminisced about how his band Parikrama, considered to be the biggest rock band of Asia at one point, used to play hundreds of college shows up until the 2010s. IITs and IIMs had a deep rock and roll society. Fast forward a

decade, and almost no college hosts a rock night anymore.

“College kids in the early 2000s were listening to Floyd and Zeppelin, which is why they related to Parikrama’s music. But after 2012, the sound shifted, and local rock and roll bands went into a deep decline,” Subir said.

The 55-year-old musician, who founded Parikrama with his younger brother and college mates in the late 1980s, explained how the shift in the digital age is one of the major factors why the genre was subdued in the mid-2010s.

“One major reason behind this decline was the shift from a guitar base to a synth base. Another core reason is that earlier five or six musicians used to sit together with their instruments and compose a song. Now, with technological advancements, a kid with a laptop can sit and write and compose a whole song from his home,” Subir said.

Raaghav, a budding music producer, helped me gain a deeper understanding of this technological shift. While the influence of rock and roll remains entrenched in the music we listen to now, he said, the shift is somehow justified.

Young musicians would rather invest in a good laptop or a home setup than in bulky hardware

like expensive electric guitars and massive amps. An amateur producer can now sample music off YouTube, rip any international music mixing software at zero cost, download beats from the infinite music platforms available now, or even make his own using a portable sound board attached to his personal computer.

The reliance on software and soundboards, while more cost-effective, put an end to the raw sound of the typical 80s rock and roll. The shift to appliances from instruments produced clean, precise music, friendly for streaming and aesthetically pleasing, just as the demand for a 45-second drum solo in an eight-minute record came crashing down.

The change became apparent to me during a nostalgic visit to my school in Noida, where students from different walks of life only united over one front, our annual music festival. It was the one event which was ours — loud, brash and steeped in personal rebellion. We used to cover the walls of the school with graffiti while blasting Megadeth songs in the corridors as teachers took a backseat. It is one of the few core memories I hold from my school days.

To relive the past, I went back to my school fest a couple of years ago. I was ready to vibe once again, but what was once an ode to rock and roll and heavy metal was now a celebration of

pop music. The shift from Megadeth to Maroon 5 caught me off guard. Not just the artists, but the tone of the event had changed.

Teenagers now wore vintage band t-shirts off of Shein just for their aesthetic value, and the burn of rebellion behind rock and roll now simmered at a low flame. Don't get me wrong, people are still deeply passionate about the music they listen to, but somewhere along the way, the 'how' changed.

Now, we don't wait for albums to drop; we discover new music and artists through trending Instagram reels. We skip intros, loop the hook, and judge a track on the basis of the first 30 seconds. Rock and roll, with its messy solos, long buildups and unabashed energy, doesn't fit the format anymore. The time when each track demanded your attention, not your algorithm, is long gone.

Now, long guitar solos are mostly limited to reels with a nostalgic filter on them. Rock and roll is more of a mood board than a movement, and honestly, I miss the noise.

## Is rock and roll dead? Veteran rockers give the final verdict

In a long conversation, Subir took me on a trip to the 90s and 2000s rock and roll scene, explaining

with vivid passion how Parikrama, along with other big Indian rock bands, changed what the genre meant. And how the youth of India saw rock and roll music as a wave of rebellion and a symbol of anti-establishment sentiment, which runs deep in the heart of every 20-something who chose to pick up a guitar once in their life.

So, is rock and roll gonna survive the current paradigm shift in music? His response was simple, “Of course it will.” He elaborated, “After a pause of nearly a decade, Parkirama was invited to perform in seven top colleges across the country, a clear sign that the demand for the genre is still there. In fact, I attended a music festival a few years ago, dedicated solely to rock bands, and I was shocked to see the entire crowd filled with youngsters, most of them in their early 20s.”

“It is surely making a comeback, and the signs are there. In fact, you see a similar style of music in a lot of mainstream Bollywood tracks, a good example would be the Dil Dhadakne Do album. In fact, when it comes to the live scene, all the headliners in big music fests in India, be it Lollapalooza or Zomaland, are rock bands,” he said.

Iconic guitarist Randolph Correia, who founded the iconic band Pentagram alongside Vishal Dadlani, is certain that rock and roll will never fade out.

“Music evolves, and almost everything we hear today i.e. modern music, comes from or has some relation to 50s, 60s, 70s rock and roll. Energy cannot be destroyed, it transforms and that’s the world we live in today. Rock and roll ain’t dead. It’s on your phone and streaming services and it will keep haunting you for the rest of your life,” he said.

My take? I believe that rock is something which is passed down from generations, taking up a new shape with every passing year. What Deep Purple was to my father, a band like Arctic Monkeys is to me. But will the generation after me embrace the genre with the same open heart that I did?

The pattern of dissent that rock and roll follows — my dad’s metal house parties as an escape from the suit-and-tie life; my siblings and I watching late-night televised concerts on V1H; and a bunch of kids reclaiming the school grounds at an annual music event — might never be replicated again, but the hope remains that its soul will survive for ages to come.


# Matcha may not be everyone's cup of tea, but it's brewing up a cultural obsession

***– Sonal Gupta***

On a particularly muggy Sunday, I stepped into the heart of Mumbai's matcha obsession. I was in Bandra, the vibrant, "posh" suburb, where every winding lane seems to lead to a café. If you were to look up the city's top matcha spots, you would find most of them nestled right here, abutting the pastel-hued East Indian bungalows.

My destination was a tiny matcha bar, bustling with customers. As I glanced inside, patrons were playing board games and indulging in café food, and on almost every table sat a tall glass of green. The hostesses were busy answering questions from matcha newbies like me. "Vanilla bean is our best seller," one of them informed

me when I asked what I should try.

I was handed a takeaway cup, which tasted equal parts bitter and sweet.

Outside, a cat had made its way into the tiny quarters where more customers were waiting for their turn. She found her place on the lap of a woman in her late 20s. I asked her if she was here to try matcha.

*A mango-matcha latte at a cafe in Mumbai. (Photo by Sonal Gupta)*

“Of course, isn’t this place most famous for matcha?”

“Have you had it before?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t like it there. I have heard it’s authentic here,” the woman replied.

A growing cohort of young Indians has taken on the cafés in search of “authentic” matcha after a wellness boom popularised it in the West. The powdered, whisked Japanese tea, rebranded as the holy grail for fitness influencers and wellness girlies, has stirred a full-blown lifestyle trend. Less jittery than coffee, prettier than a protein shake, and brimming with antioxidants, matcha quickly became the go-to antidote to caffeine culture.

## The matcha mania

Matcha is no ordinary beverage. It’s become a sort of cultural capital. Being a coffee connoisseur no longer fetches the brownie points a knowledge of matcha would. Do you know its different flavour profiles? Can you distinguish the shades of green? Do you know where to source the most authentic matcha from?

It has found its way into lattes, coolers, and even desserts like cakes and cookies, with its original earthy taste masked with sugar and

ingredients like caramel, mango, strawberry and more. Several influencers have included the green drink in their morning 'GRWM (get ready with me)' reels or as their choice of beverage for a six-part 'story time'. Instagram accounts, dedicated to making matcha at home and experimenting with different recipes, have cropped up.

However, it also seems to be the most divisive beverage on the Internet.

"I am not even sure if people like it or are just trying to look cool," said a 31-year-old marketing specialist, Sanman Golwalkar. When Golwalkar tried matcha, his first thought was, "It's like eating grass or the tea powder left after the tea is made". He tried matcha chocolates during a trip to Japan, which he liked better than the drinks served at cafés in India.

27-year-old Khushboo Singh, a PR executive, echoed his thoughts: "Earlier, it used to be limited only to specific, low-key, underrated cafés, but now franchises like Chaayos, Third Wave (Coffee) and Got Tea are getting into it only because it's popular. I have tried and hated all." Notably, Tim Hortons just became the latest coffee chain to add matcha to its menu.

Singh added that there is some sort of peer pressure or even "a class bias" behind matcha's popularity. "It's like how can you not like the

new album by The Weeknd? I just don't. Same way, how can you not like matcha? Because it's sh*t," she said.

Anushka Mukherjee, a 27-year-old writer-researcher from Bengaluru, begged to differ. "There's nothing so hateable about it. And it's not like it has to be an alternative to coffee. I still have my coffee, but it's nice to have some matcha midday, when you want a cold beverage after lunch, especially on hot days."

Mukherjee said when she first tried matcha a few years ago, "I didn't love it, but I didn't hate it either". She was discouraged from trying more because of the steep cost of matcha. But by last year, matcha was everywhere, and in almost every café, which meant it became a bit cheaper. "It was almost as much as coffee, and I thought I could have more of it," she said. Starting with matcha laced with flavours like strawberry or almond, she eventually moved onto regular matcha lattes, before realising it would be easier and more cost-effective to just make matcha at home.

"It's so easy to learn how to make it, because the algorithm pushes it relentlessly. My explore feed is so matcha-dominated. It was hard not to buy it, because it looked super easy. Everyone's doing it. And it's much cheaper than buying a drink all the time," Mukherjee added.


*A vanilla bean, matcha latte from the Tokyo Matcha Bar in Bandra (Photo by Sonal Gupta)*

Meher Kohli, the co-founder of Tokyo Matcha Bar in Mumbai's Bandra, suggested that opinions may be divided because people new to matcha may not have found the right place or right flavour. "People going to other cafés that are maybe not making the best quality matcha, or maybe not making it in the best way possible, may have this notion that matcha is disgusting. They say it tastes like grass. Which is why I think it requires a little bit more of an introduction," said Kohli.

