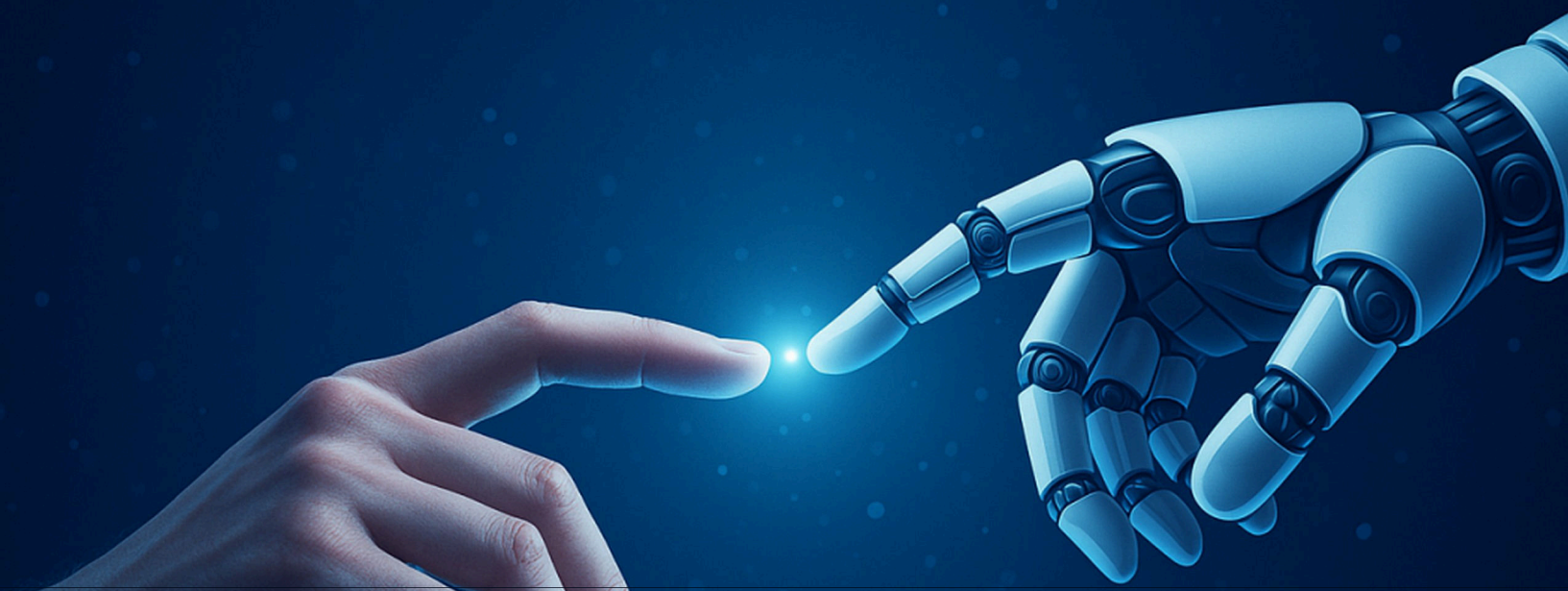
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COVER STORY

The Algorithmic Self: Learning to Want What We Choose

ARTICLES | By Maria Gladys A

Dr. Rajeev Kumar
The Possibilities and Anxieties of Growing Up with AI

Esra Yagmur
Mecca: Finding the Centre of the Self

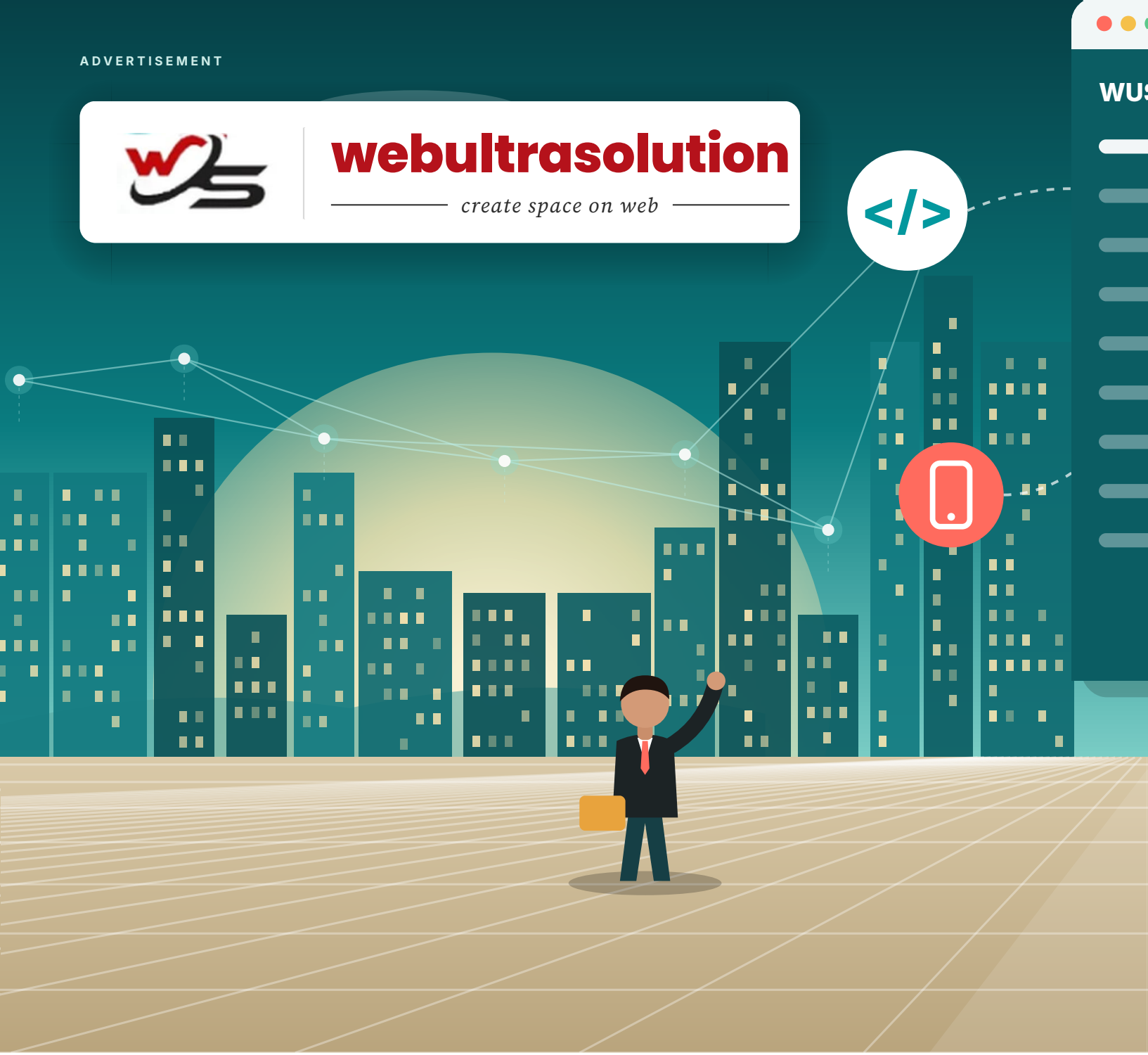
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VHH Nanobodies: Small Antibodies, Big Hopes

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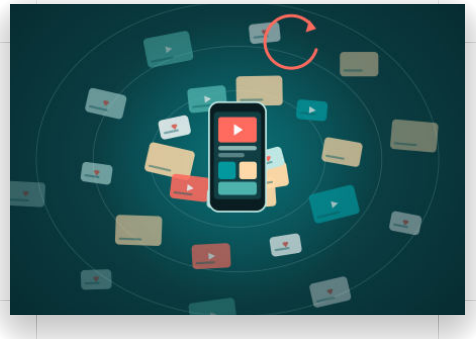
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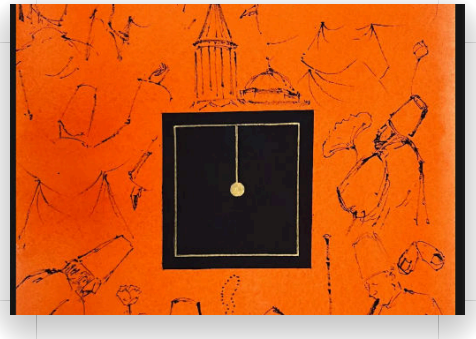
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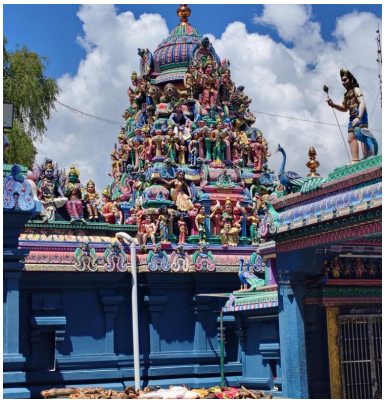
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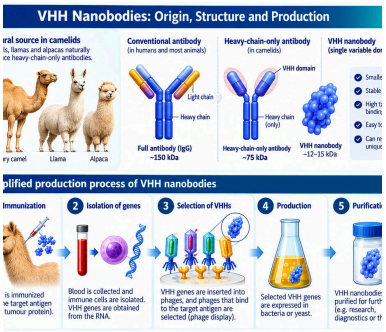












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FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF'S DESK

What does it mean to be *human?*

A note of thanks to the writers, artists, editors and supporters behind this issue.



We extend our heartfelt gratitude to everyone who contributed to this issue of the U-Talk Magazine.

First and foremost, we thank our contributors, writers and artists, whose creativity and skill have made this publication a reality. The "Articles" by Maria Gladys A, Dr. Rajeev Kumar and Rimpa Pal; the "Opinion" pieces by Suhani Sadana and Nancy Sharma; the section on "Poetry" by J. Malar Vizhi and Swasti Bisai; the "Painting" by Hapeesee Salae; "Photography" by Dr. Rajeev Kumar; the "Travelogue" by Esra Yagmur; "Health & Healing" by Dr. Mohammed Haseeb Khan; and the "Interview" with Aabid Bhat of Hostelbird by Vijay Laxmi all deserve to be lauded for making this issue complete and fulfilling.

Many pieces in this issue return, in different ways, to one question: what does it mean to remain human in a world shaped by machines, markets and algorithms? From young people growing up with AI and the quiet pull of recommendation feeds, to the hidden cost of fast fashion and the lasting gift of a good teacher, our contributors remind us that thinking, choosing and caring remain our own work.

