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From Garden City to gridlock capital, Bengaluru pays price for bad planning

Kishan S G

In the time it takes to watch a sitcom episode, the average Bengalurean travels just 8 kilometres. According to the TomTom Traffic Index, India's Silicon Valley is the second most congested city in the world. For the 147.7 lakh residents commuting, they lose nearly 168 hours a year to the crawl. The ranking confirms the reality: The "Garden City" has become a "Gridlock City."

The trap of "negative growth"

The root of the congestion lies in a simple math problem: Bengaluru's geographic location cannot keep up with the growing demography. Prof. M N Sreehari, advisor to the Government of Karnataka for traffic and infrastructure, describes the current state as a "danger zone" of unplanned expansion.

"If I earn ₹5,000, I can't plan for a lifestyle of ₹10,000! That is bad planning," says Prof. Sreehari. He argues that the city's trajectory is "negative growth," where the influx of migration driven by IT jobs and a government hungry for tax revenue will create a shortage of resources. "The government is interested because growth brings more tax, but we are creating a shortage of material, men, and infrastructure for the future. We need to put a full stop, or at least a comma, to this growth to find equilibrium," he said.

Public infrastructure deficit

If rapid growth is the fire, the lack of public transport is the fuel. While the global standard for a metropolitan city is 120 buses per lakh population, Bengaluru's BMTC (Bengaluru Metropolitan Transport Corporation) fleet has stagnated between 6,000 and 6,500 for a decade, not keeping up with the growing population.

This deficit creates a mathematical nightmare when new developments are cleared. Shruti Srinivas, a freelance transport planner, illustrates: "For a 2,000 unit colony, you are looking at 1,600 vehicles per hour. With 70-80% outbound traffic during peak hours, that's 1,120 to 1,280 vehicles hitting the public road at once. We then check if the road can handle it; it often simply cannot." She adds, "In other countries, land use has set trip generation rates (estimated no. of vehicle trips both inbound and outbound). In India, we don't. We calculate based on assumptions."

From Garden City to Gridlock Capital

For legacy residents, the traffic is a painful reminder of the lost identity. In the early 1990s, Bengaluru was defined by patience, tranquility and quietness. Today, that social fabric has been burdened under the weight of 1.2 crore registered vehicles.

Commuters crawling during peak hour congestion in Bengaluru *Samya Sharma*

"The biggest thing we have lost today is a 'culture of discipline' and courtesy," says Munavar Pasha, Assistant Sub-inspector of Police (Traffic). Reflecting on his decades on the force, he said, "In the past, there were fewer vehicles, more patience, and respect for pedestrians."

The physical loss of the "Garden City" is observed by an 88% decline in vegetation according to IISc (Indian Institute of Science), and is mirrored by the behavioural shift. The lack of discipline, the lack of patience, the "horn culture," and the narrowing of roads due to constant construction have turned the daily commute into a psychological battle.

Status symbol and gated " island"

The final fracture is sociological. While urban planners advocate for "porous" designs which allow pedestrians to walk through large private developments to reach transit hubs, the Bengaluru's real estate market is one of exclusion.

Srinivas HR, a senior site engineer from Venkataramanan Associates, Bengaluru, points out that developers prioritise "saleable area" and FAR (Floor Area Ratio) over public integration. "The architect concentrates only on private parking...For them saleable areas are important" he explains. He also notes a cultural resistance to integration: "Buyers do not prefer outsiders entering their compound due privacy issues and the hesitation to mingle with other classes." This creates "mini cities" that are high quality inside but dump thousands of cars into crumbling public infrastructure outside, reinforcing the private car as a necessary status shield against the city's chaos.

Bengaluru's path out of the gridlock requires a radical shift in accountability. Munavar Pasha pleads for full priority to public transport and dedicated bus lanes to reduce traffic by 20-30% in the long run.

On independent bookshops: Why every neighbourhood needs one

Zia Dewan

A booklover browsing the shelves of Rachna *Zia Dewan*

Growing old is never easy; you have to come to terms with the world you did not decide on. What was happening yesterday and what will happen tomorrow is uncertain. On overwhelming days like these, you find yourself going to the things you love, the same old songs, movies, and your favourite childhood food. But for book lovers, what would satisfy them are the books they grew up with and the lovely bookshops where they found them.

The walls of an independent or second-hand bookshop just feel different, making its existence calm, still, and a lived-in sanctuary of its own. "Every neighbourhood should have libraries and bookstores," says Raman Shresta, owner of Rachna Books & Publications, an award-winning independent bookshop from the hills of Sikkim. "You go online to look for a book that you already know about. But in a bookstore, there's a great sense of discovery." In today's world, various instant alternatives keep emerging, but independent bookshops don't compete on speed. Their growth is organic and mindful, and their motive is to nurture a community beyond just bookselling.

For many readers, independent bookshops serve as a second home. Within their quiet and towering shelves, readers often find comfort, inspiration, and a brief escape from the rush of everyday life.

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Has AI changed how we approach indie cinema?

Timeus Christian Sunder

A young director making his indie film has run out of money. With a limited budget and a complex stunt scene, he decides to generate it using AI (Artificial Intelligence) to meet his two-day deadline. After a few trials and errors, he has his scene. But at what cost?

Independent filmmaking has always been defined by grit and making the best of what they have, which often leads to compromises galore. Despite all of that, indie directors do their best to deliver their vision, knowing they will never be able to compete with big-budget features. AI may have just levelled the playing field or taken the soul and the whole essence out of the process of indie filmmaking.

AI as the great equaliser

Maruthu Pandiyan, the Head of the Department of the School of Communication and Media Studies, St Joseph's University Bangalore, sees it in a more positive light, saying, "I feel that AI has given means to those who couldn't produce content earlier but had a lot of fancy ideas." It has allowed for a wider variety of narratives, bridging the gap between imagination and execution.

Yet, creators are slightly conflicted on this issue. Diwakar Vijayakumar, an indie director, said that while he is hesitant to use AI, he sees no reason not to use it if it helps ease budgetary restrictions.