Kohli and her partner, Rahul Ramnani, veterans of the beverage industry with their café Ritual Daily Coffee at Pali Hill, launched the matcha bar in Bandra just months ago in October 2024.

The thought began when they introduced a matcha latte at Ritual and saw that there was an audience for it. “We introduced it over two years ago, when barely any café had a matcha latte on its menu. We also had to educate customers about it,” Kohli added.

At Cravin by Andy, in Mumbai’s Fort area, one of the baristas opines that matcha is an acquired taste. “People, who have tasted matcha before, seem to like ours. Newcomers take some time to get used to it. But we have a lot of repeat customers,” he told me.

Karishma Shah, an integrative nutritionist and health psychologist, concurred. “The matcha tea is very different from the Indian chai, in the way that it is harvested, processed and consumed. It’s very rich in the whole earth energy, so it might taste sandy to some people. It might not work for everyone,” she said.

## Matcha’s health benefits

Beyond the ‘it girl’ image, matcha has earned a loyal following in the wellness world. But what does it actually do? Shah helped clarify the facts. She said that matcha has less caffeine per cup than a regular brewed coffee. A component called L theanine releases this caffeine in a slow and sustained manner. In comparison, coffee releases caffeine very quickly, causing an extreme adrenaline rush, which can sometimes lead to

a crash, Shah elaborated. L theanine also sends calming signals to the body, whereas coffee can cause anxiety in some people.

Matcha is rich in catechins, particularly epigallocatechin gallate (EGCG), a potent antioxidant, which has anti-ageing properties. Coffee also has catechins but in lower concentrations. Shah added that matcha is also better for gut health because it's gentle on the stomach, while coffee is very acidic.

But Shah asserted that it's not a fix-all solution as the Internet makes out to be. "There is no shortcut to weight loss or glowing skin," she said. "It may boost your metabolism a little after a meal, or help give you a little pre-workout energy. As far as skin is concerned, that is a direct reflection of your gut health and hormones, and matcha can't directly fix them. It will help if you replace your coffee with matcha as it won't dehydrate your body or give you crashes."

Shah also warned that overconsumption of anything is bad. For those with caffeine sensitivity, she recommends only 1-2 cups of matcha per day. It may also be wise to check your source as a lower grade, cheaper matcha could be contaminated, she added.

## Where matcha comes from

Matcha first came to Japan in the 12th century

when a monk brought back seeds of the Camellia sinensis from China. Monks began drinking the tea to relieve fatigue, outlining a set of protocols for handling it. As it proliferated outside of the Zen temples, it first gave rise to a form of entertainment, tocha, where guests attempted to distinguish between teas grown in various regions of Japan.

In later centuries, tea became a way to socialise and a part of everyday life, giving rise to Chanoyu (literally translated to “hot water for tea”), a cultural practice of drinking tea with guests. The tea ceremony includes a specific set of intricately designed utensils, including a characteristic ceramic bowl. Traditionally, the powdered tea is mixed in hot water in a bowl, using a whisk. A back-and-forth movement of hands ensures a smooth consistency of the prepared concoction.

In the 21st century, this Asian staple gripped most of the world. Japan’s export of green teas grew nearly 25 per cent in 2024 from the previous year to 36.4 billion yen (that’s a whopping Rs 2,000 crore and some more), as per government data. However, with the matcha mania comes a sobering reality: several leading tea sellers have run into shortages, squeezing domestic and global supplies. Scorching temperatures last summer, which dried out tea fields, have also left farmers and the industry unable to keep up with the global demand.


# I was once a NEET aspirant. Here's what the Kota Factory doesn't tell you

– *Vaishnawi Sinha*

Over a decade ago, I believed cracking NEET would be my ticket to instant success. My dreams and aspirations weren't focused on becoming a doctor; they were just pivoted towards cracking one competitive exam. The 12-hour study sessions, obsession with ranks, and never-ending mock test series were all packaged and sold to a 16-year-old girl as a path to the good life. I soon learnt I had been heavily misled.

Today, at 26, working as a journalist far removed from that path, I still find myself revisiting those

years. My school friends and I often look back on our time as NEET aspirants, half-joking about our “childhood trauma,” half-mourning how teachers and coaching centres sold us a lie. What was supposed to prepare us for the formative years of our lives only handed us burnout at the ripe young age of 16.

In a recent rewatch of the Netflix show *Kota Factory*, I saw my own adolescence replaying in black and white. The cramped classrooms, exhausted faces, and friendships forged through trauma bonding looked queasily familiar. In the show, teachers told students that cracking JEENEET-CLAT is the pinnacle of success, but the finale shows us how the system exhausts our brightest students, making them question their worth every step of the way.

## *Kota Factory*: a black and white mirror

The show hit me hard and stirred up old memories of the times I considered myself a failure. But I never related to any of the characters. I wasn’t confident like the toppers, nor carefree like the backbenchers. I knew I had the drive and the calibre to achieve a good rank, but I also couldn’t make sense of a single word I was supposed to cram.

My alma mater's in-house counsellor, who chose to remain anonymous, believes that most students who felt shortchanged by the process were those who jumped into the JEE-NEET prep without understanding the depth of the challenge.

"Students were just told that engineering and medicine were the ways to go if they wanted a comfortable life, they were herded towards it like sheep. We only show students the endgame and keep them in the blind about what it takes to crack the exam. In fact, we blindside them into thinking that cracking JEE is it, we don't even tell them what comes after. That is why they feel cheated," she said.

In school, my friends and I were sticklers for rules, but always lagged in ranks. In retrospect, the system of measuring worth by numbers had pushed us into an early burnout, and for some of us, a mental breakdown.

The counsellor remembered that several students would come up to her with the "intention of leaving the science stream", but parents and teachers would often advise against it. "All they saw was a racehorse about to give up before the finish line," she said.

Such is the quagmire of competitive examination

preparation: When students have the realisation that they are in over their heads, they continue to be dragged down by the pressures of society, afraid that they would be mocked for steering away from a path most consider as supreme.

In fact, performance pressure, parental expectations, and competitive environments were found to be among the several factors for academic stress in a recent study of over 300 students appearing for high-stakes exams. The research has been published in the American Journal of Psychiatric Rehabilitation. It also notes that academic stress can directly impact the self-esteem of students. A 2024 study had also found that stress around such competitive exams comes from lengthy syllabi, time management concerns, and fear of failing, among others, which in turn can cause difficulty in concentrating or problem-solving, self-doubts, lack of motivation, and even feelings of helplessness.

## The myth of Jeetu Bhaiya

In the *Kota Factory*, Jeetu Bhaiya is portrayed to be an ideal teacher — a man who is your 'agony aunt' in moments of such stress. He saw students for their own unique abilities, visited their accommodation when they were depressed, and was essentially a fan favourite in the series. However, Kota doesn't have any saviours, and

Jeetu Bhaiya doesn't exist in real life.

Jeetu Bhaiya seemed like the dream teacher when I was fresh out of school, but as a grown-up, I saw how his character was morally grey at best. The teacher, for all his compassion, wasn't really challenging the system. He was making the same toxic grind look noble for his students with funny quips. He espoused the same tenets as everyone else: sit and study for 12 hours, see IIT as a salvation, and sacrifice their teen years in the name of success.

When Vaibhav, the protagonist, fails to clear the examination, he is never told to relax, breathe, and maybe introspect if he can survive such a competitive environment. The show ends with Jeetu giving Vaibhav a pep talk, prompting him to drop a year and once again live in a pressurised environment that led to his poor performance in the first place.

While the show should have prompted aspirants to reconsider toxic studying habits, it ends up giving the same tired message — it's either IIT or nothing.

## Who is the real winner?

Of course, some students credit coaching centres

with instilling discipline, and social media is full of stories of those who defied the odds to land at the IITs. Accounts of students who adapted and now thrive in that environment are undeniably inspiring, but we risk distorting the picture if we glorify only these successes.

Shows like *Kota Factory* fail to tell us what comes after the JEE-NEET showdown. We see Jeetu market IIT as a shiny prize that you win after breaking your back for an arguably outdated entrance examination. But he never mentions that another fight awaits when you step into a highly competitive space like an IIT.

For instance, Kaushik, a second-year Energy Engineering student at IIT Delhi, said the gruelling entrance exam preparation had done little to ready him for the reality of life at IIT. “I was always told that JEE is just a trailer of what comes for students in IIT, but it is not even one per cent accurate. In my coaching days, it was all about sitting at my desk with a book for over 10 hours. Here, teachers extensively urge us for practical knowledge. It’s the only way to understand what we are studying,” he said, adding, “IIT should only be pursued if engineering is your actual passion. For someone whose strength lies purely in exam performance, the environment here can feel mismatched.”

When Kaushik dropped a year before he got into IIT Delhi, he thought that an extra year of preparation would give him a leg up among the freshers. He couldn't have been more wrong. "I was almost 20 years old when I got into IIT, while my batchmates were 18, some even 17. Coaching institutes told me that I had more knowledge, more understanding, but when I started attending classes, I realised I was misled. I had never felt more intimidated in my life. And when I made friends with some of the younger students, they told me they felt intimidated by me. Essentially, in a room full of winners, we all felt like losers," he added.