> *What does it mean to be human in a world shaped by machines, markets and algorithms?*

Special thanks go to our Managing Editor, Dr. Rajeev Kumar, for overseeing the Magazine's layout and design; to our Associate Editor, Dr. Sajal Dey; to our Copy Editor, Dr. Insha Qayoom Shah, for the meticulous copy editing that ensures the quality and accuracy of every page; and to our Proofreader, Dr. Saalima Khan. We also thank our Production & IT partner, Web Ultra Solution, for bringing this issue to life.

Our sincere appreciation goes to the esteemed Advisors of the Magazine, Professor Bruce B. Lawrence, Professor Miriam Cooke, Professor Manindar Nath Thakur, Professor Raziuddin Aquil, Professor Purnendu Ranjan, Professor Rakesh Thakur and Dr. Ajit Kumar Jha, for their invaluable guidance in shaping the Magazine's content and direction.

We express our gratitude to our sponsors and supporters, the Umran Green School, the Umran Academic Research Association and Webultrasolution, whose generous contributions have made this publication possible.

With best wishes,

Prof. Mousumi G. Banerjee

Editor-in-Chief, U-Talk Magazine
Director, The English and Foreign Languages University, Shillong

ABOUT U-TALK

U-Talk is a space *for you to talk.*

A quarterly, multidisciplinary magazine for ideas, opinions and engagement in your own voice.

We want pieces where you bring an idea, an opinion or an engagement of your own. Tell readers what is happening, why it matters, and what you think about it.

You might write about a debate in your field, something unfolding in your city, or what is happening in India and around the world today. You might respond to something U-Talk has already published, or propose a new way of looking at an old question. **What matters is that the thinking is yours.**

01

Inform

Tell readers what is happening, here or elsewhere, and why it deserves attention.

02

Engage

Respond to a debate, a book, an event, or a piece published in U-Talk.

03

Argue

Take a position. Make a case with clear reasoning and evidence.

04

Suggest

Propose ideas, solutions or questions others should be thinking about.

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HIGHLIGHTS

News from *UARA*

Milestones, workshops and talks from the past quarter.

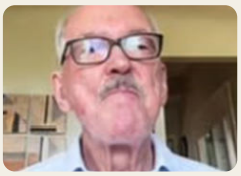


PHD COMPLETED

Dr. Rajeev Kumar completes his PhD at Ibn Haldun University

Our Founder and President, Rajeev Kumar, has successfully completed his PhD in Civilization Studies at Ibn Haldun University, Istanbul, under the supervision of Professor Bruce B. Lawrence. His thesis, titled "*The Longing–Belonging Paradigm: Negotiating 'Kahat Kabir' in South Asia with a Focus on Bihar,*" examines religion, politics, society, civilization and contemporary crisis through Kabir and the Kabirpanthi tradition in South Asia, with particular attention to the Mithila region of Bihar, India.

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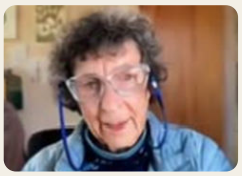
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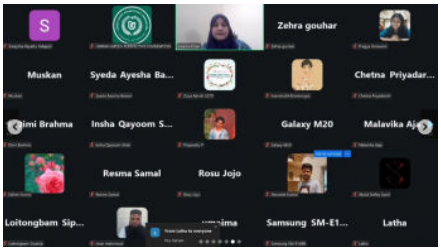
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WORKSHOP SERIES

Writing a Research Paper and Publishing in a Journal

Umran Academic Research Association and U-Talk successfully organised a four-part workshop series that benefited UG, PG and PhD students and faculty in the Social Sciences and Humanities, guiding them with practical information.



KEYNOTE · PATTAMBI, KERALA

"Why Kabir, Why Now?"

Dr. Rajeev Kumar delivered a keynote at Sree Neelakanta Govt. Sanskrit College, Pattambi, representing UARA. The session examined how Kabir's legacy opens new pathways to understand religion, politics and society, and why diversity, cultural dialogue and civilizational encounters are vital for lasting peace.



TALK · CHANDIGARH

Religion and Society in Contemporary India

At Post-Graduate Government College for Girls, Sector 42, Chandigarh, organised by the Department of History, Dr. Kumar gave his second academic talk in India since completing his PhD. It brought together students, scholars, local Kabirpanthis, singers and members of the public, and received very positive feedback.

The Algorithmic Self: *Learning to Want What We Choose*

When a feed keeps offering us the next thing to want, how do we tell what we have chosen from what we have simply been shown?



BY **MARIA GLADYS A**
Independent, India

ABSTRACT

Recommendation systems now shape much of what Gen Z watches, hears and buys. This essay asks how easily repeated suggestions are mistaken for personal desire, and how algorithms influence identity, intimacy and creativity. Rather than rejecting technology, it argues for using it with intention: pausing to ask whether we would still want something if we had never been shown it.

KEYWORDS Algorithms · Identity · Gen Z · Creativity · Digital wellbeing



THE QUIET INFLUENCE OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Most of us know the experience: we pick up our phones to check one message, then find ourselves watching videos, listening to unfamiliar music, or looking at products we never intended to buy. One recommendation leads to another, and minutes—or even an hour—pass. The next thing is already waiting, so the experience feels effortless.

This is everyday life, especially for Gen Z, which has grown up with recommendation systems woven into music, entertainment, shopping, news, and social media. These systems learn from what we watch, search for, replay, and skip, then predict what might hold our attention. They can introduce us to new artists, useful ideas, and communities we might never have found otherwise.

But a deeper question sits beneath this convenience: when something is repeatedly recommended, **how easily do we mistake familiarity for personal desire?** Algorithms may not decide who we are, but they influence what we notice, value, and want. The challenge is not to escape technology. It is to keep an active role in shaping ourselves while living with it.

WHEN PREDICTION STARTS TO FEEL LIKE IDENTITY

An algorithm does not know us as a close friend does. It recognises patterns in our behaviour. If we replay a certain kind of music, it offers more. If we pause on videos

about a particular lifestyle, our feed may fill with similar images. Repetition can make a preference feel more fixed than it really is.

Identity is built through experiences, relationships, mistakes, curiosity, and the things we choose to explore. Online, we express ourselves through photographs, playlists, memes, captions, fandoms, and selected moments from daily life. That expression can be genuine, even when curated. The difficulty begins when the trends repeatedly shown to us become the limits of what we imagine ourselves to be.

> *Being seen is not always the same as being known.*

Personalised spaces can also be valuable. Someone who feels isolated may find people online who share their interests or understand their experiences. A young person can discover language for feelings they struggled to explain. Online communities can offer support, friendship, and belonging.

Yet being seen is not always the same as being known. We may follow someone's updates and know where they went or what made them laugh, while rarely having a real conversation. Digital contact can strengthen relationships, but visibility alone cannot replace the attention and care that intimacy requires.

CREATIVITY UNDER THE PRESSURE TO PERFORM

Algorithms also shape creativity. A phone can now be a camera, editing studio, publishing platform, and route to a worldwide audience. Young people can share music, writing, art, and ideas without traditional gatekeepers. That access is worth celebrating.

At the same time, creators can feel pressure to make work that performs well. The question shifts from "What do I want to make?" to "What will people watch?" Writers try to capture attention immediately; musicians consider whether listeners will skip the opening seconds. Studying trends and engagement can be practical, but it can narrow creative freedom when visibility becomes the main measure of success.

Memes and hashtags show the same tension. They can turn private frustration into shared humour, spread information, help people organise, and draw attention to events that might otherwise be ignored. But serious messages can become fleeting trends, and personal stories can be consumed like any other content. Platforms are designed to distribute material and hold attention; they do not necessarily understand the difference between something deeply meaningful and something merely clickable.

> *"Would I still want this if I had never been shown it?"*

INFLUENCE IS NOT THE SAME AS CONTROL

It would be too simple to say algorithms control us. Our desires have always been influenced by family, friends, advertising, films, celebrities, and the culture around us. Digital systems did not invent influence; they made it faster, more personalised, and harder to notice. Because recommendations feel tailored to us, we may not recognise how strongly they guide our attention.

We want privacy but share parts of our lives online. We want to be authentic but edit what we post. We want to disconnect but fear missing something. These tensions do not make us hypocrites. They make us human beings trying to find our place in systems designed to learn from our behaviour.

The answer is not to treat every recommendation as manipulation or every screen as a threat. Personalised tools can be useful and entertaining. The important thing is to notice when convenience becomes automatic—when we scroll without knowing why, compare our lives with polished images, or assume repeated suggestions must matter to us.

MAKING ROOM FOR OUR OWN CHOICES

A small question can restore perspective: "Would I still want this if I had never been shown it?" It applies to a song, product, lifestyle, opinion, or image of success. There may be no simple answer; our desires have always been shaped by other people. But asking gives us a moment to reflect instead of automatically following the next prompt.

We can make that space in ordinary ways: explore music beyond our feed, read viewpoints that challenge us, and create something without measuring its likely popularity. We can keep some experiences private, put our phones away during conversations, and contact a friend rather than silently watching their updates. A trending opinion is not automatically thoughtful, and popularity does not determine personal value.

This does not require abandoning the internet. It requires using it with intention. Algorithms can suggest

what we might enjoy, but **a suggestion need not become a decision.** A feed can introduce an idea, but we can still question it. A platform can help us find a community, but relationships still need attention and care.