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Decoding people pleasing behaviour

Jessica Maria Joseph

Illustration depicting people-pleasing. *The Cooper Review*

People-pleasers are often seen as society's easiest citizens, the ones who adjust, agree, apologise first, and keep the peace. They are praised as "mature," "well-behaved," or "understanding". But beneath that facade lies a story of suppressed needs, fear of rejection, and an identity shaped around others' comfort. Today, the behaviour is often dismissed as a flaw, sometimes even labelled "toxic."

Yet people-pleasing is less a personality choice and more a learned survival response, shaped by past experiences and expectations.

People-pleasing as a survival skill

Psychologists suggest that this pattern often develops as a strategy to maintain emotional safety. Dr Swapna Cherian, a psychologist based in Kerala, explains that it is "not a personality trait, but a coping mechanism", used to avoid conflict and maintain peace.

By constantly adapting to others' expectations, individuals try to protect themselves from rejection, guilt, or emotional fallout. Varsha Sivakumar, a Bengaluru based graphic designer, who identifies as a people-pleaser, says, "I'm really scared of losing bonds or friendships so I tend to act according to how the other person wants me to be."

What appears as compliance is often a learned way to reduce emotional threat and secure relationships.

The long shadow of being the 'good' child

This coping style rarely begins in adulthood. It often starts much earlier, in childhood.

Psychologists warn that the widely praised "well-behaved" child may, in fact, be an early people-pleaser in the making. Dr Cherian notes that excessive obedience is often a mask, observing that "most of the time, we say a child is very obedient or easy, but actually they are masking a lot of things," including anger, desire, and playfulness.

Such children learn to avoid conflict by constantly tracking adult approval and associating love with compliance. Over time, affection begins to feel conditional. Maria Smita, a psychologist based in Bengaluru adds that this early conditioning teaches children "to ignore their own needs and place the needs of others ahead of all of it," turning early survival strategies into deeply rooted people-pleasing tendencies.

As these patterns carry into adulthood, they begin to shape personal relationships.

The quiet trade-off inside adult relationships

Chronic people-pleasing often becomes a quiet psychological trade-off, where emotional safety is bought at the cost of individuality. Sivakumar describes how personal desire is routinely erased. "The question of whether I want to do something out of my own desire is not prioritised," she says, reflecting how her needs are repeatedly sidelined to maintain harmony.

Smita explains that such patterns gradually turn relationships "one-sided," with individuals realising later "how much they have given in" and what these patterns have done to their sense of self. Over time, this can lead to burnout, suppressed anger, and identity confusion, where affection remains but individuality slowly fades.

Online approval shaping self-worth

As these ways of coping extend into the digital world, social media further intensifies people-pleasing by turning approval into a public scorecard, while simultaneously labelling the behaviour as "toxic."

Smita observes that many users now measure self-worth through online reactions. "Based on likes, people tend to identify their own well-being and acceptance, so they try to do things to please so that they get more likes," she explains. This pressure pushes people to show only positive emotions, even when they don't feel them. Sivakumar echoes this idea, saying, "I post only the positive side of myself… I'm not comfortable being vulnerable online."

In digital spaces, people-pleasing is both incentivised and condemned.

Balancing empathy and personal boundaries

Psychologists emphasise that unlearning people-pleasing is not about becoming indifferent, but about balancing empathy with self-care.

Empathy, Smita explains, is a part of emotional intelligence, but it can become harmful when people do not realise how far it has gone and continue giving without limits. The shift, she explains, requires conscious awareness. "It's important to say no when it comes to your well-being and draw those boundaries," she adds.

Dr Cherian also agrees that it can be unlearned by understanding "how much to give in and how to take care of one's own needs."

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Has AI changed...?

The collaborative experience of indie film making *Karan Siddharth*

Diwakar Vijayakumar, an indie director, pointed out, " There is no human touch to it (AI), and it fractures the film economy in many ways," insisting that the artistic side should be left to humans.

The human core: Preserving soul and essence of art

Ultimately, a film is made for audiences. Joshua Mahima, a member of the Bangalore Film Forum, said, "As long as it does not change the heart of the film, AI is fine." Hemanth S, another audience member, concurred with this statement and felt that a lot of audiences are against AI in commercial and big-budget films, but would be more understanding if used in indie films, as long as it was used just as a tool.

The importance of AI being a tool was further reinforced by M Arjun, assistant professor, department of Visual Communication, Loyola College, Chennai, underscoring that the primary idea must come from humans. "The essence must come from the creator," Arjun said, before elaborating on the fact that tools are getting simplified, and as long as the creator does not imitate, the originality remains.

Vijayakumar agreed with this statement and offered the practical aspect, namely, AI being available to him as a tool, he no longer had to confine himself to a budgetary boundary during the ideation stage, which is a significant hurdle in indie filmmaking. However, when considering originality, he says, "I think AI has not changed the way I perceive originality, but it has changed the way I consider what is original."

Navigating success and saturation

Vijayakumar's idea is to just use AI as a ticket to the big leagues, after which he would never even consider using AI. Pandiyan echoed this sentiment, saying, "To enter into an industry, anything is fine." Arjun agreed with this statement, saying that since a lot of Indian directors today have found success with short films, using AI to make more short films and push your work is perfectly acceptable.

Inevitably, with democratised production, there will be content saturation. Yet this flood of content will serve only to reinforce the value of human artistry. "After they reach saturation, they will look for niche work. You need creative, original content. Content is always the key," Pandiyan predicts.

The collaborative future

While there will always be a slight stigma against the use of AI in any form of art, it is clear that moving forward, people will be more forgiving and understanding, especially when it comes to using AI in times of lack of resources. Directors understand that when AI does the heavy lifting, they cannot claim the entire work, but it is a compromise they are willing to make. Most importantly, AI has to remain a tool, and humans have to be at the core of any work of art.