Kaushik's statement made me think: Who is the real winner of this system? Students who don't clear exams like JEE and NEET end up questioning their worth for years to come. Those who do are often struggling with burnout and a lack of social skills.

For me, the real winners in this rat race are coaching centres that exploit students, mentally and financially, and use their ranks as an advertisement, marking imaginary success. And the parents, who get to cash in on social capital after their child clears these exams.

This is not an argument against pursuing

engineering or medicine, but a plea for systemic change that recognises the very real distress students face and responds to it with empathy and support. It is an invitation for parents to have honest, ongoing conversations about what their children truly want, to back them if they wish to take a different path, and for teachers to validate and nurture diverse career choices rather than a single, narrow track. Above all, it is a reminder to students that success is not defined by a single exam, and that it is worth listening to what genuinely excites and sustains them.

At 26, I still carry the echoes of sleepless nights and tight timetables. While the exam season is far behind me, the memories are a sharp reminder that success was never ours — it belonged to everyone but the students.


# How being a little more 'delulu' worked for me — and may work for you

***– Shaima S***

I have always been terrible at selling myself. Selling and promoting yourself and your work means publicly acknowledging your value. You not only have to first attach a value to yourself, but also convince others of it. It means having a staggering amount of belief in yourself to even begin with. And frankly, I have sucked at all these things. I have let my work speak for itself as much as it could. If you are reading this, the strategy has probably worked. But that is only because it is the only one I know.

This wasn't always the case. Like most things in life, this was something I taught myself. It started when a teacher I really liked called me "overconfident" at a parent-teacher meeting in

Class 4. Suddenly, ‘overconfidence’ became the worst word in the world, and I came to accept and own the idea of being humble. Not just in a graceful, grounded way, but also where I would put myself down a little, always be a bit more pleasant and just a tad more agreeable.

So, when I came across a girl in college who spoke a lot of pretty words, decorated with theatrical pauses, conveying the simplest ideas like she had just had a revolutionary breakthrough, I would turn my head and scoff, forced by habit. Most of what she used to say didn’t make sense to me, but for some reason, it did to those who wanted to listen and had the effect she intended it to have. Funnily, and most importantly, I don’t think she was pretending. So, when she got into the right places, into the choicest rooms, surprising as it may have been for me, it was perfectly normal for her.

That was my first introduction to being delusional to the point of success. Back then, delusion, the grandchild of overconfidence, was a word I didn’t want to be associated with at all costs.

It didn’t stop there. After college, when I was forced and pushed against my will into the ‘real’ world, I started seeing this all around me. People my age navigated projects with a wild confidence about their abilities, selling themselves to be more competent than they appeared, even if they didn’t always live up to it. It seemed to work better than any podcast, any inner work

therapy — just blindly believing in the fact that the best could happen to you.

Delusion, as a word, is perceived quite negatively, a terribly wonky trait to have. More so, medically, delusions are described as “fixed false beliefs” a person has based on an inaccurate perception of reality. Basically, it’s when a person cannot distinguish between what’s real and what’s imagined. There’s, of course, no arguing against that. But like many things, the Internet has rebranded the term ‘delusional’. “Delulu” has become a mindset — a way of believing in yourself to the point of success, irrespective of the odds against you and presenting yourself in that light.

In 2025, after quite a bit of unlearning, I have come to the conclusion that delusion and overconfidence aren’t just accessories to succeeding, but in fact, quite the main ingredients in achieving positive results. I may even go so far as to say that they matter more than the quality of work you put in.

There’s science to back this argument. In 2010, two researchers asked participants to predict the amount of time it would take them to complete a certain task. On comparing the predicted time periods with the actual ones, the researchers found that those who made optimistic predictions also completed the task in less time. They concluded, “when predictions are optimistic, they spur movement toward goal attainment.” Another 2013 study, published in

the research journal Learning and Individual Differences, ties higher self-efficacy to setting higher goals and even persevering in difficult situations. No wonder, “delulu is the solulu” has become the Gen Z turn of phrase. It’s no longer just a meme, but a reminder that you need to power through to achieve your dreams. Our generation, infamous for making light of everything serious, has pretty much cracked the code most successful people apply in their lives — having an unwavering and solid amount of self-belief (Think Kareena Kapoor’s notorious ‘Poo’ from *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*).

Of course, there’s a limit to this motto. Not everything can be willed into existence with confidence alone. Influencers like Anna “Delvey” Sorokin, who conned her way into New York’s elite circles, and Billy McFarland, who sold the fantasy of a luxury island music festival only to deliver the infamous Fyre Festival fiasco, serve as cautionary tales of what happens when delusion goes unchecked.

But if you are someone heavily pessimistic, always considering the worst-case scenario, it’s probably worth giving a try to being delusionally optimistic about your chances and your capabilities. It won’t necessarily get you where you want to be, but it will get you to try and put yourself out there — not once but as many times as it takes. And that, for me, is half the battle won.

# Bonding with my mom, a decade late and 900 km away

– *Swapnil Joglekar*

My grandmother did not teach me how to cook. She loved me dearly, but for the first two decades of my life, she remained convinced that I was either too short, too young or too busy to learn cooking. My mother seemed to agree. A single parent, she worked at a bank, and her presence was often denoted by her absence.

Her schedule before leaving for work was pretty tight. She would take the house chores head-on and enlist me and my elder sister to help her out. We would team up to put out clothes to dry on the rooftop terrace, retrieve hard-to-reach boxes and bottles from the top shelf and

the bottommost rack.

By 11 am, she had already been at work for an hour. At 2 pm, it was lunchtime, and by 2.30 pm, she was back at the cash counter, greeting a serpentine queue of ill-at-ease customers. Around 5 pm, she would shut the door to any more transactions on a light day and get busy tallying the accounts. If you had to call her, it was best to be strategic and avoid rush hours.

Returning from school, I would mostly find my elder sister and my grandparents at home. On Sundays, when aai (mother in Marathi) had some time on her hands, I wasn't sure what to discuss with her because I was used to seeing her always busy working. I didn't know how to be with her when she wasn't busy.

Over the years, a quiet change came over in my relationship with my mother. As I grew younger and she older, I felt a gnawing need to take care of her. She was strong-minded; I just wished she wouldn't have to keep proving it through life's trials and tribulations. Even while booking a cab, I hoped and prayed that the driver was a decent fellow because I wanted aai to have a peaceful ride.

When my grandparents passed away and my sister

was to be wed, my mother and I put together our combined energies into projects, happy and sad. We talked about the things that mattered and discussed the serious stuff. The change in our dynamic was subtle and nuanced. I was still her child, and getting her to apply oil to my hair remained a cherished time whenever I went back home or she came over to my city. I also enjoyed telling her about the latest in geopolitics and talking to her about her day during our daily calls. But, and this happened gradually, she started seeking my opinion on certain decisions she was making. She also depended on me to recharge her mobile phone and help her switch between the front and the back cameras, while on a video call.

When I moved to Noida to start my first job, I shared an apartment with three other people. Everything here seemed different — the food, the air, the people. And the food, with its pronounced mustard oil flavour, was too aggressive for my palate. Then, just as I was starting to settle in, the Covid-19 pandemic struck.

The cook and the nearby eateries vanished, and it was for the four of us sharing the apartment to prepare meals. My lack of experience and a paralysing fear of failure meant I put off cooking till I had antagonised every flatmate. Then I called aai.

The first meal I cooked left me in sweat and tears. It didn't taste anything like my expectations. My mother cajoled me to walk back in and try adding some salt. That did the trick. But cooking still felt very onerous.

Over many hours-long calls day after day, aai taught me chopping onions and tomatoes, repurposing a day-old bowl of rice into a breakfast delicacy and making pulao. I made pulao so many times that I lost count. I also went out and bought myself a bottle of groundnut oil. And I tried out many Maharashtrian dishes that I had come to associate with home.

My entry into the kitchen, at least a decade late, wasn't a radical act. It was necessitated by survival instincts. But as the world returned to a post-pandemic cycle of life, I went back into the kitchen to cook for myself. I watched YouTube videos of middle-aged women guiding people through a dish they had probably made thousands of times over their lifetime. And I called aai, switching on the video to get her approval on the level of oil I had poured and the size of the potato cubes.

Then one day, years after that first panic-stricken end-of-the-world call made in desperation, I called aai to ask her about making dahi-pohe.

A comfort food, it was introduced to our family by a relative and became a cherished breakfast staple in the summers. You soak a bowl of pohe (flattened rice) in sour dahi (curd). You add salt, a dash of sugar, fried groundnut, some grated coconut, chopped chillies and season it with mustard seeds and curry leaves and mix it. Then, just as you are about to eat, you add some chopped onion, crushed papad and chopped coriander.

*The legendary dahi pohe mentioned above (Photo by Swapnil Joglekar)*

I had moved to a new house where the kitchen window opened into an open space. Aai was looking at me through the phone, which was perched at a height. “Put the raw onion after you season it,” she reminded me, her voice coming in from 900 kilometres away and with a hint

of Vividh Bharati playing over our radio in the other room. “Yes,” I replied, “so that it maintains its rawness, right?” I checked. “Yeah,” she said, smiling. As I served the dahi-pohe into a plate for myself, I realised something. Through these phone calls, at odd hours, and always when I was on the verge of hunger, I was greeted by aai. And just like that, as she guided me through these steps of the recipe she had gathered from her mother and from so many others who had walked on this earth before her, I found my mom from 20 years ago guiding the small boy. One step at a time, making me aware of the risks and how to avoid them, and telling me that it was okay to be content in life’s small joys when the Instagram algorithm was questioning my peace of mind.