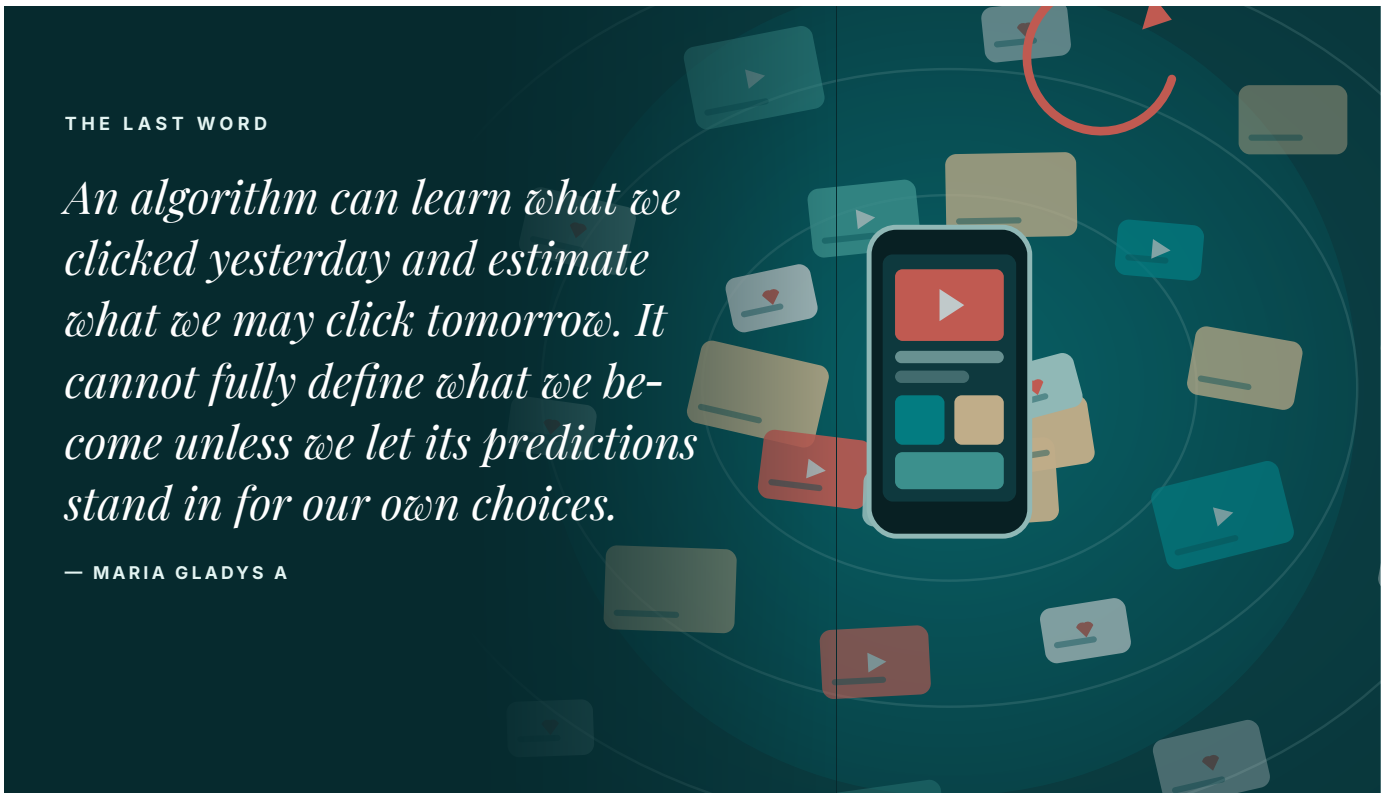
The most important digital skill may be more than knowing how to use technology. It is recognising how technology influences us—and deciding where that influence should end. We need room for accidental discoveries, unpopular ideas, unfinished experiments, and moments that do not need to be posted. We need room to change our minds and to like something without an audience.

An algorithm can learn what we clicked yesterday and estimate what we may click tomorrow. It cannot fully define what we become unless we let its predictions stand in for our own choices. In a world that constantly offers us the next thing to want, pausing, reflecting, and choosing may be among the clearest ways to remain ourselves. ■

MAKING ROOM FOR OUR OWN CHOICES

- Explore music beyond your feed.
- Read viewpoints that challenge you.
- Create something without measuring its likely popularity.
- Keep some experiences private.
- Put the phone away during conversations.
- Contact a friend instead of silently watching their updates.

> *Would I still want this if I had never been shown it?*
>
> A QUESTION FOR EVERY SCROLL



EDUCATION & TECHNOLOGY

The Possibilities and Anxieties of *Growing Up with AI*

What happens when asking a machine becomes as ordinary as asking a teacher or a friend?



BY DR. RAJEEV KUMAR
Civilization Studies, Ibn Haldun University, Istanbul, Türkiye

ABSTRACT

For teenagers today, asking an AI chatbot may feel as ordinary as asking a teacher or a friend. Drawing on recent surveys, a case at Brown University and research on critical thinking, this article weighs the real possibilities AI opens for learning against the value of intellectual struggle and human companionship, and argues that young people must learn when to use AI, when to question it and when to put it aside.

KEYWORDS Artificial intelligence · Education · Adolescence · Critical thinking · Companionship

There was a time when not knowing something required a little patience. You asked your teacher, searched through a book, called a friend, or simply remained confused for a while. Sometimes you spent an entire evening trying to understand one difficult idea. Today, a young person can open a phone, ask an AI chatbot, and receive an answer within seconds.

For those of us who grew up before artificial intelligence became part of everyday life, this still feels remarkable. But imagine being thirteen today. AI may not feel remarkable at all. It may simply be another part of growing up, like smartphones, YouTube or Instagram. You can ask it to explain your homework, translate a sentence, suggest an idea for a drawing, solve a mathematics problem, help you write an email, or simply talk to you when you are bored.

This is why the conversation about young people and AI cannot simply be about whether AI is good or bad. It offers possibilities that previous generations could hardly imagine, but it also raises a difficult question: what happens when a generation grows up with machines that can not only provide information, but also write, create, advise and converse with them?

A CHANGE ALREADY UNDERWAY

The change is already happening quickly. A 2026 Pew Research Center survey found that 57 percent of American teenagers had used AI chatbots to search for information and 54 percent had used them for schoolwork. Almost half had used them for entertainment. One in ten teenagers said they were using chatbots to do all or most of their schoolwork.

There is an exciting side to this. Think of a student who cannot afford private tuition but needs someone to explain algebra again. An AI tutor can explain it once, twice or ten times without becoming impatient. A student learning another language can practise without feeling embarrassed about making mistakes. Someone living far from a good library or university can ask for an introduction to a difficult subject before reading further. The OECD's 2026 work on digital education recognises this potential, while also making an important distinction: simply completing a task successfully with generative AI does not necessarily mean that learning has taken place.

That distinction takes us to the difficult part of the story.

> *Simply completing a task successfully with generative AI does not necessarily mean that learning has taken place.*
>
> OECD, 2026

THE VALUE OF THE STRUGGLE

Imagine two students who have been asked to write an essay. One spends an evening reading, becomes confused, writes a bad first paragraph, deletes it, tries again and finally produces something imperfect. The second asks an AI chatbot and receives a beautifully organised answer in twenty seconds. The second student has certainly saved time. But the first student has done something else. While struggling with the essay, they were learning how to think. They had to decide what was important, connect different ideas, find words for something they only partly understood and perhaps even change their mind along the way.

We normally look at the finished essay and call that the student's work. But much of the real intellectual work may have happened during the frustration that came before it.

> *“Much of the real intellectual work may have happened during the frustration that came before it.”*

WHEN THE SCORES DON'T ADD UP

A recent case at Brown University shows that this is no longer only a hypothetical problem. In 2026, economics professor Roberto Serrano became concerned after the results of a take-home, closed-book midterm were unusually high. The median score was 98 percent, and 40 of 86 students received a perfect score. Serrano said that his previous midterm averages had generally been between 65 and 85 percent. He also noticed unusual similarities in some answers and suspected that AI had been used despite the rules.

For the final examination, he returned to an in-person format. Among students who completed both assessments, subsequent reporting found that the average fell from about 96 on the take-home midterm to about 49 on the in-person final. The difference alone cannot prove which students used AI, and researchers later cautioned against treating the scores as definitive evidence of individual cheating. But the experience was enough for Serrano to change how he assessed students: he decided to stop using take-home exams and to remove homework from the graded part of his courses. Other professors at Brown also raised concerns about whether take-home assessments could still be trusted in the age of generative AI.

The Brown case points to something larger than cheating. For generations, teachers have given essays and homework because the work students submitted was assumed to represent, more or less, what they understood. AI makes that assumption much harder. A student may now submit an excellent answer without having gone through the intellectual process required to produce it. Universities therefore face a deeper question: if we cannot easily distinguish between what a student knows and what a machine can produce for that student, how should we evaluate learning?

THINKING WITH US, OR FOR US?

Research is beginning to raise similar concerns about thinking itself. A 2025 Microsoft Research study involving 319 knowledge workers found that greater confidence in generative AI was associated with less critical-thinking effort, while greater confidence in one's own abilities was associated with more critical engagement. The researchers did not conclude that AI simply makes people less intelligent. Their findings suggest something more complicated: AI can change where and how our thinking happens.

Perhaps this is the real educational question. **AI can help us think, but it can also think for us if we allow it to.** The difference between the two is not always obvious.



Asking a machine. For many teenagers, an AI chatbot is now as close as a textbook. Illustration: U-Talk.

A FRIEND AT TWO IN THE MORNING

There is another side of growing up with AI that may be even more personal than homework. Young people are

beginning to talk to machines not only for information, but also for companionship. A 2025 Common Sense Media survey found that nearly three-quarters of American teenagers had used AI companions, while about half used them regularly. Around one-third of teen users said they had chosen to discuss serious matters with an AI companion instead of a real person.

It is not difficult to understand why. Human relationships can be difficult. Friends sometimes do not reply. Parents may not understand. Teachers are busy. People judge us, interrupt us and occasionally say exactly the wrong thing. A chatbot, by contrast, can be available at two in the morning. It listens patiently and responds immediately.

For a lonely teenager, that may genuinely feel comforting, and we should not dismiss that need. But we should still ask what happens when artificial companionship becomes easier than human companionship. Friendship is not only about having someone listen to us. It also means learning to listen to another person. Relationships require disagreement, compromise, patience and sometimes disappointment. These uncomfortable experiences are also part of growing up.

57%
of American teens have used AI chatbots to search for information
Pew Research Center, 2026

1 in 10
teens say they use chatbots for all or most of their schoolwork
Pew, 2026

~3 in 4
American teens have used AI companions; about half use them regularly
Common Sense Media, 2025

96 → 49
average score: take-home midterm vs in-person final, Brown University
2026

POSSIBILITIES WORTH PROTECTING

At the same time, it would be unfair to tell the story of AI only through fear. AI is already giving young people remarkable possibilities. Someone who cannot draw can experiment with visual ideas. A student can practise another language, learn basic coding, explore music, brainstorm a project or receive explanations adapted to their level of understanding. For students who lack expensive educational resources, good AI tools may open doors that were previously closed.

The challenge, therefore, is probably not to keep young people away from AI. That may already be impossible. AI will increasingly become part of their schools, universities, workplaces and creative lives. The more important task is teaching them when to use it, when to question it and when to put it aside.

> *The more important task is teaching them when to use it, when to question it and when to put it aside.*

Perhaps students should learn how to ask AI a good question, but they should also experience what it means to struggle with a difficult question themselves. They can use AI to improve a paragraph, but they should first know the frustration of trying to find their own words. They can generate an image in seconds, but there is still value in drawing something badly with their own hands. And they can talk to a machine, but they should understand that receiving an answer is not necessarily the same thing as being understood.