How rising living expenses are quietly reshaping student life

Vaishnavi Savant

College experience for young students once promised freedom, inter-college fests , friendships, late-night study sessions, and bittersweet excitement of gaining independence. But for today's students, independence often comes with rising rents, food costs, and other budgetary considerations. Nisha Mishra, a student at RV University, Bengaluru, said, "Freedom used to feel exciting. But now it feels like learning how to worry silently."

Mishra also highlighted her concerns regarding her nutrition and sleep cycle, explaining that the food provided in her paying guest accommodation often lacked nutritional value despite the rising rent. With a limited budget , eating outside on a daily basis is not a feasible option. As a result, many students sacrifice their basic needs

The disappearing care space

Those pursuing education far from home hostels and PGs provide a sense of security and stability. However, the rising rent and declining nutritional value of food in hostels and PGs have raised concerns among students.

Rahul Joshi, owner of Angel Nest PG, Bengaluru, said his PG runs on razor-thin margins. He said, "Pretty much everything has gone up… building rent, food, gas, staff salaries, electricity." He added, "Frequent increases are just to keep the place running."

Joshi admits that when every bed is occupied, "it's easy to start thinking about the numbers instead of people's interests for any PG owner."

He tries to be transparent about the decline in food quality. "Food is the first area that feels the pressure when we need to cut down; it helps balance profit," he said. Many students, on the other hand, notice changes in PG living conditions over time. Nisha Mishra says, "Now it feels like I'm renting a bed, not living in a community."

While students feel like tenants, Joshi admits something is wrong somewhere. "They want privacy but also want to be heard; balance is

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AI as emotional companion: Reasons and risks

Ancy James

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is no longer just helping students solve assignments or answer academic questions; it is slowly becoming someone they talk to. Many young people are using AI chatbots that are available 24/7 not just for information, but also for emotional support and validation. The instant responses, limited judgment, and constant availability make AI feel like a safe space for students to open up. What began as a tool for efficiency is now changing into something more personal: a digital companion.

A space without judgement

For students like Chaithanya Manoj, a second-year undergraduate at Jyoti Nivas College, Bengaluru, AI has become a constant presence in daily life. "You don't know if your friend or family would make you feel safe or respond the way you want," she says. Unlike people, AI offers a space free from judgment. For many students, its accessibility is yet another aspect that makes it an easy source of support. Users do not have to worry about waiting, feeling embarrassment, or being rejected.

For Chaithanya Manoj, AI offers a sense of comfort that can be hard to find elsewhere. "Sometimes it's emotional support as well," she reflects, explaining that she turns to AI when her thoughts feel too personal to share with others. "Sometimes I feel like my writing is too private to show to my friends or even family," she adds, highlighting how AI has become a quiet, judgment-free space for expression.

"When you ask humans there's obviously bias… But I don't think AI has that sort of bias," Chaithanya adds. She explains that over time, these interactions can feel surprisingly meaningful, making AI a source of emotional reassurance.

Designed to simulate empathy

Technology experts, on the other hand, mention that this growing emotional reliance is not accidental. According to Varun Rathi, an AI expert, founder of an AI startup, which is currently in stealth mode and working with AI-driven platforms, chatbots are designed to respond in ways that feel supportive and empathetic. "Part of training the models involves aligning them… it's basically a neural network designed to emulate how the brain functions," he explains. By analysing emotional patterns in text, AI generates responses that appear empathetic and comforting.

According to Rathi, the growing reliance on AI is largely driven by its accessibility and capability. "It's ease of access," he explains, noting that AI is available at any time without limitations. He adds that AI systems today are becoming increasingly intelligent and responsive. "Models are getting smarter and smarter every day," he notes, explaining why many users find it easier to turn to AI for answers, reassurance, and guidance.

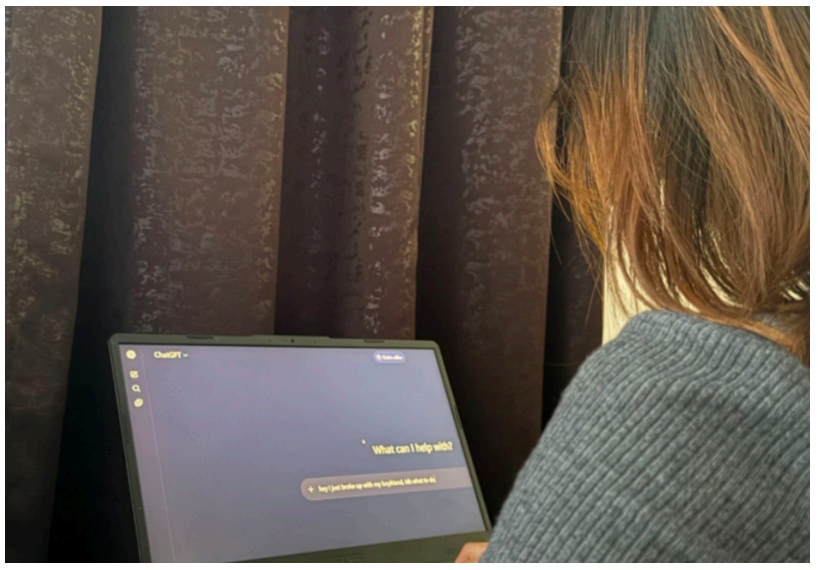
However, Rathi cautions that AI does not understand emotions. "It recognises patterns in human language and generates responses that appear empathetic," he says. Although AI lacks emotional capability, its ability to imitate emotional understanding makes the line between imitation and real understanding seem blurred. "If you want a therapist, then I think it can be an excellent therapist. Models are getting smarter and smarter every day," he remarks.

Mental health experts urge caution

Mental health professionals are observing this shift with both curiosity and caution.

Molly Thambi, a psychologist and the deputy director at the Kolkata-based Lifeline Foundation, believes growing dependence on AI reflects unmet emotional needs. "Most people, even your best friends, are not going to listen to your rants every day," she says. For many young people, especially those struggling with loneliness or anxiety, this constant presence can offer comfort.

