

Sunday mid-day



Your I-Day plan sorted

A unique exhibition that celebrates Koli culture, bike rides and a host of around town options for Aug 15. **P32**

AS STATE GOVT PUSSYFOOTS ON PoP BAN, NATURE-FORWARD BAPPA BHAKTS FIND IDOLS GREENER THAN EVEN SHAADU

Humse jo takrayega, mitti mein mil jayega

Environment-enemy PoP and river clay shaadu now face strong contender in mitti or farm soil as raw material for Ganesh idols. A third-generation potter and his doctor buddy are behind a one-of-a-kind experiment which, with government support can change the Ganesh visarjan pollution game

JANE BORGES ON P18-19

While shaadu idols can be immersed at home, the leftover silt can only be dumped into a water body or into the earth. The residue from our maati idol can be used in potted plants. This circularity ensures zero waste

Kedar Sunil Kumbhar



A karigar cracks open the mould to reveal a maati idol at a workshop in Uruli Kanchan, near Pune, run by Kedar Kumbhar and Dr Akshay Kauthale. The idols here are made from nothing else but farm soil and water. PIC/PRADEEP DHIVAR

60-90

Time in minutes it takes Vruksha Gajanan to dissolve in room temperature water

'I see the Bible in new light; our Jesus is inclusive'

What's it like to be openly gay, intersex, bisexual, and follow a religion? Four brave, independent minds come clean with mid-day. **P24**



When the deaf can hear a film in their language



Founder of inclusivity firm behind Bhaag Milkha Bhaag interpreter version argues why subtitles are not enough. **P22**

Aqil Chinoy discusses the next sign language news bulletin to be broadcast by India Signing Hands, which has been pushing the boundaries of inclusivity for the deaf community. PICS/SAMEER MARKANDE



Watch for signs

By re-releasing popular films with sign language interpretations, a Lower Parel based organisation is filling up seats for inclusivity in the mainstream

GAUTAM S MENGLE

EARLIER this month, the Farhan Akhtar-starrer *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* was released in theatres again, 10 years after its original release but with one addition: On the bottom right of the screen, all through the movie, an interpreter relayed shot-by-shot in sign language. She looked stricken when Milkha Singh said, "Sir mujhse nahi hoga (Sir I can't do it)" and was lovestruck when he proposed to his lady love. She even danced while interpreting the lyrics to the songs.

Every person who watched the film, which was re-released specifically for deaf audiences, came out with a smile on their face. They all had the same thing to say, "This was the first time we truly enjoyed a film because we understood everything. Finally, we watched a movie in our language."

Bhaag Milkha Bhaag was the third film re-released with interpreters. The brainchild of India Signing Hands (ISH), a Lower Parel-based organisation working towards better inclusivity for the deaf, the idea was a learning experience for its co-founders. It showed how much more work needed to be done for the deaf community to be

included in mainstream life.

"The one question we were asked," says Aqil Chinoy, one of the three founders, "is whether it's a good idea to have an interpreter at the bottom right of the screen. People thought it could distract the audience from the film. What they don't realise is that because our one sense is under-developed or lacking, all other senses sharpen automatically over time. A deaf person can take in what's happening on the entire screen, the film and the interpreter, at the same time, simply because our peripheral vision is very strong."

Many people ask why we need an interpreter when there are subtitles. What nobody thinks about is that because of the lack of resources for them, the deaf don't get access to quality education and hence, a large number of them can't read subtitles

Aqil Chinoy, co-founder, India Signing Hands

Born and raised in a deaf family—parents, uncle, aunt and younger brother included—this never dampened the spirits of the Chinoy. "We are never bothered by the screaming and arguing of neighbours," says Chinoy. "We can sleep peacefully no matter how many vehicles are honking outside our house. And my father, who is a technology fan, has installed lights all over the house that indicate the doorbell has rung, or the front gate has been left open, that the telephone is ringing... There are lights outside every room, including the bathroom. As we can't call out to its occupants, we just press a switch. And we sleep with vibrating alarm clocks under our pillows."

Chinoy's entire life has been a constant battle with misconceptions and ignorance. At school—this was at a time when most deaf schools in India relied on lip reading—his teachers warned Chinoy's parents against using sign language with him at home. The common misconception, which prevails despite repeated research indicating otherwise, is that sign language diminishes perception and logical thinking.

After completing Class III, he was integrated into a mainstream



Chinoy was born to deaf parents, and has a deaf aunt, uncle and younger brother

school upon his principal's recommendation and struggled with lip-reading up to Class X. His parents then sent him to Gallaudet University in Washington DC, the world's only institution for deaf and hard of hearing individuals that teaches American Sign Language and English. The education he received there, coupled with the experiences of his childhood, set the foundation for his life's work.