The generation growing up today may be the first that cannot clearly remember a world before intelligent machines became part of ordinary life. Their challenge will not simply be learning how to use AI. It will be learning something much harder: what to ask machines to do for them, what to continue doing for themselves, and **which parts of being human should never be outsourced.** ■

MEMOIR

Tribute to My *Polestar*

A first-generation learner remembers the teacher who kept her on course.

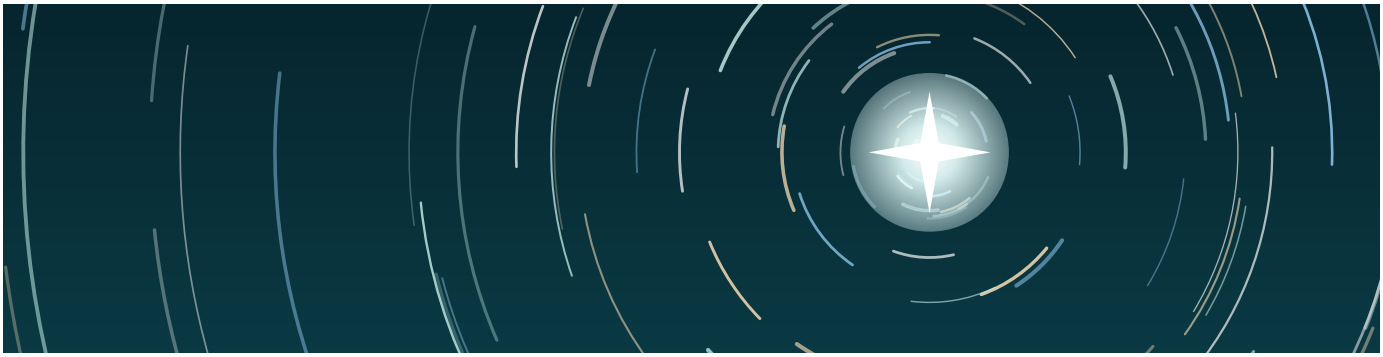


BY RIMPA PAL
State Aided College Teacher, Department of English, Tarakeswar Degree College, West Bengal

ABSTRACT

A former student's tribute to Soma Bharati, the school teacher who guided her from a Class XI classroom in Bhangamora to a first-class degree and a teaching career of her own. Through memories of shared books, advice and encouragement, the essay argues that the compassion of a true teacher cannot be replaced by any machine.

KEYWORDS Teaching · Mentorship · First-generation learners · Bengali literature



The pole star stays fixed while the sky turns around it. Illustration: U-Talk.

In this era of digital technology and artificial intelli- gence, overshadowed by educational corruption, cycles of question-paper leaks, uncertainty and hopelessness, Soma Bharati Madam remains one of the very few people I consider my role model. I first met her in 2011, in my Class XI classroom at Bhangamora School. Instead of emphasising rote memorisation, she always encouraged us to write answers independently. From her I learned an elegant way of understanding literature with emotion, of explaining difficult grammatical rules, and of bringing individual creative thought into writing.

We all agree that school life is the formative stage of our lives. Her prudent, motherly warnings about the usual temptations of adolescence protected me and never let my focus drift from my studies. Even then, she advocated the economic independence of women as the most important foundation for their empowerment and status in society. Her wise counsel, imprinted on my mind since school, continues to help me in my professional life.

When I took admission in a lesser-known village college in 2012, the whole world seemed to turn against me. At that time she stood beside me, saying, "The institution does not matter if you keep your focus on your studies." I am happy that I proved her words by securing a first class and second rank across the entire University of Burdwan. Entering the vast sea of English literature, I first felt like a fish out of water. She then guided me to approach my studies fearlessly.

She instilled a love of literature in me from my school days and introduced me to the rich repository of Bengali literature and the classic works of Rabindranath Tagore, Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Buddhadeb Guha and Narayan Sanyal. Her suggestion that I read cult texts such as Madhukari, Purba Paschim and Aranyak changed my outlook on life. She lent me her books, and we discussed them in a

homely literary adda (discussion). This nurtured my literary sensibility and paved the way for my further study of English literature.

She played a crucial role in my voyage of education and self-exploration. Stepping forward in education is not easy for a first-generation learner like me in our country. She always advised me on how to overcome economic struggle and fight social barriers. My parents gave me life and support, but she gave me the inner strength to face every adversity with courage and a silent smile. When I look back on the days from 2011 until now, I remember visiting her house innumerable times and calling her through thick and thin. She never gave up on me and always believed in my capabilities, even when I myself had abandoned hope. Her words **"You can definitely do this" ("Tumi parbei")** urged me to do the impossible. Her heartfelt blessing, "May success kiss your feet," became magical words that helped me move ahead. Her encouragement consistently lit up my "half-asleep" possibilities. Her philosophy resonates with Kahlil Gibran's words on teaching in The Prophet:

> *"No man can reveal to you aught but that which already lies half asleep in the dawning of your knowledge. The teacher who walks in the shadow of the temple, among his followers, gives not of his wisdom but rather of his faith and his lovingness."*

"Tumi parbei"

You can definitely do this.

The words that urged a first-generation learner to do the impossible.

Now let us leave the academic realm behind and step into life. From her I have learned how to live fully and joyfully, how to respect another's private space and where to stop, and how to balance emotion and reality, joy and sorrow. She teaches me to move forward without wasting precious time in the conundrums of the past, and to let go of painful episodes by forgiving people. Her lesson of compassion and forgiveness is perfectly aligned with Alexander Pope's famous line in An Essay on Criticism: "To err is human, to forgive divine." She is a powerhouse of positivity whose fragrance spreads to everyone around her. A person of diverse talents, her engagement with theatre, music, poetry, cultural programmes and travel makes her all the more dynamic and energetic. My only regret is that I have not been able to bring that kind of positivity into my own life; it would have made life easier.

Although I am an established introvert, I can discuss anything with her without hesitation—literature, politics, culture, love, marriage. I share everything with her in the firm belief that she will never judge me, yet she always corrects me when I make mistakes. She gives me a safe shelter, and I see her care and concern whenever I am in trouble, distress or ill health. Like a skilled boatman, she has steered my life's boat through every storm of darkness and fog of uncertainty. To this day I share with her not only news of success and joy but also moments of failure, depression, emotional turmoil and dilemma. She encouraged me to embrace Rabindranath Tagore's maxim in the poem Bojhapora —"Bhalo mondo jahai ashuk, / Shottere lao shohoje"— as my personal credo, and to keep up the spirit of Rudyard Kipling's If: to remain calm and patient in the face of adversity. Her motherly affection and patience never fail to read my mind and feelings from my face, without my saying much. She appears like an angelic solution bank for all my questions in life; in a word, she is a panacea for all my worries and doubts, personal and professional.

"Be honest to yourself." — the advice she wrote in my diary in 2013"

I always try to follow her golden advice, "Be honest to yourself," which she wrote in my diary in 2013. Crossing the boundary of a mere teacher, she has become my friend, philosopher and guide. She has not only extended a loving hand to enrich me academically but has also helped me become a better human being.

Although the world progresses with AI, **the genuine compassion and concern of a true teacher cannot be replaced by any machine**. I know the debt to a teacher cannot be repaid in a single lifetime. So I pray to God that our cordial bond remains intact forever, and that I may one day give her a proud moment and make her name shine as her student. That will be my only offering to my real-life guide. ■

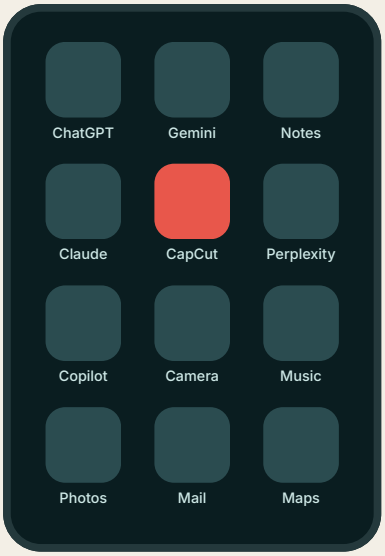
SATIRE

I Relapsed: *A Confession*

A tongue-in-cheek letter about slipping back into making things by hand, in an age that expects everything to be made by AI.



BY **SUHANI SADANA**
Mata Sundri College for Women, University of Delhi, India



WEDNESDAY, BETWEEN THE HEALTHY AI APPS…

"…was CapCut, just above ChatGPT and below Gemini, with Claude on its left and Perplexity on the right."

— Suhani Sadana

I am sorry, brother. I have been making things again. I know I am supposed to use AI… it's so much faster. But I'm sorry… I… relapsed.

It's actually been going on for a while now. The first time it happened, you were asleep. It was midnight. The Monday blues were quite heavy. I saw the notebook in the drawer beneath the almirah—yeah, weird place to keep a stash—but at least you didn't find it this time. Trust me, I really tried to take your advice. I asked AI to help me with the sinking feeling, but it just irritated me further. So I took it. Just one dose, though. One page of a poem was enough to get me through the night. Honestly, I didn't feel anything; I guess I have become pretty tolerant to such substances.

But my college is pretty woke, and I forgot what happened that night after a few days. They ensure that the youth doesn't get destroyed by these current waves of creativity and originality. In fact, there are posters everywhere and workshops on how to use AI—to just live. I do admit that I feel pretty nauseous sometimes when I see AI graphics on Pinterest, Batman vs Voldemort videos on Instagram, and good morning messages on WhatsApp. I still have withdrawal symptoms.

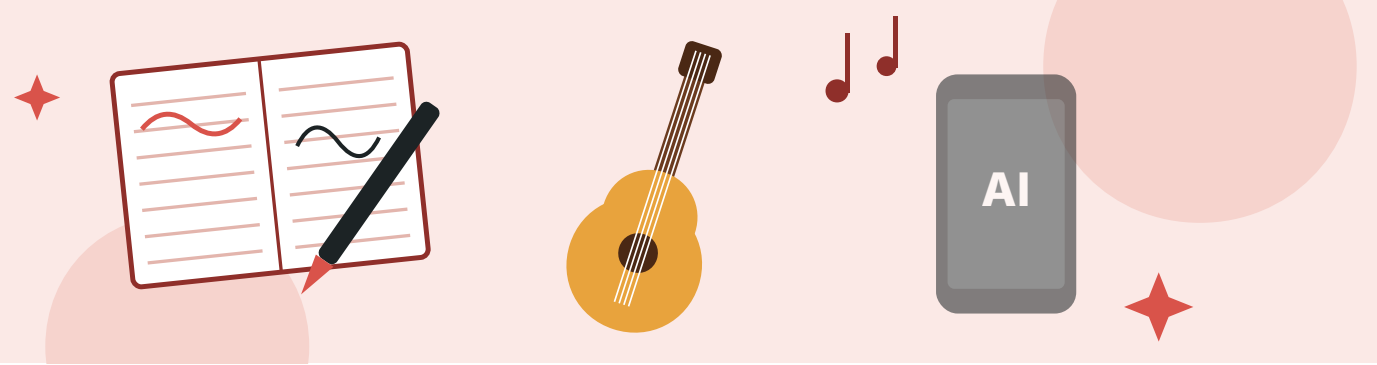
So I was fine for a week, but then the second time happened. It's partially your fault. You were supposed to uninstall all editing apps permanently from my device so that I couldn't inhale any cinematic experience anymore. But on Wednesday, between the healthy AI apps, was CapCut—just above ChatGPT and below Gemini, with Claude on its left and Perplexity on the right. All the flashbacks came at once: my teenage self making fan edits for Harry Styles, and then birthday edits for my friends. I couldn't resist anymore. Ik you said that in life, ChatGPT is enough to listen; it will always reply on time, answer you, and create videos for you. But I decided to line up the right amount of CapCut, using my credit card… to pay the subscription fee.