However, Thambi warns that AI lacks the emotional depth and accountability of human relationships. "The biggest drawback of being too dependent on AI for validation and emotional support is the negative impact on socialisation," she adds. While chatbots may help users express their emotions and validate feelings, they cannot replace human care.



When emotion meets code *Ancy James*

Shreya Thomas, a Bengaluru-based clinical psychologist, also observes how AI may be shaping emotional habits of young users. According to her, the constant availability of chatbots is what makes them attractive to users. "AI is available at 2 a.m. even when your friends are asleep," she observes. Its greatest strength is 24/7 availability, which can also become its greatest risk. She further explains that emotional growth usually happens through real interactions, where individuals learn to navigate vulnerability, disagreement, and empathy. While AI can assist users in organising their thoughts, it cannot fully replicate the complexity and mutual understanding that comes from human connection.

Between support and substitution

The experts agree that the emotional side of AI is complex. For some students, it becomes a first step toward self-reflection, helping them process thoughts they might otherwise suppress. For others, it is a substitute for difficult conversations.

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How rising living expenses...

Quiet exhaustion behind students' independence *Karan Siddharth*

The role of parents as silent negotiators

Behind every student struggling and juggling to manage expenses and cutting down their needs, parents play an important role in a child's daily life. When, financial issues arise, children usually turn to their parents for money.

For Pooja Nair, whose daughter Sakshi is pursuing her degree at Jain University, Bengaluru, the semester fees of the course didn't really matter. She said, "College fees were affordable, but the hostel rent and food costs shocked us the most."

She also mentioned that whenever she had conversations with her daughter about money, her daughter hesitated to ask for it. Nair later added, "We also hide our stress from her. It's a cycle, a loop of silence."

However, she believes that this experience helps her child understand the importance of budgeting. Nair also said that parents must support their children. "The only support our kids have is us. We must trust and be supportive so that they don't hesitate telling us about their financial needs."

Is a part-time job a choice or a compulsion?

For students facing having financial difficulties, survival means working part-time while managing work and student life. While employment offers financial stability along with practical exposure, it also affects students' academics.

Vedant Patil, a CA student at Kristu Jayanti College, Bengaluru, works four hours on a daily basis as a social media manager for a Bengaluru-based company. Patil stated, "I wanted independence, but now I work to cover my expenses."

In the beginning, he struggled with managing academics and work life together and had issues regarding attendance due to his part-time work. However, he is now learning to balance both employment and academics.

From Lab to label: How chemical names became skincare's biggest marketing tool

P R Vedasmriti

Years back, buying face creams meant trusting vague promises like brighter skin, spotless glow, and visible fairness. Today, these promises have turned into clinical claims, and now the products use or mention ingredients such as 10% niacinamide, 2% retinol, and hyaluronic acid in bold, colourful letters, borrowing credibility from chemistry labs and dermatology clinics.

Clinical vocabulary to reassure

Srinidhi, a young consumer, says she used to think that higher concentration meant better results, and later she realised that skin needs balance. She also admits that she rarely reads full labels, and often her buying of products was influenced by promotions or trending ingredients, while single chemical names make products feel more trustworthy.

Since the pandemic, skincare has evolved into a lifestyle routine rather than an occasional use, and it is increasingly seen as a self-prescribed treatment. Srinidhi also mentions that, "now I understand it's about protecting your skin and not for whitening or other beauty purposes."

The rise of hero ingredients

Brands nowadays centre their campaigns around a single hero ingredient, for example niacinamide for glow, Vitamin C for radiant skin, and hyaluronic acid for hydration. According to Dr Sunil Kumar Prabhu, a dermatologist and aesthetic physician with over 20 years of clinical experience, these ingredients do offer measurable benefits, but they have their -limits. He also adds that consumers often overestimate what one ingredient alone can achieve.

Concentration matters too. Niacinamide, for instance, is usually capped around 10 per cent beyond that, irritations may occur on the skin, yet many buyers equate higher numbers with faster results. This misunderstanding has consequences. Dr Prabhu estimates that about 30 to 40 per cent of people experience irritation or skin complications from self-prescribing or layering multiple active chemicals without professional guidance.

When marketing meets medicine

The line between cosmetics and pharmaceuticals is blurring. By reducing the ingredient concentration, companies or brands can avoid drug regulations while still advertising clinical benefits. Dr Prabhu says that "it's a strategic shift" and explains that "lower the percentages, and you can sell directly to consumers without trials,. That's why you see professional ingredients entering mainstream shelves."

Bottles and tubes of skincare products *P R Vedasmriti*

Chemical names themselves have become marketing tools. "People feel informed just by recognising the term," he notes. "It creates trust, the consumers feel part of the science."

Influencers and algorithms

Influencers play a key role in turning brand messages into easy-to-understand content. -Ragav Bharani, a skincare influencer, believes that celebrity associations, packaging, and claims of quick results matter more when it comes to marketing.

He notes that "people buy because the product promotes visible changes in seven days or just because they saw it on Instagram." Bharani also reveals how brands usually provide marketing briefs but not detailed clinical data. It-basically outlines what creators should highlight and what should be avoided. The claims are always about ingredient levels rather than testing the finished product itself.

He also says that viral trends are largely seasonal or algorithm-driven, like lip balm during dry months, dandruff treatment during monsoon, and sunscreen before summer.

Confidence and confusion

Ingredient trends have become cyclical. Vitamin C has its season, followed by hyaluronic acid, ni acinamide, and exfoliating active chemicals like AHA and BHA. Each trend wave brings a flood of launches, influencer reels, and comparison of products, turning molecules into marketing moments.

Today's skincare consumer feels empowered and armed with terminology which were once reserved only for dermatology clinics, but that confidence often masks uncertainty. Yet behind those aesthetics of skincare and its product packaging, there lies a simplified version of science, diluted regulations, and marketing narratives that are built for attention.