My entry into the kitchen was inescapable; my choice to stay back was pure self-interest. I had discovered a time machine that satisfied what the stomach craved and the heart desired. I had found aai.


# Body-shaming is inherited in Indian homes: How I broke free

***– Vaishnawi Sinha***

"*Tu kitni moti ho gayi hai* (you have gained so much weight)." "*Weight loss kab kar rahi hai* (When are you going to lose weight)?" I am all too familiar with such remarks. I was probably not even older than 10 years of age when I started noticing the intense scrutiny around my weight — from relatives, family, and friends.

Growing up, I learnt to live with these comments. I avoided the mirror and tasted guilt with every meal. Early whispers of "you'll never be enough" evolved into a lifelong hangover of shame. Over time, I realised that these remarks weren't about my health but almost always about fitting into

the world's set beauty standards, disguised as concern.

And I am not alone. Most of us have faced body-shaming, just different versions of it. In Indian households, particularly, body-shaming is inherited from those who came before us. And pop culture doesn't help either. The shows and movies I grew up watching rarely handled this complexity with the nuance it deserved. Fat characters were usually reduced to comic relief or the token quirky best friend. And when a film tried to be "woke," its heavier characters were often cast as hypersexualised symbols of body positivity, as if that were the only role for anyone outside conventional beauty standards.

## The inheritance of shame

The cycle often starts with a grandmother's backhanded comment about "how much you have grown", or an aunt's subtle home remedies on how to lighten your complexion. Fathers tell their sons to hang from monkey bars if they are short, and mothers tell their daughters to watch what they eat before they even hit puberty. These aren't just isolated cruelties. These remarks are handed down and recycled across generations, disguised as care, tradition, or concern.

I was around eight years old when my aunts started keeping track of the sweets I ate at family

gatherings. It was like being weighed in real time. I overheard dinner table conversations like, "*Humare zamane mai to chashme wali ladkiyo ki shaadi tak nahi hoti thi* (Back in the days, bespectacled girls couldn't get married)", and about "*rang saaf karne ke nuske* (home remedies for 'whitening' skin)".

I was told that keeping yourself trim and dressing a certain way was necessary to find a man. Ironically enough, male members of my family never commented on my appearance — it was always the women. I don't blame them entirely. Their remarks came not from reactions to my weight or body, but a mindset that was handed down to them by their mothers, and theirs before them.

Body-shaming is like a family recipe that no one dares to question — not even me. I felt that mindset being passed down to me as well, when relatives would point at a heavy-set person in public and ask me, "*Iske jaise banna hai tumhe?* (Do you want to become her?)" It was not just an insult for that person, but also a way of planting in me the same cruelty they held toward anyone who didn't fit their beauty standards.

After years of criticism by family, friends, and the boys I had a crush on, I decided to join the gym. I was a woman obsessed: I tracked every single calorie and lost a ton of weight. I just wanted to

fit the beauty standards of my own family. But those around me now found a new criticism: "*Gymming karke aadmi lagne lagi ho* (Working out is making you look like a man)." The comment hit hard as I realised that I wasn't beautiful in the eyes of my own family. I avoided conversations, stayed on the sidelines, and stopped eating at family functions, just so I wouldn't be the topic of discussion.

## Euphoria's Kat taught me real self-love

A kind of redemption awaited me in Kat Hernandez's character on the teen drama Euphoria. When I first watched the show, I felt an immediate connection to her. Like me, Kat, played by Barbie Ferreira, had internalised shame about her body from childhood. The quiet jabs came not from strangers, but from family, close friends, and even her first boyfriend.

At first, I thought the show had taken a stereotypical turn when Kat's character development led her to become a hypersexualised cam-girl, seeking validation from middle-aged men to replace the years of damage caused by casual body-shaming. But my initial disappointment faded when I realised that Kat's cam-girl arc was just a response to inherited shame and how people close to her treated her body as "less than". As Kat gave herself a makeover — with mesh tops,

body harnesses, and chokers — I saw more of her in me. I saw the version of me freed from the shackles of insecurities and constant criticism. As Kat — and I — gained more confidence, the people around us grew kinder, finally noticing a personality beyond our bodies.

Kat's attempt at empowerment wasn't clean or simple. It was messy, conflicted, and haunted by the belief that her body is something to be hidden, corrected, or managed. Her journey reflects the painful truth for many of us, that the internalised body-shaming doesn't just disappear with adulthood, it follows us, coded in the way we view ourselves and others.

Kat taught me a lesson that my own family couldn't: that it is okay to look the way you look without trying to prove to the world that you are working on yourself. Kat's journey made me aware of how body-shaming can distort your perception of relationships and yourself, even after you decide to get past it. She taught me that my value doesn't lie only in my appearance, and that I alone control the way the world views me.

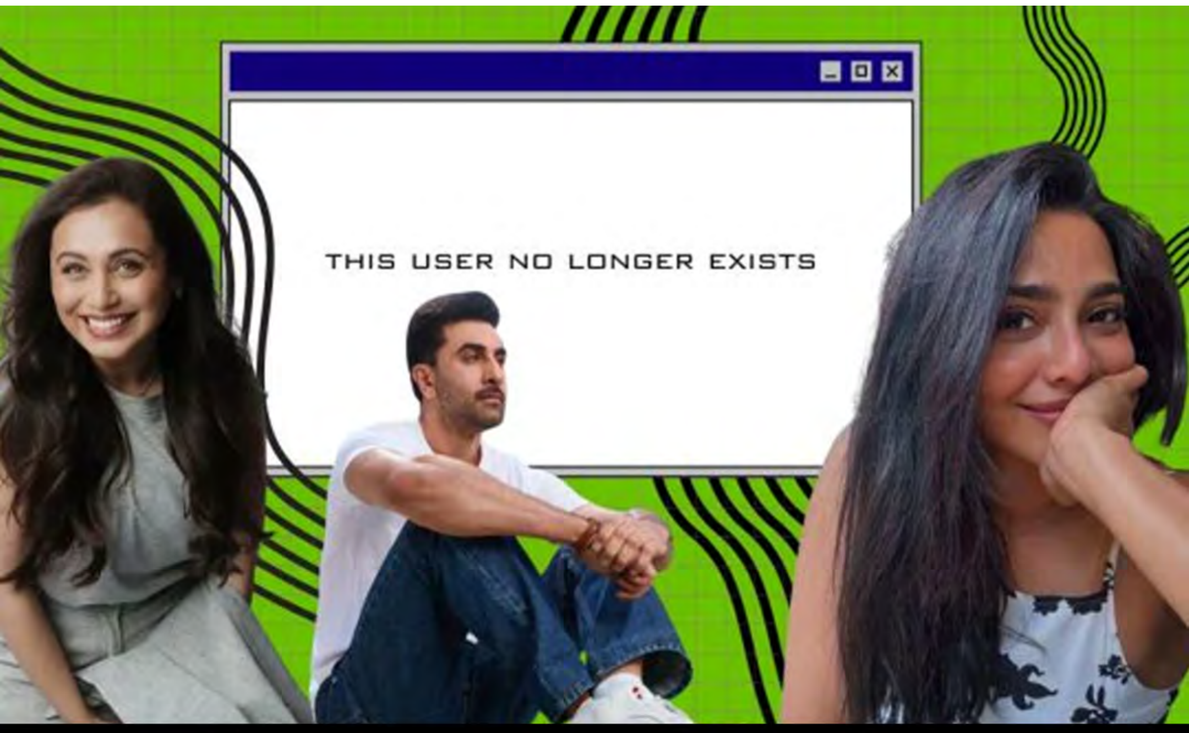
## Kindness as rebellion: How I broke the cycle

As I grew older, I rebelled against the thought process handed down to me by my family. I decided

to embrace my personality rather than wasting away in a sea of insecurities. And as I grew more confident and found ‘myself’, strangers showered me with more kindness and compliments than my family ever could.

I came to realise that everyone had their own set of insecurities, often deep-rooted in how those closest to them viewed their appearance. I could be looking at someone fit and athletic with awe and envy, and there would be someone out there who viewed me with a similar feeling. So, I have decided to break the cycle. Instead of passing down the same inherited gaze, I compliment people as much as I can, be it family members, friends, acquaintances, or strangers. It may be a small act, but for someone who knows the feeling of never receiving compliments, I know the power of a kind word to brighten a day or even change a life.

And health? I stopped trying to fit a standard or have a strict, military-like discipline. I made it more personal. I fixed my broken relationship with food, mirrors, and cameras. And I now have a quiet pact with myself — to move my body because it makes me feel strong, to eat because it nourishes me, and to dress how I like for my own comfort and style.




# Why more celebrities are choosing to disappear from social media

***– Cris***

What might have been a dark or abrupt post sounded almost poetic in Aishwarya Lekshmi's farewell message, bidding adieu to social media. The actor, known for her subtle and powerful performances in Malayalam and Tamil films, wrote in a thoughtfully crafted message that social media "has reverse-UNO-ed" and distracted her from her work. It had, she said, taken every original thought away from her, affected her vocabulary and language, and made every other simpler pleasure joyless.