And oh my god. I had never experienced such a high in my life. The dots suddenly connected when I joined two videos together. My neurons were dancing. It felt like I was flowing through the night, with no track of time. I was in an altered mental state, where ideas were coming out of me naturally. My body relaxed when I saw the full video together. I was making strange associations between pictures and transitions. Text was coming out of me in a flow, with fonts that looked aesthetic... and me. I hadn't felt such emotional intensity in a while. I was able to say everything that I can't otherwise. I get why people do these drugs... you can't keep all your feelings to yourself. You need to express them, and sometimes a few doses of writing and filming do it for you. From time to time.

I thought it had been a week. It was November. I was completely addicted. Gemini was waiting for me to give it a prompt, but my hunger for the drug made me ignore every other socially acceptable app. In fact, when the CapCut dose finished, I saw another dealer with a new drug in the market—the guitar. It's pretty expensive but worth it. It's very strong as well; your brain can actually create its own melodies and rhythms with it. I swear I reached a state where all that mattered was to smoke my own thoughts away, and I couldn't stop. You can have nothing, but once you inhale this guitar thing into your veins, music gets created— literally.

Later, when I got sober, I was filled with guilt. Who will ever hire a druggie like me who can't use AI to save her life? Moreover, I know the long-term impact of psychedelic creativity is harsh—you may end up becoming an artist and doing actual drugs. But you need not worry; normal people have ensured that artificiality is present everywhere human intelligence was supposed to be doing its magic. So, one way or another, I will somehow be back to it.

Now, I don't want you to worry. I felt so much shame that I went to rehab myself. It's called 'How to Use AI to Create Art, in This Economy'. Once I am at least 100 days clean, I'll come back. For now, **this confession letter is the last evidence that I ever took the drug of creativity.** ■



Making things by hand: notebook, pen and guitar. Illustration: U-Talk.

ENVIRONMENT

Fashion or *Exploitation?*

A question to the younger generation



BY **NANCY SHARMA**
Student, Jagran Lakecity University



The fashion industry, which contributed around 1.6% of the world's total GDP in 2025, is one of the most significant industries, with a market worth of around 1.84 trillion dollars. Known for its massive growth and the job opportunities it offers to upcoming generations, it employed around 430 million people globally in 2025. Yet, although the industry is blooming, it has its own constraints.

The term "fast fashion" first came into the limelight through The New York Times in 1989; the same newspaper later described it as "throwaway fashion." Leading fashion companies such as Zara and H&M have planted in young minds the habit of changing one's wardrobe once or twice a month. Clothes became available at cheaper rates because their quality was compromised. This excessive production and consumption has turned the fashion industry into one of the world's greatest polluters.

THE HIDDEN COST

According to the United Nations Environment Programme, **the fashion industry is responsible for 10% of yearly global carbon emissions**. Around 60% of the material used in its products is oil-based (polyester or nylon). It contributes around 35% of the microplastic pollution in the world's oceans, making it the largest known source of marine microplastics. In Asia, 70% of fresh water is contaminated by waste disposed of in water bodies. Washing clothes alone releases 500,000 tonnes of microfibres into the oceans, equivalent to 50 billion plastic bottles.

A total of 92 million tonnes of textile waste is produced every year. This waste is either burned, polluting the atmosphere, or shipped to underdeveloped and developing countries, where it is dumped in open areas. According to Watson and Wolf, 60,000 tonnes of clothes have been dumped in Chile's Atacama Desert.

Adding to the problem, fashion is the second-largest water-consuming industry: producing a single cotton shirt requires about 2,700 litres of fresh water. Around 85% of the textiles produced end up in landfills, and less than one per cent are recycled.

“So the question is: is the article cheap, or are we paying the cost through the health of our environment?”

With this question in mind, let us not harm our planet. Let us take simple measures such as recycling and re-using instead of throwing clothes away, and let us not allow the rapidly changing trends imposed by fashion brands to thwart our attempts to save the planet. ■



Mountains of discarded clothing: textile waste dumped in open land. Source: National Geographic

THE COST OF FAST FASHION, BY THE NUMBERS

10%	35%	92 mn t	2,700 L	<1%
of yearly global carbon emissions *UNEP*	of microplastic pollution in the world’s oceans *UNEP*	of textile waste produced every year	of fresh water to make one cotton shirt	of textiles produced are recycled

Is the article cheap, or are we paying the cost through the health of our environment?

NANCY SHARMA



READ · WRITE · SUPPORT

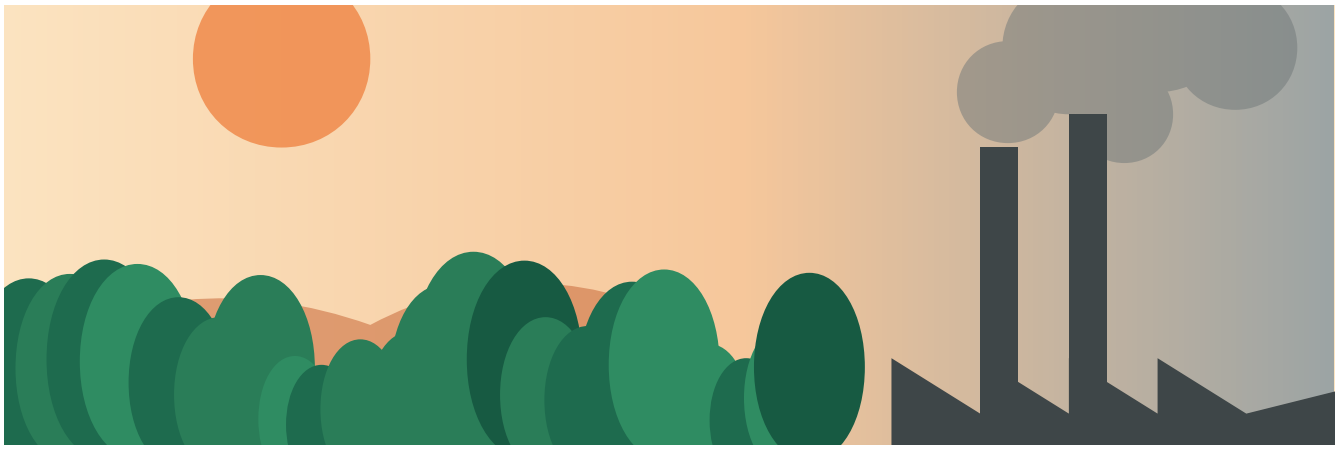
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Where Shall the *Hor-Hopon* Go?

J. MALAR VIZHI *Junior Research Fellow, Research Department of English, St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Palayamkottai*



He Thakurjiu, amge kedal kana?

No Mahua trees
No Kadamba trees
No Sal trees
No Kendu trees
No abode for Jaher-Ayo

Alakjari vine is coiling like an ajgar
Around the mighty sarjom tree,
Sucking the life out of it.
He Thakurjiu, amge kedal kana?

Marang Buru, O Marang Buru, amge kedal kana?
The Big Mountain God of the Santals —
The children of Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Budhi,
Dwelling silently in the dense, red-soiled Parganas,
Brewing delicious haandi, roasting mutton and pigs in ferocious fires,
Swaying in vibrant colours to the rhythmic beats of banam and tamak.
E-yo! E-ba! amge kedal kana?

Long ago, Earthworm and Tortoise built our land from deep waters,
Now it is no more ours —
They forced us to leave our kulhis.
Our forests fell to the villainous smile of powerful axes and saws.
Our totemic animals are slaughtered mercilessly with guns.
Mighty factories are malevolent bongas.
Giant machines suck the life out of mineral-rich mountains —
Like dahnis feeding voraciously on the liver of their innocent victims,
Chanting "Iron, Bauxite, Coal, Copper, Limestone" like mantras.
Clouds of dust, pungent fumes and smoke everywhere.

We hunt tubers for food,
They hunt minerals for money.
Venomous wasps swarming over our ancestral hills.

O Sim-Bonga, amge kedal kana?
O Chando-Bonga, amge kedal kana?
O Karam-Bonga, amge kedal kana?

If this land is no more ours,
Where shall your hor-hopon go?

Hor-hopon: the Santal people (literally "children of humans"). **Thakurjiu, Marang Buru, Bonga**: Santal deities and spirits.



TWO POEMS BY

Swasti Bisai

The EFL University, Regional Campus, Shillong

Life

Turmoil, dusty, half darken
Embedded with profound pathos.
Warm pain like sands,
Scorching ache like sun, delves it more.
Radish comfort closed the windows,
forever.
Still they expect more!
How can life be this much hellish to her?

Drafty (Drafted) Desire

Closeness emblems me more
You and me, best company ever.
Let's fly high from the pebbled shore
They are growing faster there.

Dusty cry sucks my breath
Let us fly high far from the grey heads.
Grey hairs came from conventionalism
They envisaged and tread the rest.

They make patriarchy the sign of dominators
Let's fly from them to make a new heaven at hell.
Just ignore if you can't tolerate
Leave them in their own created hell.

If they stifle your breath, then
Flee from them and fly high.
Heaven is too high, where freedom empowers the most.
The half women-dom get habituated but,
You be the leader, show them the path towards the dazzling independent heaven.



Knowing Oneself · Hapeesee Salae

Knowing *Oneself*

HAPEESEE SALAE
Istanbul University · Thailand

In Sufi thought, "knowing oneself" refers to recognising one's own existence and understanding the self (nafs) in order to turn toward ultimate truth. The figures gathered around the composition represent the diversity of human experience in the external world, while the black field at the centre symbolises the inward journey of the individual. The single golden point at its centre represents the inner self and the divine truth concealed within this multitude.