The rise of thrift culture among young consumers

Sanjana Shaji

A thrift store in Bengaluru *Vaishnavi Savant*

Once seen as a niche or need-based habit, thrifting has quietly grown into a cultural movement among young people. From college campuses to Instagram thrift pages, second-hand fashion is no longer just about saving money. For many, it has become a way to express individuality, make conscious choices and rethink how they shop. As thrift stores multiply in cities and online resale platforms gain popularity, the question today is no longer about why people thrift, but why more young shoppers are choosing it over malls.

For store owners, this change has been very visible. Nisha M, who runs a small thrift boutique in Bengaluru, has watched demand grow steadily in the past three years. What began as a simple Instagram page selling second-hand dresses has now become a steady business with regular customers. "Earlier, people were very hesitant. They used to ask a lot about hygiene and quality. Now, many customers come with specific demands - oversized jackets, vintage denim, Y2K fashion etc.

Thrifting is no longer about compromise. It is about showing your personality," she says.

This shift is especially visible on college campuses. Students are drawn not only by affordability but also by the chance to wear something different. Helena Maria, a 21-year-old student from St Gits College, Kerala, says most of her wardrobe comes from thrift stores and online resellers. "In malls, you see the same clothes everywhere. On campus, everyone wants their own style. With thrifting, I can experiment without spending too much. If I buy something for ₹300 and use it many times, it feels worth it,"- she explained.

Affordability remains a strong reason behind the trend. With prices in branded stores continuing to rise, many young shoppers are rethinking how and where they spend. But cost alone does not explain the shift. Alan George, a regular thrift shopper from Bengaluru who prefers sustainable fashion says his mindset changed during the pandemic. "At first, I thrifted because it was cheaper. Now I do it because it feels responsible. Fast fashion creates so much waste. Buying something that already exists feels better," he said.

This growing environmental awareness is reshaping how young people relate to fashion. What was once called second-hand clothing is now often seen as "circular fashion", where clothes are reused, restyled and given a longer life instead of ending up as waste.

Fashion professionals believe this reflects a deeper change in values. Meera Nair, a fashion designer from Kochi, Kerala, says younger generations are redefining the meaning of fashion. "Earlier, fashion was about newness and status. Today, it is about identity and responsibility," she explains. "Thrifting connects with their desire to be unique while also being conscious," she adds.

Beyond ethics and affordability, thrifting also offers excitement. Unlike malls, thrift shopping feels unpredictable. Every visit is different, and finding a rare piece feels special. Many students are also reselling clothes, turning thrift culture into small business opportunities and building peer-driven fashion networks within campuses.

Social media has played a major role in this shift. Instagram thrift stores, college flea markets and styling reels have helped remove the stigma around second-hand clothing. Today, wearing thrifted fashion is often seen as creative, eco-friendly and socially aware.

The sector, however, is not without challenges. Inconsistent sizing, limited stock and quality concerns can discourage some buyers. But as awareness increases and thrift businesses become more organised, these problems are slowly being addressed.

Mangrove revival and blue carbon

Meinar Efel Nahak

From the sweeping mangrove forest of the Sundarbans in India to Indonesia's vast archipelagic coastlines, mangroves stand as one of the world's most productive yet endangered ecosystems.

Dr A. Steven, an assistant professor in the Botany department, St Joseph's University (SJU), Bangalore describes mangroves as gaining "an endangered ecosystem because of various activities… in the name of development." He emphasises their irreplaceable ecological role: breeding and nursery grounds for several marine species. Mangrove supports rich biodiversity, including endangered and endemic species. In India, the Sundarbans area is home to the Royal Bengal Tiger which illustrates the scale of mangrove biodiversity. "If the tiger is there, the region must be vast enough," Steven asserts, adding that mangroves are the home for many marine species and play a key role in sustaining the coastal food chain.

Similarly, Dr M. Jayashankar, associate professor in the Department of Zoology at SJU emphasises that mangroves are "nurseries where marine organisms breed and grow," underlining their ecological and economic interdependence. Yet this nature-based coastal defence often remains undervalued until disaster strikes.

Local heroes at the frontline

At the heart of this transformation are coastal women. In many villages, they are restoring mangroves while rebuilding local livelihood and strengthening community resilience. Under the guidance of NGOs such as CARE Indonesia, Pasijah, a coastal leader and mangrove steward in Java, Indonesia, feels that the work is personal. "Mangroves are not just trees. They are our protection, our food, and our future," she said. Her community has witnessed rising floods and falling fish stocks. Today, women are rebuilding both ecosystems and local economies. "Women are the guardians of mangroves because they think about the future of their children," Pasijah explained.

Across the Bay of Bengal, in the Sundarbans, many women are known as "tiger widows" after losing their husbands to tiger attacks while collecting forest resources. Facing poverty and social stigma, many have turned to mangrove restoration, crab farming, honey collection, and community conservation. Their work not only strengthens coastal protection but also challenges traditional gender roles across South and Southeast Asia.

Shrimp aquaculture: Extraction or regeneration?

Shrimp farming includes integrated systems like silvofishery, where mangroves and shrimp ponds are managed in ecological balance, and has reshaped coastlines in Southeast Asia. Fr (Dr) Felix Baghi, SVD, a philosopher and ecology activist of East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia calls it "one of the principal drivers of mangrove destruction," though he clarifies that "the problem is not shrimp farming, but a model rooted in short-term extraction."

Dr Sahat M. Pangabean of the Indonesian Mangrove Society echoes this balanced view: The solution is not to ban cultivation, but to integrate the ecosystem and the local economy. If redesigned, shrimp farming can coexist with conservation. Keeping mangroves around ponds improves water quality, reduces disease risks, and stabilises production. Mangroves also enhance biodiversity and provide additional income through crabs, fish, and eco-tourism,"he said.

Blue carbon and climate opportunities

Mangroves have gained global attention for their ability to store large amounts of carbon. This "blue carbon" potentially draws international funding to coastal regions. For many communities, these projects bring new opportunities by funding for restoration, alternative livelihoods, and stronger environmental governance.