Sparing a lone disparaging comment, most users on a Reddit thread were appreciative of her reasons. As much as the world seems to

revolve around social media, people on it know the hassles that come with it, the traps and the risks, prompting them to virtually pat the ones who dare to leave. Aishwarya's choice might have surprised many, but it isn't unprecedented.

## Celebrities log off

She has joined a slew of actors, writers, and others who have chosen to take breaks, if not entirely abstain, from social media. Among famous absences, withdrawals, comebacks, and short breaks are Aamir Khan's abrupt departure in March of 2021, Rani Mukherjee's and Ajith Kumar's choice not to be on any networking platform, Hrithik Roshan's detoxing break, and Fahadh Faasil's revelation that he stopped using a smartphone. Some departures remained permanent. Sonakshi Sinha did not come back from her Twitter break, after a quick note calling it quits for the sake of mental peace.

Many of them admit to doing it for their mental health, aware of the 'risk' of losing out on promoting their work or appeasing the fans. Aamir Khan's announcement was casually dropped in a message, almost like an afterthought: "In other news, this is going to be my last post on social media". No grand reasons were offered, which inevitably brought on speculations that he must have found it affecting his privacy, coming as it did a day after his birthday, when he was swarmed

with wishes. Hrithik took a short break this year and said it was like something in him “switched”. Fahadh said that he used a ‘dumb phone’, but he would, like Hollywood filmmaker Christopher Nolan, become an email-only person one day. Ranbir Kapoor has famously admitted to having a “secret” account for following others, but he doesn’t post anything. In several interviews, he has given multiple reasons for this, from not wanting to “be in the news” when he’s not releasing a film to being a “shy, introverted” person and not wanting the bur den of maintaining an “entertaining persona” on social media.

The phenomenon is global. Actors, writers, and musicians across the world are known to stay away from online platforms, either out of a complete lack of interest or to protect themselves. While senior actors like Eddie Murphy and Brad Pitt have found no reason to log in and begin a new habit in this stage of their careers, younger celebs like Emma Stone and Saoirse Ronan have also found it easier to detach themselves from the fad. Emma quit Twitter in 2013 after her account was hacked, while Sairose simply thought people only knew her for the roles she played, and they would not want to know about her personal habits. Musicians like Ed Sheeran and Selena Gomez, too, have taken extended breaks.

“It may be important for a lot of people to have an online presence, for actors or writers to get

public acceptance. But how do we evaluate if there is anything worthwhile positive that overrides the negative," asks philosopher, educator, and writer Sundar Sarukkai.

It is not only about the vulnerability of being in a public space, but also about the risks of addiction, Sundar says. Some do leave to have more time for themselves, to work, to concentrate, to relax.

## Why quit?

"People become stressed and anxious and they'd want to respond to everything so fast. There is a whole lot of instant emotion — instant anger and instant depression. It takes a huge toll on their mental health. From my experience of working with students, I know how they are affected. It decouples you from everyone around you. Social media draws them in so much that they stay hooked even when they are not enjoying it. That is how deep the addiction can be. You need to ask what cost you are paying for whatever benefit you are getting from it. Not just the celebrities, but every ordinary person should ask this," Sundar says.

The famous have to put themselves out there. It's an occupational hazard. There are, of course, merits of being in a virtual space, which allows them to be present for the fan, even if not physically. Fans can engage with their favourites

(all those ask-me-anything sessions), forming what are called para-social relationships, as they watch real-time updates or take part in “live” interactions. In a win-win situation, the celebrities get another platform to announce and promote their new work. But sometimes, it doesn’t work as smoothly.

The virtual space gives a false sense of security, but nothing is abuse-proof on the internet. Words are grilled, photos are plucked and taken apart. Cyberbullying and abuse are not limited to controversial posts or visuals, but every little word or deed can invite trouble. This happens especially on social media handles of celebs who may take a stand or share an opinion about anything at all. Trolling has become the easiest tool to express disapproval, and sometimes criticism can turn into threats.

“What happens in the public discourse has become such an entitled thing that everyone thinks they can abuse everyone else even if they don’t know them, even if they have not read or known their work. In a world with no regulation of basic public politeness of various kinds, social media can become extremely toxic,” Sundar says.

While cyber laws have become stricter and address the abuse, the victims of the attack still go through a new kind of trauma. Not that the paparazzi of an earlier age were kinder —

Princess Diana was driven to her death as she was chased by paparazzi. But cyberspace seems especially vicious, allowing a certain kind of sadism to take form, where abuse is done for pleasure.

Many celebrities have learnt to work around the system — keeping their posts professional and work-focused, often handing over their pages to managers or public relations teams. Others still find ways to connect more personally, sharing behind-the-scenes glimpses, vacation reels, or heartfelt birthday posts. The truth is, celebrities are often no different from the average user. Increasingly, many young people are also choosing to log off social media altogether to reclaim their time, protect their mental space, and escape the endless scroll. But when celebrities choose “internet obsoleteness”, there is a greater risk — as Aishwarya says, being “out of the gram is out of the mind”.

SPORTS


# Rohit Sharma did not deserve the unceremonious demotion from ODI captaincy

***– Sandeep Dwivedi***

Imran Khan was nearly 40 when he hand-held Pakistan to the 1992 World Cup title. By the time the 2027 50-overs World Cup is upon us, Rohit Sharma will also be 40. But, unlike The Khan, he wouldn't have a fairytale farewell. The national selectors ended his ODI captaincy the other day by naming 25-year-old Shubman Gill as his replacement. It was an unusual and unexpected decision with no precedent.

Only the eclectic with no worldly desires or ambitions would have remained unaffected by the demotion. As for Rohit, he has been a proud captain, a silent chaser of grand dreams and a winner of two ICC tournaments in a matter of

months — a rare achievement for a nation that isn't Australia and that has a long history of World Cup heartbreaks.

Indian cricket isn't known to snatch the captain's armband from a player who, in his last outing in India Blues, was Man of the Match in a winning ICC tournament final. The unreasonable immunity that those with World Cup silverware have enjoyed was not extended to Rohit.

Would the snub hurt Rohit, demotivate him and hasten his retirement? Or will he come out roaring, channelise his anger into run-making, and be the Tendulkar of the dressing room? When Rohit comes out to open the Indian innings with his successor Shubman in Australia in little over a week, the world will get the first hint of the answer to the above questions.

Chief selector Ajit Agarkar gave many reasons for the intriguing Rohit-to-Shubman switch. One of them was about the complexity of having three captains for three formats — Shubman (Tests), Rohit (ODIs) and Suryakumar Yadav (T20Is). In that case, there should be just one all-format captain so that life for the selectors, coaches and administrators would be much simpler.

Then there was one about Rohit getting too few international outings since the world doesn't

play too many ODIs, and the former captain had retired from Tests and T20Is. So, was that Rohit's fault? Isn't it the BCCI's responsibility to ensure that India's ODI specialists get enough match time before the World Cup that really matters? Virat Kohli is in the same boat as Rohit. Will we let the world's best ODI player rust in London?

Before the second Test against the West Indies, days after he was named the ODI captain, Shubman would talk about the importance of Rohit and Virat for India's ODI chances.

"There are very few players in the world with such skill, quality and experience. From that perspective, we are definitely looking at them (Rohit and Virat) for 2027," he said. Rohit would have liked to be "looked at" differently — a gaze that was more respectful of his impressive ODI record, significantly better than his modest Test numbers.

That's why when Rohit retired from Tests — apparently, he was forced to — there was no outrage. The England series result under Shubman's leadership would validate the bold call taken by Agarkar & Co. Gautam Gambhir and Shubman ensured the Test transition was wonderfully seamless. The 2-2 series result in England saw the emergence of new stars and a new India.

Generally, a dressing room with a young captain and a new coach isn't overwhelmingly welcoming for senior players who have had an unquestionable reign in the same premises. A mix of youth and experience isn't always a winning combination; in the real world, it can also mean complex situations with multiple power centres. The easy option here was to defang the senior and empower the young captain. But was it the right decision?

Did the selectors, emboldened by the successful shaping of India's Test future, get carried away? Picking Shubman as Test captain was a bold call, but making him the ODI skipper of a team that had Rohit and Virat has a whiff of bravado. In the haste to ride the "New India" wave, the time-tested 'Good Old India' was hastily forgotten. Rohit's white-ball leadership is a masterclass for any budding captain and a longer apprenticeship for Shubman would have helped him and India.

Since the time he won five IPL titles, Rohit knows what it takes to win limited-overs games. It is a precious gift only a few possess — it was last seen in MS Dhoni. In three successive ICC events — the 50-overs World Cup in 2023, the World T20 in 2024, Champions Trophy in 2025 — India had looked like Australia under Ricky Ponting. Everybody knew their roles in a team with 11 match-winners. It was a unit that respected the

conditions and played with a definite plan. They were entertaining to watch; they had it in them to sweep this cricket-crazy nation off its feet.


*The unreasonable immunity that those with World Cup silverware have enjoyed was not extended to Rohit. (PTI)*

The only way to get the respect of the team, Imran would say, is to perform and set an example. Rohit did exactly that. If India were a crack unit, Rohit was on the frontline. Throughout the 2023 World Cup campaign, he would throw caution to the winds, undertake cricket's most difficult task — taking on the best opposition bowlers with a new ball in hand as an opener.