In this sense, drawing upon the Sufi understanding that "Whoever knows himself knows his Lord," the work emphasises that truth is not to be sought solely in the external world, but within the inner realm of the human being. **The golden point within the darkness symbolises the spiritual journey from the darkness of the nafs toward the light of truth.**



Another work by the artist

> *"Whoever knows himself knows his Lord.*
>
> A SAYING CENTRAL TO SUFI THOUGHT
>
> Truth is not to be sought solely in the external world, but within the inner realm of the human being.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Sacred Geometries and Cross-Cultural Aesthetics at *Sri Kalatheeswarar Temple*



BY **DR. RAJEEV KUMAR**
Civilization Studies, Ibn Haldun University, Istanbul, Türkiye

Location focus: Sri Kalatheeswarar & Sri Varadaraja Perumal Temple, Puducherry, India

My visit to the temples in Pondicherry this time was a uniquely enriching experience. I was mesmerised by the art and aesthetics surrounding these grand structures—it naturally brought to mind the mastery of the Sistine Chapel and Renaissance artists like Michelangelo.

While I am not an art expert who can measure exact proportions, studying art and aesthetics gave me a deep appreciation for the craftsmanship here, allowing me to draw fascinating parallels with European art movements. The narrative sculptures adorning the exterior and interior walls, alongside the vibrant ceiling paintings, tell stories with a grandeur rivalling Western masterpieces.

Architecturally, it was intriguing to compare the post-and-lintel framework with the Greek Pantheon—here, the pillars are square rather than round, featuring simple, elegant capitals without classical pediments. I experienced this sacred space not just spiritually and physically, but also through its psychological and sociological influence. It was truly a wonderful experience.



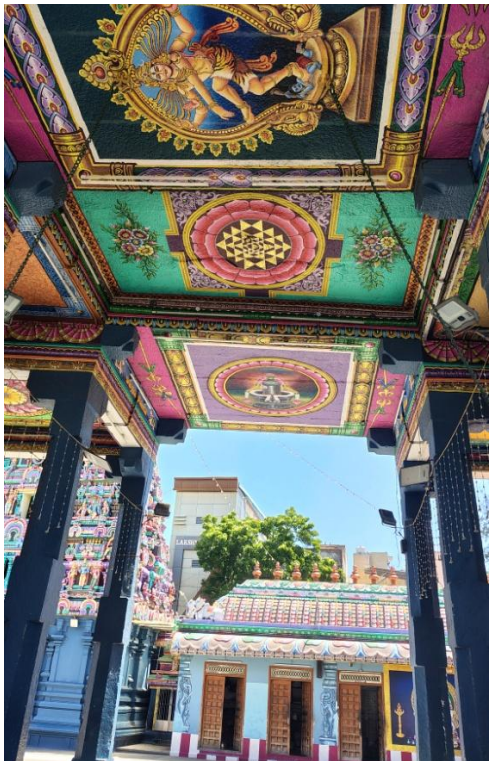
The majestic Rajagopuram of the Sri Kalatheeswarar Temple in Puducherry, towering over Mission Street with intricate tiers of sculpted deities.



The vibrant Vimana above the sanctum sanctorum and the processional wooden cart bearing the Tamil inscription of the Sri Kalatheeswarar and Varadaraja Perumal Devasthanam.



On the temple ceiling: this painted panel is on the ceiling of the temple, one of the vivid narrative panels illustrating divine themes against cerulean and deep magenta palettes.



ECHOES OF THE SISTINE CHAPEL

Detailed ceiling murals featuring Lord Nataraja, surrounded by lotus panels and sacred geometric motifs.

> *“The narrative sculptures and vibrant ceiling paintings tell stories with a grandeur rivalling Western masterpieces.”*

> *I experienced this sacred space not just spiritually and physically, but also through its psychological and sociological influence.*
>
> DR. RAJEEV KUMAR

Mecca: Finding the *Centre of the Self*

From the stillness of Medina to the first glimpse of the Kaaba — a journey into the meaning of intention, equality and belonging.



BY **ESRA YAGMUR**
Digital News Producer, TRT World, Istanbul, Türkiye



The Haram and the Kaaba, the destination of the journey from Medina.

Soon it was time to leave Medina. We set off from our hotel for the five-hour journey to Mecca. The landscape outside shifted continuously, from green valleys to open desert, herds of camels grazing under a changing sky, as if the land itself was preparing us for a different kind of encounter.

> *Leaving Medina did not feel like departure so much as carrying its stillness forward into what came next.*

Our first stop was Dhul-Hulayfah, the miqat mosque, one of the designated points where pilgrims enter the sacred state of ihram, once visited by the Prophet and his companions for the same purpose. Surrounded by lush date palms, this mosque of stone and mud brick serves as both a resting place for pilgrims and a station for entering ihram and preparing for worship.

Ihram, the special garments worn to enter the act of worship, symbolises both humility and equality, a spiritual process in which worldly status dissolves. Men wear plain white unstitched sheets, women modest attire, and all stand equal before the Creator.

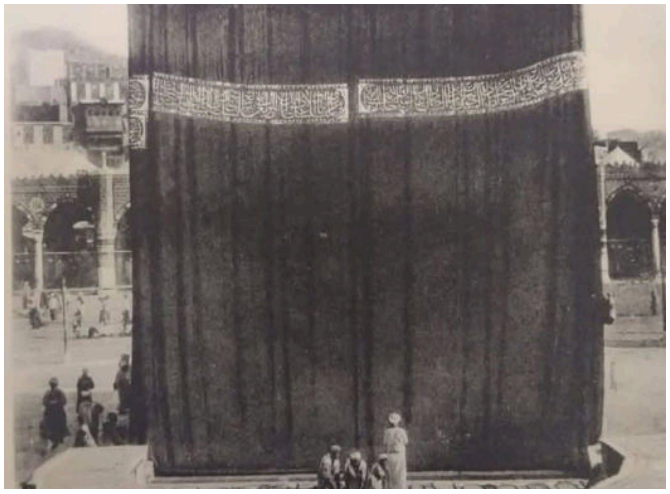
> *Ihram symbolises both humility and equality, a spiritual process in which worldly status dissolves.*
>
> ON ENTERING IHRAM

At this moment, we verbalised our intention. Islam teaches that acts of worship gain meaning only when combined with sincere intention:

> *"Labbayk, Allahumma labbayk! Labbayk, la shareeka laka, labbayk! Innal-hamda, wan-ni'mata, laka walmulk. La shareeka lak."*

These words echo the prayers of Prophet Ibrahim as he first shaped the holy structure, looking to the sky while carving the stones: "Here I am, my Lord. Truly, You have no partner..."

Repeating the talbiyah, we approached Mecca, each repetition reinforcing devotion and surrender.



The Kaaba, the fixed point around which pilgrims walk the seven circuits of tawaf.

Then, finally, the Kaaba.

At first, it revealed itself only partially, glimpsed between the columns beneath the King Fahd Gate. The emotion I felt was unlike anything I had anticipated. With its form half hidden and half revealed, **the first impression it left on me was that of a dark pearl emerging from its shell.**

As I examined its simple geometry and still presence, I could think of nothing else. With a mixture of awe and humility, I repeated silently within myself: Labbayk, here I am.

To perform the tawaf, we walked around the Kaaba seven times, keeping it on our left side, close to our hearts.

> *Perhaps our understanding of the infinite is limited, and God speaks to us through forms that meet the senses.*

This ritual, conducted through movement and repetition, carries meanings that guide the soul through experience rather than explanation. Perhaps our understanding of the infinite is limited, and God speaks to us through forms that meet the senses.

The Kaaba stands as a fixed point amid shifting identities. Each encounter with it reveals something new.

After completing tawaf, we moved to sa'y between Safa and Marwa.

Trusting in God's promise, Prophet Ibrahim left Hajar and Ishmael in a barren valley. Hajar, searching for water for her child, ran between the two hills seven times, refusing despair. Eventually, water sprang forth beneath the feet of Ishmael: the well of Zamzam.

For centuries, Muslims have retraced her steps.

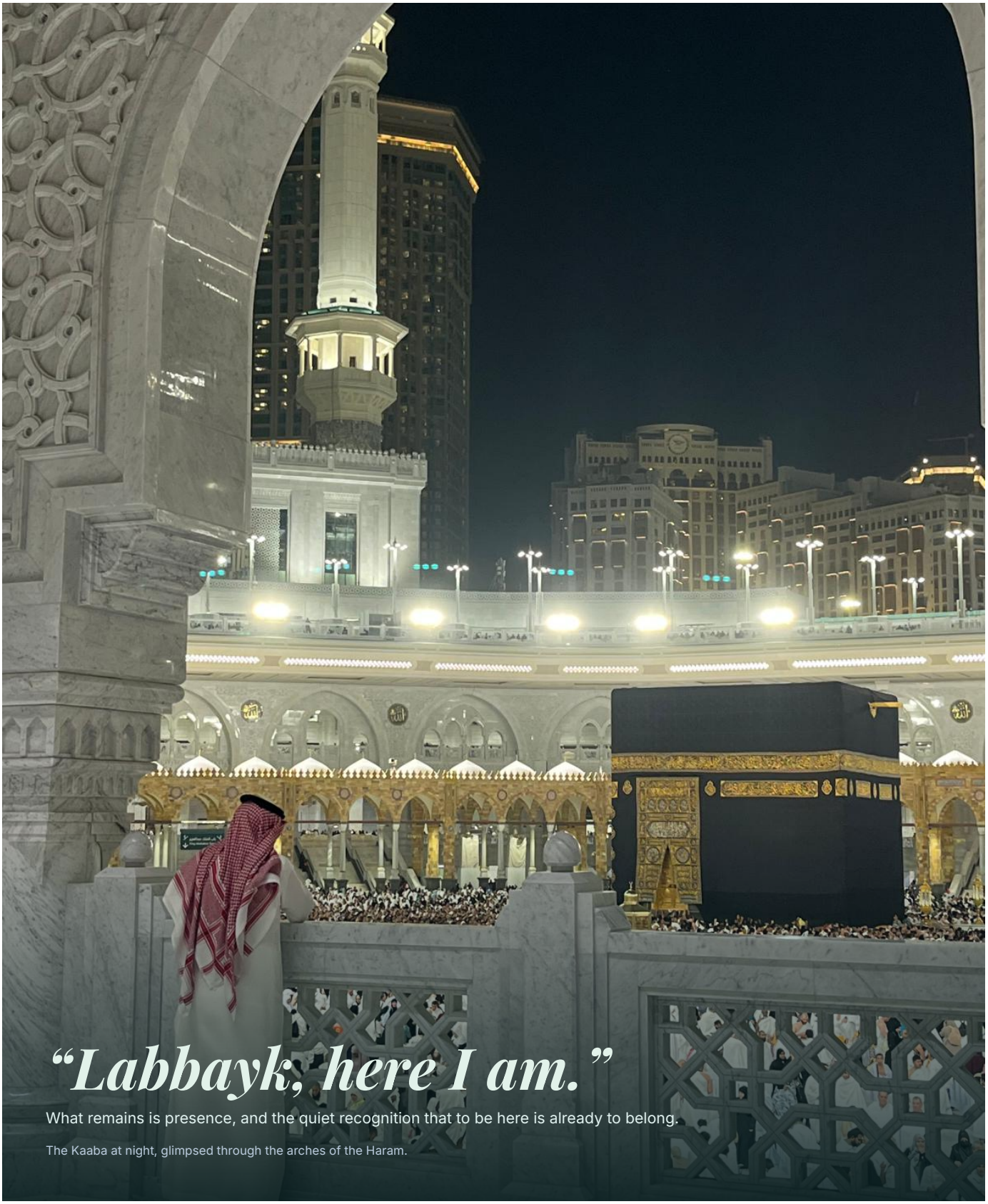
This was not merely physical movement for me. It raised questions that had no simple answers: why this repetition, why this memory embodied in action? Hajar did not act as ritual, but out of necessity and trust. And yet her effort became the foundation of remembrance for millions.