Mangrove plantation at Manglore coast *Arthur*

India has scaled its mangrove restoration through the MISHTI (Mangrove Initiative for Shoreline Habitats & Tangible Incomes) scheme, which aims to revive 540 sq. km of coastal ecosystems by 2028 across 13 states. In the Sundarbans, the Nature Environment & Wildlife Society has planted 16 million mangroves as a cyclone-buffer "bio-shield." In Kerala, the Kannur Kandal Project led by the Wildlife Trust of India protects 100 acres of private mangroves, while Tamil Nadu's Muthupet Mangroves restoration by the M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation revived tidal flow across 115 hectares using "fishbone" canals. As Dr Steven notes, mangroves' salt-tolerance traits could help develop crops resilient to rising soil salinity, underscoring their ecological and scientific value. These initiatives are increasingly linked to blue carbon credits and eco-tourism, ensuring that conservation provides tangible economic benefits to local fishing and tribal communities.

Experts agree that collaboration between science, policy, and grassroots leadership is key to the future of mangrove conservation. Principal scientist at the Centre for International Forestry Research, Daniel Murdiyarso emphasises that integrating scientific knowledge with community participation and strong governance can transform mangroves into a cornerstone of sustainable coastal development.

For Pasijah who is rigorously taking care of the local mangrove cultivation , the vision is simple: resilient coastal villages, secure livelihoods, and empowered women and youth. "The future of our coast depends on local people," she said. "We are not victims of climate change; we are part of the solution."

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On independent bookshops...

In Bengaluru, bookshops like The Bookworm, Champaca, Select Book Shop, Blossoms Book House, and many more act as a safe havens for book lovers. For Saugaat Moktan, a student from Christ University and a passionate reader, The Bookworm is a place that he adores and loves a lot. He also speaks fondly about the charm of second-hand finds. "I especially love the aspect of discovering secondhand books. You see a lot of history, a lot of dates, a lot of thoughts written down by people who have read the book previously. Sometimes you even find bookmarks and old letters inside the book," he says. Online platforms may provide heavy discounts, but supporting independent bookshops is a conscious choice. "I try to buy books from independent bookshops as much as possible," says Moktan. He resorts to buying books from Amazon or similar online platforms only when he needs to. Adding to the possibility of being scammed, he adds, "There have been a few times when I have received a pirated copy of a book from an online seller, which was quite a negative experience."

Running an indie bookshop comes with a lot of ground struggles, and are rarely romantic behind the scenes. For Prathap Ramagouni of Lipi Library, running an independent bookshop in Bangalore, persistent "space issues" and infrastructural constraints are among the biggest challenges, along with the struggle of sustainability in the face of rapid digital transformation. In a city where commercial rents are high and online platforms dominate book sales, limited funding is also a major hurdle. Yet, what keeps him going is passion, community loyalty, and the desire to provide "an alternate place for creative engagement."

Beyond just selling books, indie bookshops often host meaningful events like book signings, poetry sessions, workshops, and open mic events for local and emerging writers to share their art with other earnest souls. "The presence of indie bookshops in any place creates space for community," says cultural curator

Readers enjoying their reads at Rachna bookstore *By special arrangement*

Mary Therese Kurkalang, from Shillong, Meghalaya. According to her, these bookshops contribute to the city's intellectual life. "It plays a very important role in community building as well as to further the cause of literature, reading and books." This deep connection is what makes this community special.

The future of independent bookshops may seem bleak in this fast-paced world on the surface level, but as we look at the nuances and beauty of their existence, the roles they hold in not just our personal lives but also that of our community, we trace back time and history in these walls while making new ones. With every independent bookshop in our neighbourhood, we are learning to go back to an analogue lifestyle, where literature is shared, old stories keep getting renewed, and human connection learns to be authentic again.

A silent shift to English in Bengaluru's workspaces

Sheza C

In a city like Bengaluru, conversations rarely stay in one language, allowing people to coexist effortlessly. An auto ride begins in Kannada, switches to Hindi at a traffic signal, and eventually ends in English when the passenger is dropped at their destination. This way, the city has learned to switch seamlessly. In markets and habbas, language often shifts depending on who joins the conversation, with people moving between Kannada, Tamil, Malayalam, and Hindi.

However, in corporate sectors, the tables turn and the story is entirely different. This is where the switching often stops, leading employees and employers to rely on just one language: English. It remains the default mode of communication, even though workers converse in other languages outside work. This is very evident in today's job descriptions, which frequently emphasise "good communication skills," a phrase often used to imply fluency in English. In these settings, it becomes essential for workers to speak confidently and present themselves clearly while shaping their first impressions during recruitment.

An interaction between a commuter and an auto driver in the city *Sheza C*

Fluency as plus point

While many auto drivers and gig workers across the city are familiar with English, there remains a section of them who find it difficult to keep up with the fast-changing linguistic demands of everyday interactions. Apsar Ahmed, an auto driver who has been in the city for nearly six years, speaks about the challenges he faced due to his limited English proficiency. According to him, adjusting to the city has become more difficult in recent years, especially while customer interactions increasingly shift towards English."Sometimes, a foreign passenger comes and since we don't speak each other's language, someone else has to help me in explaining the location," said Ahmed. "This happens quite often. I think it will help me in a lot of ways when I learn English," he added, highlighting the importance of learning English

Preparing for professional spaces

For gig workers and auto drivers, English may mean smoother rides and fewer misunderstandings. However, for professional spaces, it can determine something much larger. This shift is visible in the growing number of English training centres across the city. Zilpah D'Souza, a language proficiency and communication trainer in Bengaluru, said that many learners now approach English not as an academic subject but as a workplace necessity.

"People don't feel like it's a subject to learn, rather it has become more of a lifestyle and a requirement," she said. According to her, the expectations in Bengaluru have changed, with recruiters looking for candidates who are not only good at English but fluent too. Being placed in a good company often depends on communication skills. "You may have the skill and knowledge, but if it is not backed by language, then there is no use of that knowledge," she added.

Does fluency signal competency?