He was a sly captain — he took the field with a mind full of ideas but always thought on his feet. Well before the 2024 T20 World Cup in the US and West Indies, at the press conference to announce the team, he said he had a plan. It turned out he was banking on the spinners, and it worked wonderfully well. Rishabh Pant's

elevation up the order, the use of all-rounder Axar Patel's batting prowess, and the short surprise Bumrah spells in the middle overs were inspired decisions that won India games.

Fans are said to have short memories. So do selectors, it seems. In a long 50-overs World Cup, a team needs a seasoned captain who knows his team inside out. The present Indian team is the one Rohit groomed. He has known Bumrah since the time he joined Mumbai Indians as a teenager. He was the one who gave Kuldeep Yadav the confidence he desperately needed. With India's key all-rounder, Ravindra Jadeja, he played the 2006 Under-19 World Cup. He also understands the enigmatic Shreyas Iyer the best.

There was no tearing hurry either to make the very talented Shubman the ODI captain. Rohit should have got one more series as a leader. This isn't a petition for an ageing captain, nor a plea for giving a longer rope on sympathetic grounds. This is an ode to an ODI legend and a white-ball Mike Brearley, who was denied what he had earned. This is also a reminder that Imran might not have been the fittest at 40, but he was the sharpest and wisest and at his inspiring best.


# Homebound and the ache of dreams in transit

***– Anas Arif***

Around the 30-minute mark in *12th Fail*, Vidhu Vinod Chopra crafts a montage: Manoj (Vikrant Massey) arrives for the first time in Delhi's Mukherjee Nagar, and is stunned by the sheer mass of bodies. Young men and women, all burning with the same hunger, the same dream of clearing a government service exam. A similar moment opens Neeraj Ghaywan's sophomore feature *Homebound*. Shoaib (Ishaan Khatter) and Chandan (Vishal Jethwa) step onto a railway platform and freeze seeing dozens of students sit along the tracks, backpacks at their feet, waiting for the train that will carry them to yet another exam centre. Another film, another city, another shot, but the same ache. A country in

conflict with its youth. A country that records their presence but erases their possibilities. A country with no room for their dreams, and no will to wait for them. It instantly reminds you what Shashi Kapoor's character once said in Yash Chopra's *Deewaar*: "*Yeh duniya ek third-class ka dabba ban gayi hai. Jagah bohot kam hai, aur musafir bohot zyada* (The world has become a third-class compartment: too many passengers, too little room)."

As *Homebound* unfolds, that line turns from metaphor into atmosphere. But it's worth noting that beyond this point, *12th Fail* and *Homebound* are largely antithetical to each other in many ways. Where Chopra's film finds dignity in struggle, Ghaywan's film dismantles the very myth of struggle as a ladder. If *12th Fail* is about breaking through the crowd, *Homebound* stays in the crowd itself, questioning whether there's even a door left to knock on. Perhaps that's why, when Chandan and Shoaib finally manage to board the train, they tell each other that reaching the exam centre is a battle in itself. Perhaps that's why their aspiration, to become police constables, carries a meaning altogether different from that of Manoj's in *12th Fail*. Manoj is moved by the idea that when honesty is married to power, it can move mountains. But Shoaib and Chandan are not chasing transformation. They are aiming

for protection. What draws them to the uniform is not the idealism of justice, but the possibility of shielding themselves from a system that has humiliated them for generations. And perhaps that's why, when they see a constable wielding physical authority on the railway platform, Shoaib turns to Chandan and says, "When you're in uniform, your faith and caste no longer matter." It's not to be misunderstood as a declaration of equality, but instead as a survival strategy devised by both of them. Just as it's not to be read as belief in the system, but as the desire to stop being its target.

That's why it hits you when you realize Chandan is hiding his Dalit identity, because somewhere deep down, he knows that even if he ascends the social ladder, he will remain othered, perpetually subjected to caste-based humiliation. (There's a very affecting scene early in the film where a clerk seeks to assert his dominance through a glance and body language meant simply to belittle Chandan.) Yet, Chandan also grasps that the government job represents his only viable escape. His parents labour at a construction site; his sister tends to children at a local school. Herein lies the fundamental divergence between *12th Fail* and *Homebound*. *12th Fail* focuses singularly on Manoj's class struggle through a merciless world, seldom turning its gaze back

towards the family he left behind, in that zero-sum landscape. He possesses the luxury of an unburdened forward movement, largely due to an inherent caste privilege. And when the narrative does look back, it exposes the fragility and devastation that have consumed their lives in his absence, yet these hardships ultimately serve to propel him forward. *Homebound*, by contrast, refuses to sever Chandan from his roots. It also does not operate in a vacuum, but unfolds at the dense crossroads where caste converges with class, and both are refracted through the lens of gender. In one of the best scenes of the film, his sister Vaishali (Harshika Parmar) confronts him with the reality of his privilege: his maleness afforded him the opportunity for education, a privilege denied to her. His ability to dream is not born of individual merit alone but rests upon the endless toil of those around him.

Shoaib, however, carries the weight of inherited expectations. His journey mirrors Murad's in Zoya Akhtar's *Gully Boy* (Ranveer Singh): a young Muslim son whose dreams are tightly bound to the debts owed to family and circumstance. Like Murad's father, Shoaib's father (Pankaj Dubey) suffers from a knee injury; like Murad's father, he too measures Shoaib's worth as a cruel arithmetic in a time divided. And, like Murad's father, he is similarly exasperated by

Shoaib being fettered to a dream that seems to pull him away from the immediate duties that keep the household standing. But Ghaywan, ever sensitive to the multitudinous facets of his characters, he moves beyond cliche to subvert the traditional father figure. In one of the film's most affecting moments, Shoaib's father urges him not to abandon his aspirations on their behalf. The scene is charged with profound subtext: it is a benediction, a recognition from a man weathered by the world, who knows that in a land that withholds so much, the sole mercy he can grant his Muslim son is the right to dream in his home. Perhaps that's why even Chandan's mother (a superb Shalini Vatsa) gives him space to breathe and become, knowing that, at least inside her home, he is allowed to be himself, unbound and free.

After all, the idea of home hangs heavy over *Homebound*. Where Shoaib is asked, again and again, "where is your true home?" Chandan holds a dream, to build one, brick by brick, for those who have never had one. Where Shoaib is asked to flee his homeland, Chandan is never fully welcomed in it. No wonder, they both become wanderers in their own land. No wonder, they are called strangers on the soil that raised them. And, no wonder they often sit by flowing water, for like the streams, they too

are summoned to move, again and again, never given the stillness that a home might offer. Water becomes *Homebound*'s most persistent visual motif, joined by trains, buses, pigeons, each a symbol of motion, of impermanence, of lives always in transit. At his best, Ghaywan brushes against the melodramatic sweep of Bimal Roy's *Do Bigha Zameen*, and evokes the aching moral solitude of Raj Kapoor's *Jagte Raho*. But at his greatest, he reminds you of the true auteur he is, in moments that devastate completely. A mother sits barefoot at the threshold of her home, waiting for her son to return with slippers. She waits. He is *homebound*. She keeps waiting. He never arrives. Because, in truth, he never had a home to return to.

LIFESTYLE

# When paradise doesn't exist

*– Swarupa Tripathy*

Imagine scrolling through Instagram and spotting a breathtaking video of a Maldives resort — crystal-clear waters, luxurious overwater villas, all for just Rs 5,000. The influencer testimonial feels genuine, the website appears professional, and the comments are overwhelmingly positive. You book instantly, only to discover later that this paradise never existed. Welcome to travel's new frontier of fraud: AI-generated deepfake destinations.

This is no distant threat. Globally, many have fallen victim to such scams. A report by The Independent recounted the story of a Malaysian couple who travelled across the country for a cable car ride, only to discover that everything

was AI-generated. The fake “Kuak Skyride” featured queues, tourists taking photos, a lavish meal, and a deer petting zoo — all fabricated by AI.

Closer home, actor Archana Puran Singh revealed her family lost money in Dubai after booking an indoor skydiving session on a fake website. “We’ve already paid, and the tickets weren’t cheap. *Dubai mein humare paise doob gaye*” (We lost money in Dubai), she said.

In 2024, the BBC reported that Booking.com warned of an explosion in travel scams driven by AI, with online threats surging 500–900 per cent over 18 months. Phishing and fake listings are spiking alongside generative AI tools like ChatGPT.

This trend is already visible globally, and it’s only a matter of time before India experiences a similar surge, making it crucial to be aware of what to watch out for.

## The perfect digital deception

Modern deepfake travel scams go far beyond Photoshop. Jaspreet Bindra, CEO of AI&Beyond, said, “With GenAI, it has never been easier to fabricate convincing destinations. Tools like Stable Diffusion, Midjourney, Runway, and open-source video generators create hyper-realistic

images and clips of beaches, mountains, or forests that do not exist."

Sneha Katkar, head of product strategy at Quick Heal Technologies, a cybersecurity platform, said, "Deepfake travel scams combine generative-AI imagery with social-engineering precision. AI-voiced 'travel vloggers' praise resorts that never existed. Unlike old Photoshop jobs, these ultra-high-resolution clips survive reverse-image searches and even trick automated ad-platform vetting."

*The technical execution of these scams is surprisingly sophisticated. (Source: Freepik)*

Dikshant Dave, CEO of Zigment, noted the accessibility: "Anyone with advanced generative AI tools can now create hyper-realistic videos

of non-existent places. What once required professional studios can now be done by hobbyists."