After working with a private firm for 15 years, he co-founded India Signing Hands with businessman Alok Kejriwal, who is deaf, and Dr Mansi Shah, a hearing child of deaf parents. While they started with promoting sign language, they soon realised that there was a lot more to do. From here, the idea of relaying the daily news in sign language was born.

"In my childhood, my family was

deprived of knowledge and information from TV channels as they used spoken language," he says. "I realised that due to this lack of accessibility, many deaf individuals face difficulties, especially with education and employment. I concluded that the first step had to be towards quality education and access to information."

Launched in 2018, ISH News, streaming on Instagram (ishnews) as well as YouTube, became a runaway hit for more than one reason. The news broadcasts have video, subtitles, an interpreter relaying it in sign language and even audio, which helps others learn sign language as well.

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The re-released version of Bhaag Milkha Bhaag had an interpreter at the bottom right of the screen, narrating the entire film in sign language

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The whole idea to make movies accessible is based on the simple premise: Why shouldn't the deaf be able to enjoy movies? In a world that thinks about inclusion in terms of employment and equal rights, entertainment and recreation take a backseat. But those, too, are the basic rights of any human being.

"I was never able to enjoy films because the subtitles just didn't work for me," says Chinoy. "I always wanted the deaf to be able to enjoy them. Besides, by drawing them to the cinema halls, what else are filmmakers doing other than promoting inclusivity?"

ISL first interpreted The Kashmir Files in 2022, and then 83 in the same year. The response was tremendous—apart from heart-warming reactions from the deaf community, it also marked the beginning of enlisting top celebrities to the cause. "Thousands of deaf people reached out with appreciation and gratitude, and expressed how they were able to fully connect with the movie, thanks to the sign language interpretation.

mid-day visited the ISH office-studio in Lower Parel, a cocoon of peace in the busy industrial estate. ISH shoots and edits all its news videos here, while two teachers conduct sign language classes in a corner. Chinoy conversed with this writer through his interpreter, Priya Sundaram. The synergy between them is obvious, with Sundaram not only translating his signs into words but also mirroring his emotions. Her voice rises and falls with the words, as if it were him speaking.

Point this out to her, and she doesn't even think it's surprising or out of the ordinary. "That's how sign language works. It is more than hand gestures, it has its own grammar," says Sundaram, who is a CODA (Children of Deaf Adults). Her mother is deaf, while her father is hearing. She grew up learning two languages and started working with ISL four years ago, part time. "I came here with the intention of working a few hours a day, and never left," she says.

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XOXO, it's Reddit

The real and raw social media platform is an escape from the hyper-curated feeds of Instagram and X, dishing raw gossip on the Internet—nevermind true or not!

AASTHA ATRAY BANAN

SUB's strike rate 100%"; "So sad to hear this. Hope they find the strength to go through this phase of their lives"; "Kusha was really into open relationships and Zor didn't want to continue?"—This writer got sucked into the world of Reddit last month when content creator and actor Kusha Kapila announced her separation from her husband, fellow digital creator Zorawar Singh Ahluwalia. A subreddit called r/InstaCelebsReddit started a discussion on the split, opening the pearly gates to raw, unedited gossip heaven. The comments were varied: Some expressed despair, some discussed theories, and some delighted at the fact that the subreddit had predicted the divorce.

The opinions may be real, but people commenting don't have their real faces on. We have usernames such as _burgandyonmystery, moonpiexox01 (expert snitch) and jaani_dushman—more anonymity, more audacity?

The gossip, the communities, the reviews and the general "let's do as we want, let's be who we are", vibe of Reddit is slowly drawing those bored of the ring lights and cube croissants of Instagram, or the tailored sarcasm of X. The registered users of the American social news aggregation, content rating, and discussion website are commonly referred to as Redditors. They submit content in the form of links, text posts, images, and videos, each of which is then voted up or down by other members. Posts are organised by subject into user-created boards labelled Communities or Subreddits.

On another day, we went down the rabbit hole at subreddit r/BollyBlindsNGossip, which has 573k followers. The topic of heated discussion: Why actor Deepika Padukone looked a bit uncomfortable while husband Ranveer Singh and Alia Bhatt chatted cosily at the head of the runway at the Manish Malhotra show. Another group was discussing 'Bruh why are the kisses so forced and cringe?' referencing the smooches in the latest Karan Johar hit, Rocky and Rani Ki Prem Kahani. It was raucous and hilarious.