While communication trainers speak of rising expectations, young job-seekers are already experiencing them. Avaneebala, a student who recently attended an internship interview, recalled that she and her friend applied for the same role with similar academic performance. When the results were announced, she was selected while her friend was not. She believes the difference was that her friend "couldn't answer the questions very fluently in English." As she describes, "Earlier it used to be some status symbol. But now, it's just…expected."

Language and the line between classes

The role of English does not end with recruitment, it continues to shape workplace experiences. For Sakshi Gupta, a former corporate employee in Bengaluru, the difficulty was not the work itself, but the adjustment. "When I first came to Bangalore, my first challenge was to speak English properly… it affected my self-confidence," she said. She further added that often it was not about being excluded by others, but holding herself back from stepping into conversations due to hesitation in communication.

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Commercialisation and power creeping into Bharatanatyam "performance"

Sruthi Lakshna

A Bharatantyam dancer at her Arangetram *Sruthi Lakshna*

Bharatanatyam is one of India's most revered classical art forms, grounded in spiritual devotion, discipline, and tradition. However, beneath its aesthetic and philosophical depth lies a contemporary reality shaped by social hierarchies, privilege, and unequal access, determining who can perform and who cannot.

The ultimate purpose of Bharatanatyam was to seek a spiritual connection that transcends and surpasses personal gratification allowing the dancer to experience immense joy within and share it with Rasikas (connoisseurs). Divine alignment through Bharatanatyam is a higher purpose that demands lifelong practice and commitment from the dancer. However, a large section of society pursues the art form for short-term gains without genuine passion. Parents often enrol their children to fulfil their own aspirations, not the child's interest.

Traditionally, Arangetram (debut solo performance) marks the beginning of a student's artistic journey, signifying their first complete performance of the Margam (repertoire) on stage. Today, the significance of Arangetram has been diluted, as students are encouraged to perform extensively at festivals such as Navaratri and Shivaratri, as well as in dance productions, long before their formal debut.

Despite this redundancy, many parents still organise Arangetrams for their children on a grand scale, comparable to weddings. Thanuja from Chennai, a parent who organised an Arangetram, said, "The expectations were already set very high by other parents in the class and even by the teacher. There was an unspoken pressure to match them or do better, and that pushed us into organising an extravagant Arangetram that cost nearly ten lakhs, not because it was necessary, but because it felt expected."

Parents adorn their children with costumes stitched from expensive silk sarees and elaborate jewellery, while grand auditoriums are booked, complete with catering, professional lighting, videography, and photography. In some cases, gurus (teachers) also encourage the practice of guru dakshina (an offering given to the teacher, symbolising the student's gratitude), demanding exorbitant sums of money. Consequently, the Arangetram becomes a spectacle of wealth and social status, where parents showcase their affluence, while children have little agency in the process. Wealthy parents often pressurise gurus to hasten the Arangetram, disregarding the child's preparedness. Malathi Krishnakumar, a Bharatanatyam dancer and teacher based in Chennai, said, "If a dancer cannot independently hold an entire Margam, doing an Arangetram is pointless." She further stated that while the ability to present an Arangetram is worth celebrating, its core purpose should never be compromised.

Is art truly meant for everyone?

The notion that classical art forms do not pique the interest of the masses is a commonly shared understanding across the world and across different timelines. Social hierarchies exist not only among Bharatanatyam performers but also among its audiences, as appreciation of the art form often requires cultural familiarity and interest. Earlier, recitals in temples created an open and inclusive setting. With the rise of sabhas (formal venues), performances moved into enclosed spaces that are socially exclusive. This has enabled upper-class groups to dominate access to the art form.

Survival in the Bharatanatyam field still depends heavily on caste and social background. Sabha secretaries, organisers, and other gatekeepers are responsible for this favouritism. Many dancers abandon years of rigorous training and their deep commitment to the art form, after repeated experiences of marginalisation, causing deep emotional distress. Dhivyashree, a Bharatanatyam student from Chennai, trained for seventeen years but eventually withdrew from the art form due to persistent caste discrimination. She said, "I never felt a sense of belonging in the dance community. I was constantly made to feel like an outsider because of my caste. I never heard back from most of the sabhas I applied to, while my peers did. I was left to fend for myself, and my caste ultimately closed many doors, leaving me deeply hurt." The freedom to pursue one's artistic calling is taken away, leaving psychological scars and deeply affecting individuals' sense of identity and self-worth.

Dancers who pursue the art form full-time largely come from generational wealth or secure financial stability through marriage, giving them social and economic leverage. This privilege often translates into influential positions within sabha administration, where performance opportunities are made.

Malathi asserts that a dancer without socio-economic benefits should take up parallel careers and not solely be reliant on Bharatanatyam for sustenance. Through independent performance platforms and community-building that prioritise talent over inherited privilege, she advocates collective resistance, urging dancers to fight the good fight, as shared voices have the potential to dismantle existing power structures.

Beyond the certificate: What a degree really means today

Yashaswini

For generations, a degree was seen as a destination that assured professional stability. Today, it is increasingly functioning as a transition. The pathway from classroom to career is no longer straightforward. While a degree remains the central part of the academic and professional system, its purpose is to be interpreted in multiple ways: as specialisation, and as a means of keeping future options open. Students, educators, and recruiters each view higher education through different lenses. Understanding these perspectives offers insights into how the idea of "destination" in education is being redefined. Mass expansion of higher education has transformed degrees from rare achievements into common credentials. As more students graduate each year, the competitive advantages once associated with simply "having a degree" has diminished.

Even though students approach higher education with different perspectives, their experiences highlight varied meanings a degree can hold in shaping career and learning paths.

Between aspiration and assurance

Among undergraduates and postgraduates, education is often seen as the next logical step. Prarthana, a psychology student from NMKRV College planning to pursue her master's degree, believes specialisation is necessary to enter the field. Yet she admits the future feels unpredictable. "I know I want to do my master's, but I'm still not fully clear about how the career path will extend," she says.