## The psychology of travel dreams

Why do we fall for these fakes? Humans are naturally drawn to exotic, aspirational content. "Travel content taps into emotion and aspiration. Coupled with urgency-driven marketing, people suspend scepticism. The 'wishful thinking bias' is strong in travel," said Dave.

Ankush Sabharwal, CEO and founder of CoRover.ai, said that the brain trusts novel or aspirational content. "The romanticism of 'discovering hidden treasures' or 'uncovering paradise' pulls on our psychological strings of newness, social proof, and FOMO," he said.

Bindra noted that social media amplifies these vulnerabilities, with likes and shares rewarding instant belief rather than careful scepticism. "Add the 'trust halo' of influencers or official-looking accounts, and fabricated travel videos can spread virally before doubts set in," Bindra said.

## What about India?

India's digital boom and growing disposable income make it a target. Amit Jaju, senior

managing director at Ankura Consulting, warned: “First-time online users may not recognise these scams. Budget travel is popular, and scammers take advantage of it. Apps like WhatsApp make it easy to spread fake offers quickly, especially in regional languages.”

Katkar highlights India’s high mobile usage and social-media engagement, saying, “Budget travellers rely on third-party aggregators and peer-recommendation videos. Deepfakes in vernacular languages widen the attack surface, with auto-translations tailored to Hindi, Tamil, or Marathi.”

Katkar pointed to specific vulnerabilities, such as India’s high mobile usage and social media engagement. “Budget travellers rely on third-party aggregators and peer-recommendation videos. Deepfakes in vernacular languages widen the attack surface, with auto-translations tailored to Hindi, Tamil, or Marathi,” he said.

## How the scam works

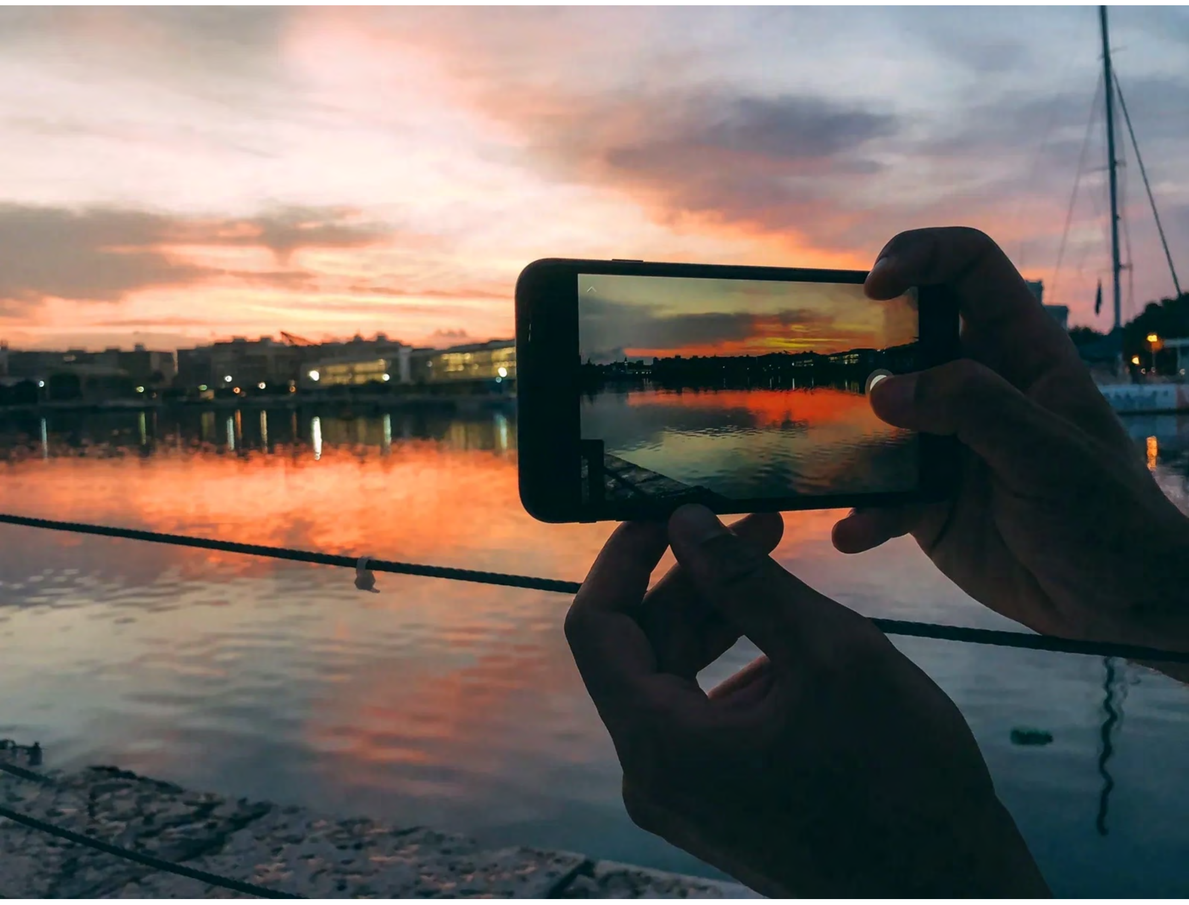
The technical execution of these scams is surprisingly sophisticated. Jaju broke down the process: “It usually starts with a fake website or social media page, sometimes cloned from a real agency. They might use stolen images or AI-generated videos to build trust. Payment is the next step; they’ll often push you to pay via wallets or sketchy links. Once that’s done, they

vanish. Some even use AI voices to run fake customer service lines."

Katkar provided more technical detail, revealing that a typical campaign begins with "domain spoofing, such as 'goa-bliss-stay.in', backed by cloned payment APIs that silently redirect funds to crypto wallets." While deepfake videos seed credibility on social media, stolen KYC documents, bought off dark-web dumps, populate testimonial carousels. When a traveller clicks 'Book Now,' a fake gateway skims card data while generating a PDF 'e-ticket.'

The industry is taking notice. Ravi Gosain, president of IATO (Indian Association of Tour Operators), confirmed, "The last few months have brought about the threat of fake travel listings, alongside the use of altered photos and deceptive promotional videos to target travellers. Even as numerous sites attempt to fortify their authentication systems, scammers make use of AI tools."

IATO, along with its member agencies, implements rigorous verification measures to validate destination packages, accommodations, and tour offerings, Gosain said, adding, "Our procedures insist on in-house evaluations, partnerships with official tourism authorities, and proper accreditation of member agencies." Yet, the advanced capabilities of AI-generated forgeries require more robust partnerships.



*While deepfake videos seed credibility on social media, stolen KYC documents, bought off dark-web dumps, populate testimonial carousels. (Source: Freepik)*

## Red flags to watch for

So how can travellers protect themselves? Experts offer several key warning signs to watch for. Jaju suggested, “If it looks too good to be true, like a luxury Maldives package for Rs 5,000, it probably is. Also, check the reviews. Real ones tend to vary in tone and detail; fake ones sound oddly perfect or repetitive. And always verify the company’s contact details. If there’s no real address or the website was just created recently, that’s a red flag. Also, such videos do not have the influencer visit these destinations, but they use stock videos of the destinations.”

Katkar advocated for verification over aesthetics. He believes travellers need to “lean more towards

provenance instead of aesthetics.” Cross-check new destinations against official tourism boards, validate hotel addresses on open maps, and scrutinise booking domains for misspelt HTTPS certificates. Abrupt payment requests via unfamiliar gateways or wallets are some key red flags to look out for, stresses Katkar.

## Some travellers are cautious

Not all travellers are falling victim to these elaborate schemes. Pravar Anand, a travel enthusiast, shared his cautious approach. “I mostly trust authentic websites for travel information rather than being influenced by visuals or recommendations. While photos and videos can be attractive, they can also be edited or enhanced, so I don’t rely on them entirely. Reviews from official sources or verified platforms give me more confidence in making decisions,” he told indianexpress.com.

Anand’s verification process is thorough, involving cross-checking a deal on multiple websites before making any booking decision. This helps him understand if the pricing and offers are consistent across platforms. Additionally, he says that he looks for verified reviews and ratings to make sure the deal is genuine.

However, Anand acknowledged the limitations of current protection systems. “As of now, I don’t

think there are any proper systems in place to help victims of deepfakes or fake AI destinations. Such an experience would definitely shake my trust and make me even more cautious in the future."

## What the future looks like

Combating deepfake travel scams requires a multi-pronged approach: stronger AI detection tools, public awareness campaigns, faster takedowns, tighter payment monitoring, and regulations around AI-generated content.

Sabharwal predicts real-time verification tools will soon allow travellers to authenticate photos and videos instantly, much like spam filters protect users today.

Until robust AI detection systems are widespread, the oldest rule of travel still applies: if it looks too good to be true, it probably is.

TECHNOLOGY

# This startup wants to make your iPhone affordable

*– Anuj Bhatia*

Before buying a new flagship smartphone, one of the first things consumers in India look for is whether the device can be purchased through easy monthly installments (EMIs) spread over 12 months or more. This strategy has worked in favour of phone brands and the ecosystem players contributing to the rise in the adoption of high-end, premium smartphones in the world's most populous country. In the recent quarters, the share of premium smartphones has registered the highest growth of 96.4 per cent in India, as per the data from International Data Corporation (IDC).

While it is already possible to buy flagship smartphones through accessibility schemes, a startup called BytePe, founded by a former Flipkart executive, aims to reduce the cost of EMIs even further by offering options to upgrade or retain smartphones, drastically cutting the cost of EMIs compared to standard EMIs.