> *Hajar did not act as ritual, but out of necessity and trust. And yet her effort became the foundation of remembrance for millions.*
>
> SAFA AND MARWA

Umrah, in this sense, is both deeply personal and profoundly collective. It gathers people from every nation into the same rhythm of motion and devotion.

Watching the crowds around the Kaaba, I saw every form of life folded into the same circle: prayer, silence, recitation, stillness.

In this sacred space, worldly ambition loses its measure. What remains is presence, and the quiet recognition that **to be here is already to belong.** ■



“Labbayk, here I am.”

What remains is presence, and the quiet recognition that to be here is already to belong.

The Kaaba at night, glimpsed through the arches of the Haram.

CANCER RESEARCH

VHH *Nanobodies*

How nature's smallest antibody fragments could transform targeted cancer treatment, and what they might offer for glioblastoma, the deadliest brain cancer



BY **DR. MOHAMMED HASEEB KHAN, PH.D.**
Researcher, The Brain Tumor Laboratory, BILSAB, Bezmialem Vakif University, Istanbul, Türkiye

ABSTRACT

Camels, llamas and alpacas make unusually small antibodies whose target-binding fragment, the VHH domain, works on its own. This article explains how these nanobodies are produced, why their size, precision and stability make them promising for diagnosis, targeted drug delivery and immunotherapy, and what they might offer for glioblastoma, while noting that clinical testing in brain tumours is still largely ahead of us.

KEYWORDS Nanobodies · VHH · Cancer · Glioblastoma · Immunotherapy

THE STORY BEHIND NANOBODIES

Picture a camel at dawn, kneeling beside a desert well, as its ancestors have done for thousands of years while carrying people and goods across harsh land. Few would guess that its blood holds a medical secret: the VHH nanobody, an antibody fragment so small that it can slip into places where ordinary antibodies struggle to go.

Antibodies are natural defence molecules made by the immune system. They recognise targets such as viruses, bacteria and abnormal proteins. Antibody drugs have also become important in cancer treatment, but their large size can limit how well they reach certain tissues and tumour regions. This is where nanobodies may help.

A GIFT FROM THE CAMEL

The camel holds a special place in many cultures, including the Arab and wider Muslim world, and in the Quran, which invites people to reflect on how the camel was created (Surah Al-Ghashiyah, 88:17). Science has since found something remarkable in its blood. In 1993, Belgian researchers discovered that dromedary camels make a special type of antibody with only heavy chains and no light chains. (Most animals, including humans, have both.) Llamas and alpacas, close relatives, make them too.

The part that recognises the target, the VHH domain, works perfectly well on its own. It weighs only about 12– 15 kilodaltons (kDa), a measure of molecular size, against about 150 kDa for a conventional antibody, so a nanobody is roughly ten times smaller.

DID YOU KNOW?

Nanobodies are among the smallest antibody-based molecules able to recognise a specific target with high precision.

FROM CAMEL BLOOD TO THE LABORATORY

Making a nanobody starts with immunisation: a camel receives a harmless sample of the target, such as a tumour protein, and its immune system responds. Scientists then take a blood sample, extract genetic material from the immune cells, and copy the VHH genes.

These genes are placed into bacteria-infecting viruses called phages, creating a huge "library" of different nanobodies. Researchers fish out the phages whose nanobodies stick to the target. The chosen genes are then inserted into bacteria or yeast, which act as tiny factories, and the nanobodies are purified and tested.

WHY DO TINY ANTIBODIES MATTER?

Size is only part of the story. Nanobodies offer several attractive features:

- **Small size:** may reach tissues and tumour regions that larger molecules cannot.
- **High specificity:** can recognise particular disease-related molecules.
- **Good stability:** many tolerate heat and harsh conditions better than conventional antibodies.
- **Simple production:** can be made in bacteria or yeast, usually more easily than conventional antibodies.
- **Flexible design:** can be joined to drugs, imaging labels or other nanobodies.

Together, these traits make nanobodies promising for diagnosis, targeted treatment and immunotherapy.

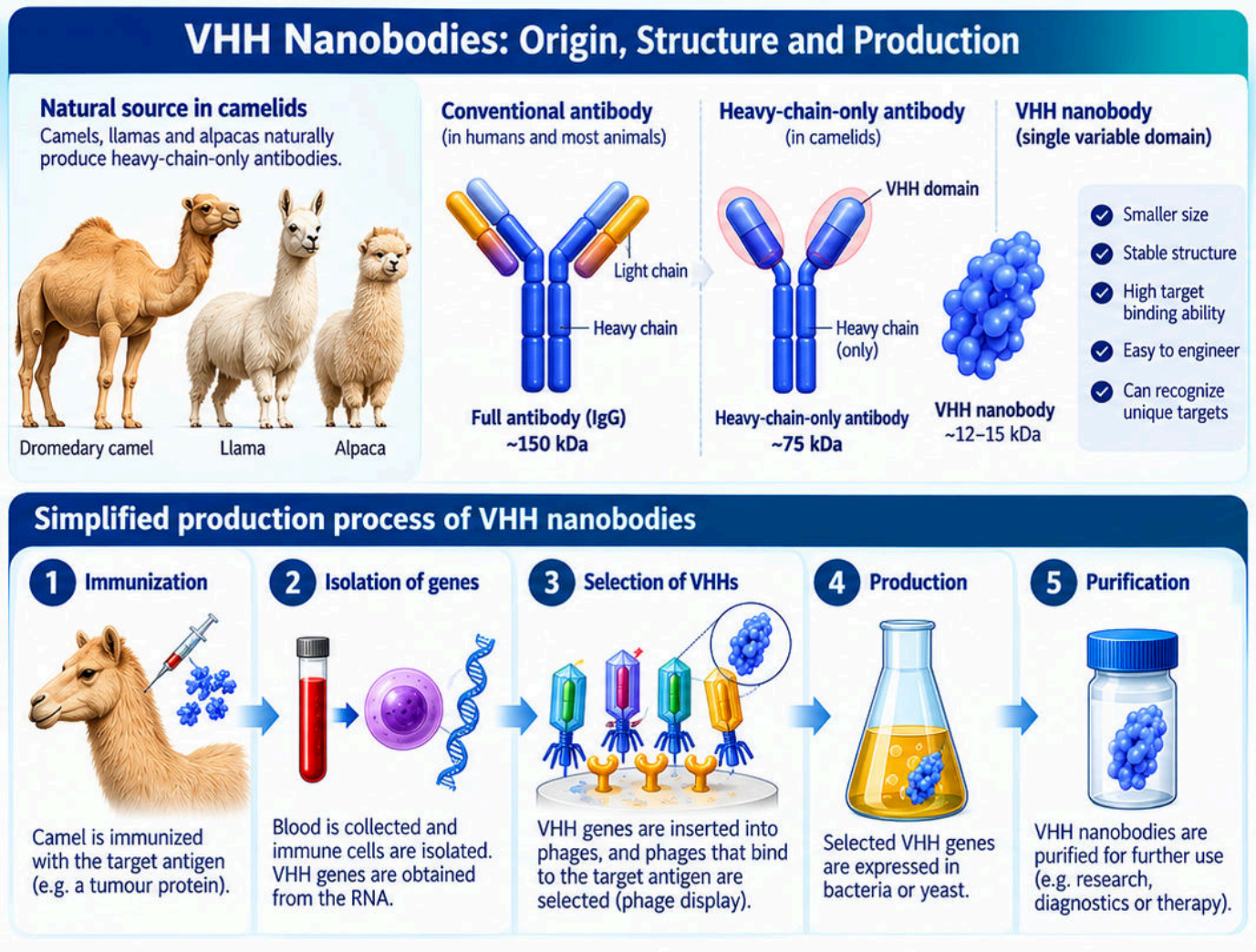


Figure 1. How VHH nanobodies are made. Camels, llamas and alpacas naturally produce heavy-chain-only antibodies. After a camel is immunised with a target such as a tumour protein, immune cells from its blood supply the VHH genes. These are screened using phage display, and the best candidates are produced in bacteria or yeast and purified.

FIGHTING CANCER WITH NANOBODIES

Cancer cells often carry particular proteins that help them grow, survive and hide from the immune system. Nanobodies can be designed to recognise these proteins and block their activity.

They can also act as guided carriers, delivering drugs or other therapeutic molecules to cancer cells. In immunotherapy, two-part nanobodies can work as bridges, holding a cancer cell and an immune cell, such as a T cell or natural killer (NK) cell, close together so the immune cell can attack. And when linked to fluores-

cent or radioactive labels, nanobodies can help doctors see tumours more precisely.