Subreddit r/BollyBlindsNGossip, which began in February 2018, says that their members observe celebs and post observations as topics, which transmutes into gossip at some point. Though few members post gossip direct sources,



when asked whether the site verifies their content, the response the anonymous moderators of the community was, "We have no means to verify the source of gossip posted by members. We used to remove all 'Original Gossip' posted via 'Source'. [For instance] The news of Alia's pregnancy was broken on this Sub at the time of Alia-Ranbir's wedding. We removed it as we felt it may be a fake/prank by a member. After this, we decided to let members post original gossip under the tag 'Exaggerated claims: no sources, no proof'. It is up to members to cross question and decide to believe or discard it. Members who want to post OG gossip also insist on remaining anonymous. If someone says they are a celebrity and wants to do an AMA [Ask Me Anything], we request a picture with a placard. We have a dormant Twitter [sic] account where we ask for verification via DM."

In a world without strict guidelines, who draws the line? "We are okay with all kinds of gossip except outing someone's sexuality, and about celebrity children," says the moderator. "We allow #MeToo allegations after cross questioning. We remove all posts and comments that incite hate against vulnerable groups, or use abusive language. We are also against the culture of 'ban and boycott Bollywood brigade'."

According to the traction data provided to the subreddit by Reddit, they get 9.3 million page views per week. Approximately, 200 posts are submitted and 1,500 new members join subreddit every day. "Why it's so popular and important



SHRUTI PEDNEKAR



FARZANA PATOWARI



ROHAN CHAUBEY



ANOOP MISHRA

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r/BollyBlindsNGossip

is because it is a safe place to interact with like-minded people and debate freely with opposite views," the moderators told us in an email interview.

That's what fans of the social media platform say as well. Entertainment writer Farzana Patowari logs in most of the time "to read trash comments about people. I feel some kind of joy... it feels so good to see people being honest. Unlike Instagram, where we are always thinking about what is the right thing to say or not, here we can be politically incorrect." The last post she really enjoyed was the one where actor Ileana Dcruz posted a photo with her "alleged" lover. "People were wondering if it was a footballer, and some just saw it as a publicity stunt."

"Of course, it's gossip," says Patowari, who checks the app last before she hits the sack. "But sometimes, it's legit information. I also like that many people talk about their communities. For example, I used to live in Pune, and people would talk not only about civic issues, but also where to go, where not to go."

Dombivli-based Shruti Pednekar feels that Reddit is a raw, real, and saner world. "It's anonymous so no one is judging you," says the video producer, "and you can be real and say what you want, without thinking 'who is approving [of] my words?' I am very active on Reddit—I leave comments, and ask questions about anything and everything... And if I am disturbed by a thread, I exit the post. If you are on Reddit, know that people may say anything, so don't take anything personally and leave if

it's not going down well with you." Pednekar spends at least two hours a day on the platform, much more than she spends on Instagram.

As of February 2023, Reddit ranks as the 10th most visited website in the world, according to Semrush, which works in keyword research and online ranking data. Many experts say that since its inception in 2002, the site has grown year on year, been lauded for building a community and helping raise funds for various issues, even though it has been criticised for its propensity to spread potentially dangerous misinformation. In 2021, it was valued at US \$10 billion, with advertising revenue contributing \$350 million. In 2023, so far, it has 55.79 million daily active users and 1.660 billion monthly active users.

Rohan Chaubey, who runs the community r/GrowthHacking, with 37,000 members, says that his subreddit is a good way to use the platform. Chaubey has written The Growth Hacking Book, which talks about using traditional and non-traditional media to hack your way to growth, especially as a startup. "There are no ads, and no targeted audience," he says. "The only way to use Reddit is to tie your business with conversation. There are many niche and intellectual communities too. There is also a lot of Not Suitable For Work content. I have reached out to many people, and I get a lot of work on it. But, you can actually find all kinds of information—Fix your PC? Sure. Want to find a place to eat/stay in Hyderabad? Sure."

It is social media PR Strategist Anoop Mishra who puts all this in perspective. "Platforms such as Reddit and Quora are being preferred now, as there is no filtration, and thus, the reviews are real. Brands and creators should be here—because organic conversation and growth is better than platforms where you need to do stunts to be relatable," says Mishra. He advises brands to embrace Reddit, Medium and Quora because the authentic product reviews can help their business. "Now," he says, "Facebook doesn't offer organic reach. So a brand would rather put their product up on Reddit, get reviews, and let people read them and buy. Also, people can leave reviews in their own languages. It doesn't get better than that."

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