"If you are buying a product today, you typically pay 100 per cent of its value upfront. Now, maybe a year or two down the line, if you stop using it, there's still a left out value in that product. What we have done is build a proprietary model that predicts the lifecycle value of a product. This model works seamlessly with existing financing instruments, whether it's a credit card or our own lending ecosystem," said Jayant Jha, Founder & CEO of BytePe, explaining the rationale behind India's first subscription-based smartphone service.

"As a consumer, when you visit our platform and select a product, we curate a customised EMI structure or financing model based on your preferences. Typically, our financing structures are about 40–50 per cent more affordable than standard EMI options, making the product much more accessible, reduces pressure on your wallet, and ultimately helps you upgrade your lifestyle," he added.

Launched in September, BytePe was founded by Jha, who previously served as the Senior Director of the Recommerce unit at Walmart's Flipkart. He was also the co-founder and CEO of Yaantra, which was acquired by the e-commerce giant in 2022.

"Affordability is still not solved," Jha said in an interview to indianexpress.com, adding that the cost of owning premium smartphones in India remains high despite the popularity of affordability schemes such as no-cost EMIs and trade-in offers. For Jha, the affordability aspect of high-end smartphones represents a much larger opportunity – one he understands well, having worked at Flipkart and from his prior experience as CEO of Yantra, where he gained deep insights into calculating product lifecycle value. "We are not a smartphone rental service," clarified Jha, categorising BytePe as a platform for smart ownership.

Jha emphasised the need to solve the affordability challenge for premium smartphones through BytePe, which allows consumers to pay only for the value they use. The model offers flexibility and consumers can exchange or upgrade their devices at any time. They also have the option to eventually own the product or return it after a certain period, with EMI costs reduced by up to 55 per cent. Jha further added that BytePe's

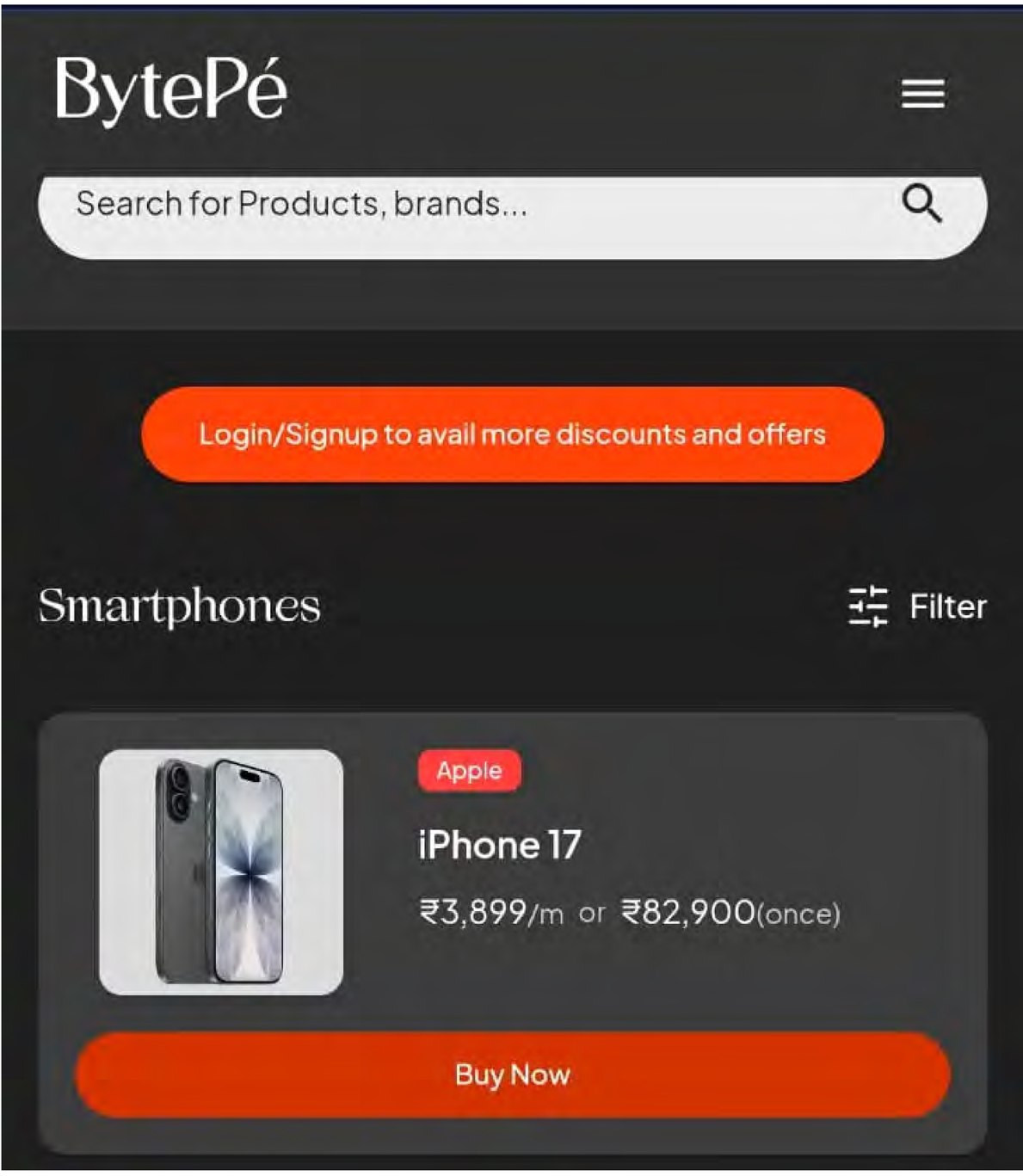
model is integrated seamlessly with existing financing instruments such as credit cards and the broader lending ecosystem.

What BytePe, according to Jha, does is make those EMIs more affordable and give you an option to exchange or upgrade the phone whenever you feel like it. According to him, 70 to 80 per cent of the consumption of premium products are happening in India is done through EMIs.

“If you walk into a Croma store and want to buy the iPhone 17, you’ll most likely opt for a 12-month EMI plan, where you end up paying around Rs 7,400 per month and you own the device. However, with BytePe, we offer you an EMI option of just Rs 3,899 per month. After 12 months, you can decide whether you want to return the device and upgrade to the next iPhone when it launches, or continue using the current one.

If you choose to return the device, we will come to you and collect it. If you decide to keep it, you can continue paying Rs 3,500 per month. You also have the option, say after 12 months, if you wish to retain the device and don’t want to return it, you can pay the remaining balance, typically another 12 months of Rs 3,500 and keep the device permanently. In both cases, you retain

ownership. The key difference is that your Rs 7,400 EMI is effectively reduced by approximately 55 per cent, allowing you to pay just Rs 3,500 a month for the iPhone 17," Jha explained.




*BytePe aims to reduce the cost of EMIs even further by offering options to upgrade or retain smartphones. (Image: BytePe)*

In the future, Jha said he plans to introduce a two-year plan, where the smartphone upgrade cycle would range from 18 to 24 months, offering savings of up to 45 per cent to consumers. "We are adding a smart ownership model. It's not

rental, it's not leasing – you are simply owning it smarter, at a fraction of the cost." Each smartphone offered on the platform comes with 100 per cent damage protection in addition to the brand warranty.

Brands like Apple and Samsung are going all-in on affordability options to drive sales of their high-end smartphones in India. Perhaps the two biggest players in the premium flagship smartphone space.

"I don't think they are reluctant," Jha said when asked what is stopping top smartphone brands from introducing a similar selling model to what BytePe has launched. "What this business ultimately requires is stitching everything together. When you sell to a consumer, underwriting is involved and you need a financing instrument to underwrite the customer. Another challenge is what brands would do with the products once they come back. I believe the secondary ecosystem, where you guarantee the upfront value, is a space that requires a lot of capability. That capability is what we bring to the table, which is why we are able to successfully integrate all the pieces."

BytePe currently offers only high-end smartphones from brands like Apple and Samsung, but over

time, the platform plans to expand its product categories to include accessories, premium watches from Seiko, bags, and more. Jha indicated that his startup may work closely with some of these brands, though he did not name any. For example, the latest iPhone 17 is available on BytePe for Rs 3,899 a month, the iPhone 16 for Rs 2,787, and the AirPods 4 for Rs 877 a month.

BytePe, he believes, will succeed as Indian consumers' behavior shifts towards mass premium and flagship smartphones. However, Jha isn't alone in trying to make premium smartphones more affordable through unique business models. Everphone in Germany sells Apple iPhones, Samsung Galaxy phones, Google Pixels, and other tablets "as a service." In the UK, Raylo offers smartphone subscriptions, charging consumers a monthly fee to lease new or refurbished SIM-free devices.

"These players may operate similarly to us, but their backend structures are different. For example, Raylo's model does not offer ownership, whereas our model gives you the choice of ownership. The European market has a different consumer dynamic, while the Indian market is more focused on affordability," Jha said.

Jha mentioned that since the beta launch of the

platform in September, the company is currently serving 15,000 PIN codes. When asked about the response from smaller towns in India, he said it's too early to comment on regional behavior, as more data will be needed over the next few months. The service is currently web-based, with an app launch planned for this quarter.

Jha indicated that after smartphones, his next big bet for a product category may be gaming, with other categories expected to follow in the next financial year.

BytePe has 30–35 person team based in Bangalore and Delhi.