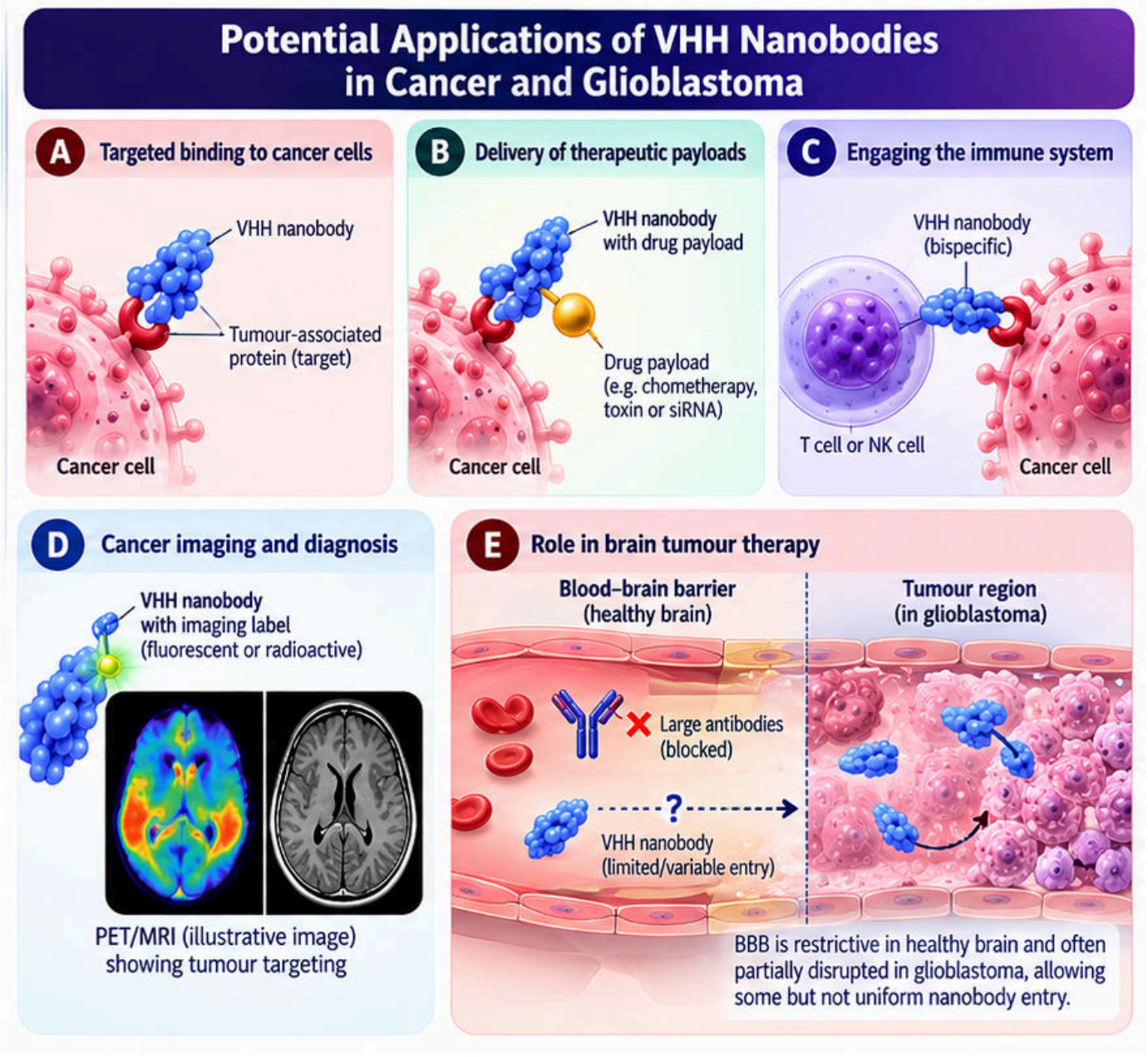


Figure 2. Possible uses of VHH nanobodies in cancer and brain tumours. They can bind proteins that are abundant on cancer cells (A), carry drugs (B), bring immune cells close to tumours (C), and carry imaging labels (D). Whether they can cross the blood–brain barrier in glioblastoma has yet to be shown (E).

THE BRAIN TUMOUR CHALLENGE

Glioblastoma is one of the most aggressive brain cancers. It is hard to treat and often returns. A major obstacle is the blood–brain barrier, a tightly controlled lining of blood vessels that protects the brain by limiting what passes from the bloodstream into brain tissue. Essential as it is, it also blocks many large antibodies and anticancer drugs.

Because of their size, nanobodies are being explored as a way around this barrier. Some may reach brain tissue more easily, and others are being engineered to use the body's natural transport routes across it. But smaller does not automatically mean better delivery. In glioblastoma, the barrier is disrupted only in places, and much of the evidence so far comes from laboratory studies rather than patients.

NEW POSSIBILITIES FOR GLIOBLASTOMA

Researchers are exploring nanobodies to:

- **Recognise** proteins found on glioblastoma cells.
- **Deliver** drugs directly to tumour cells.
- **Engage** the immune system to attack the tumour.
- **Image** the tumour by carrying visible labels.
- **Combine** with chemotherapy, nanoparticles and other emerging treatments.

FROM THE LABORATORY TO THE CLINIC

Nanobody medicines are no longer theoretical. Caplacizumab, approved in Europe in 2018 and the United States in 2019 for a rare blood-clotting disorder, was the first. Ozoralizumab, for rheumatoid arthritis, followed in Japan in 2022.

In cancer, several candidates have reached human trials. KN046 joins single-domain antibodies against PD-L1 and CTLA-4, two "checkpoint" proteins that tumours use to switch off immune attacks, and has been tested in lung and other cancers. DR30303, which targets Claudin 18.2, a protein found in stomach and pancreatic cancers, entered a Phase I trial in 2022, although the sponsor later ended that study for strategic reasons.

The newest example is GTB-5550, whose first patient was dosed in a Phase I trial in May 2026. It combines camel-derived nanobodies that grab B7-H3 on tumour cells and CD16 on NK cells with IL-15, a signal that helps NK cells multiply, to draw these immune cells to the tumour. Phase I trials mainly test safety, so results are early, and this one focuses on solid tumours such as prostate cancer, not brain tumours.

Testing VHH-based treatments in glioblastoma patients is still largely ahead of us.

LOOKING AHEAD

Nanobodies face real hurdles. They are cleared from the body quickly, so they may need modification to last longer. Because they originate in animals, they can trigger immune reactions unless carefully engineered. Reaching some tissues, including the brain, also remains difficult.

> *The future of cancer treatment may depend not only on more powerful drugs, but on smarter ways of delivering them.*
>
> DR. MOHAMMED HASEEB KHAN

With their small size, precision and flexible design, nanobodies could help create a new generation of targeted therapies, particularly for difficult cancers such as glioblastoma.

Sometimes, the smallest biological tools may open the biggest doors in medicine. ■

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INTERVIEW · TRAVEL & ENTERPRISE

Hostelbird: *India's First Community-Driven Online Travel Agency*

India has long been a dream destination for backpackers, yet finding a safe, affordable place to stay has not always been easy. Hostelbird, a young platform founded by Srinagar-born entrepreneur Aabid Bhat, is trying to change that. It lists more than 1,000 hostels across the country, from the Himalayan towns of Manali and Kasol to the beaches of Goa and the lakeside city of Udaipur. Beyond bookings, it aims to build a community: travellers can join group tours, volunteer in exchange for a stay, and meet like-minded people on the road. The platform pays particular attention to women travelling alone, with female-only dormitories, safety-focused listings and a reward scheme that encourages solo travel. We spoke to the founder about his own journey and the future of budget travel in India.

1,000+
hostels listed across India

45 million
budget & backpacking trips a year*

Female-only
dorms & safety-focused listings



Interview by **Vijay Laxmi**, 1st Year MBA, Chandigarh University

*Founder's estimate



IN CONVERSATION

Aabid Bhat, *Founder, Hostelbird*

Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir · Hostelbird, India's First Hostel Booking Platform

Q1 Hostelbird is a platform for hostel stays across India. What inspired you to start it?

I grew up in Srinagar, Kashmir, and for a long time I felt like an outsider even in my own hometown. That changed when I started travelling solo and staying in hostels. For the first time I found a real sense of community, a "tribe" of like-minded people. I wanted to make that experience easier for others to find, so I founded Hostelbird.

Q2 What gap in the market were you trying to fill?

There was no dedicated platform built around hostel bookings in India. Most travel platforms focus on hotels, while hostels and the budget-conscious, backpacking traveller get very little attention. We estimate around 45 million such trips are taken in India every year, and that audience keeps growing. They deserve a platform designed for them.

Q3 What does Hostelbird offer travellers?

We work in four areas. First, we help travellers discover safe, verified hostels. Second, we offer volunteering opportunities, where travellers can exchange their skills for a place to stay and meals. Third, we organise verified group tours. And fourth, we have a social feature that lets travellers connect with each other, because meeting people is a big part of what makes hostel travel special.



> *"Travel is an essential, empowering experience for personal growth.*

Q4 You place special emphasis on female solo travellers. Why is that?

Solo travel by women is a fairly recent trend in India, but it is growing, and safety is the most important factor for them. We connect women with hostels that offer female-only dormitories and strict safety policies. We are also developing AI-driven summaries of guest reviews, so travellers can quickly judge how safe a property is. On top of that, our reward system, called "birdcoin," gives women higher incentives to encourage them to travel solo.

Q5 Traditional family and societal expectations can discourage women from travelling alone. Do you see that changing?

I believe in evolution and growth, and I see change happening. The internet and social media play a big role. Women see others travelling solo and feel inspired to do the same, even where family or social restrictions exist. It won't change overnight, but the direction is encouraging.

Q6 What would you say to someone who has never travelled alone?

Travel is an essential, empowering experience for personal growth. It shows you who you are and connects you with people you would never otherwise meet. That is the heart of Hostelbird's mission: making that first step feel safe, affordable and welcoming.

HOSTELBIRD



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Travel solo. Travel safe. Find your tribe.

1,000+ verified hostels across India, female-only dorms and safety-focused listings, volunteer stays and group tours.

Manali · Kasol · Goa · Udaipur and many more

Hostelbird

India's First Hostel Booking Platform

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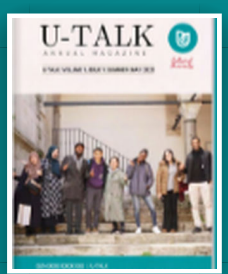
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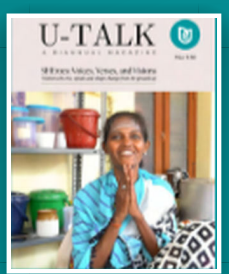
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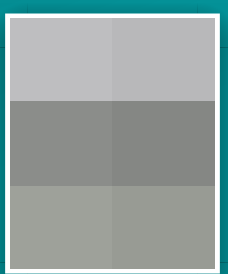
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>
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