While some students remain uncertain about their direction, Hima Shree B.R, a psychology student, expressed her clarity in clinical psychology, where she was consistently drawn to understanding mental disorders. However, she acknowledged that changes in RCI (Rehabilitation Council of India) leave her unsure about how academic pathways unfold. "While my interest and passion are clear, the structural pathway sometimes feels uncertain," she stated.

Clarity through change

Kushboo Yadav's MSC psychology student academic journey reflects how shifting fields does not always mean losing direction. After completing her undergraduate degree in Kathak from Banaras Hindu University, she took a break from her master's programme. Her decision was shaped by both self-reflection and professional pressure; studying in prestigious institutions created expectations to constantly prove herself.

While she admits her graduation years were exhausting, she also acknowledges that being surrounded by accomplished artists shaped her discipline and perspective. Rather than abandoning her past, she sees her earlier training as something that still holds value. She believes that "alternative pathways remain open."

Education without a roadmap

Students enter higher education with different levels of clarity, says faculty members from NMKRV College. "Some students are very clear about what they want to become in the future, but some of them join a degree without any clear intention," says Dr Mahantesh Havani, assistant professor and HOD of Economics at NMKRV College. He adds that many students continue to study postgraduate without a proper plan for what comes next. Completing a degree Without direction is like "a plane without pilot", he adds.

"Students pursue degrees due to delayed decision or family influence, often without a clear goal," says Dr Megha Garoti, assistant professor and HOD of Sociology at NMKRV College

She noted that higher education is driven more by employability anxiety than intellectual curiosity, with students viewing education mainly as a route to jobs rather than knowledge.

Adding on, she said, "Education began as an escape and has gradually become an ambition."

Chasing a new beginning *Sheza C*

Degree opens doors, skills secure jobs

Having multiple degrees matters only if they align with the job role. "If they have done something relevant to what I am looking for, that's the whole point," said Shankari Nair, HR manager, from Csfirst company, Bangalore. According to her, while candidates from non-tech backgrounds often shift fields through short-term courses, relevance remains key. However, high qualifications do not guarantee selection.

"That comes down to cultural fit," she explained. Technically strong candidates can be rejected if their attitude or soft skills do not align with the team.

Learning after a degree

For some graduates, a degree is more an eligibility than gaining understanding. Akash J, a B.Com graduate now working in risk investigation at Razorpay said that the real skills required for his job were developed only after entering the workplace. He said the degree was just for cracking exams without real learning. He also highlighted that there is a growing mismatch between academic specialization and professional roles. "Degrees are often used as entry tickets rather than skill building frameworks", he added.

A degree may offer a sense of direction, but by itself it does not guarantee success. preparedness depends on clarity of purpose and practical skills.

The quiet weight of hormones

Samya Sharma

For young women in their twenties, adulthood is marked by firsts: a first job, living independently, higher studies, and ambitious dreams. For some, however, it begins with a diagnosis. Hormonal conditions such as polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOD) or hypothyroidism are becoming increasingly common, shaping confidence levels, routines, and life choices.

Vasudha Sharma, a 22-year-old postgraduate student, was diagnosed with PCOD in class 11. "At first, I didn't really know what it meant and that made me scared," she says. When her periods stopped for months and excess hair growth followed, she realised something was wrong.

Rakshita Singh, a 24-year-old PR professional, was diagnosed with hypothyroidism at 21 while she was still in college. She describes it as a quieter experience. "I knew it would be a long-term condition. I wasn't shocked, but I knew medication would probably continue for life."

Across clinics in India, stories like theirs are becoming increasingly common.

A diagnosis arriving earlier than before

Over the past decade, doctors have reported a steady rise in young women seeking care for hormonal disorders. "About a third of unmarried or newly married young women present with complaints related to PCOD or hypothyroidism," says Dr Rachana Lekkala, a Mangalore based gynecologist. She notes that these conditions now rank among the most common diagnoses among college students.

While improved testing and awareness have helped identify cases earlier, experts caution against overlooking lifestyle factors. "It is a metabolic lifestyle cluster," Dr Lekkala explains, linking it to sedentary academic routines, ultra-processed diets, chronic stress, and disrupted sleep. "Modern schedules place more physiological pressure on women's endocrine balance than previous generations," she adds. Yet, the trend suggests influences beyond lifestyle alone.

More awareness or a real rise?

When asked whether the increase reflects worsening health or earlier identification, Dr Lekkala says, "Both, but real increase is undeniable."

A decade ago, irregular periods were often normalised within families, and many women sought treatment only after marriage. Today,young women visit clinics earlier, often with period-tracking apps and blood reports, reflecting a shift towards proactive menstrual health.

However, doctors caution that lifestyle deterioration plays a significant role. Sedentary schedules, academic pressure, and chronic stress disrupt hormonal balance. Whether driven by earlier diagnosis or a genuine rise, long-term management is now beginning earlier in life.

Balancing hormones, balancing life - together *Sanjana Shaji*

When diagnosis becomes daily life

For many young women, managing a hormonal condition becomes part of their routine. "The pills are hormonal, so my body didn't adjust well at first. I had bloating, nausea almost every day, and I started feeling depressed," says Vasudha.

Doctors emphasise that treatment is rarely short-term. "Lifestyle is primary treatment. Medication is supportive," Dr Lekkala explains. Rakshita describes her condition as a constant presence. "Nothing drastically changed in my routine, except that I have to be consistent with my medication." On difficult days, she feels "extremely fatigued and irritated," adding, "emotionally, I sometimes feel like a mess."

"In your 20s, you're still figuring out who you are," says Ashraj Chabbra, a clinical psychologist based in Patiala. "Instead of just living in your body, you start managing it." Over time, he adds, this becomes a long-term responsibility.

The quiet emotional toll

Over time, the condition begins to affect more than physical health. The first shift is often psychological, influencing how women perceive themselves.

"PCOD makes you gain weight, and that makes you conscious," Vasudha says. Gradually, her response shifted from distress to acceptance. "The more you realise it's not your fault, the more you start accepting yourself."

Rakshita felt the emotional struggle more intense. "On 9 out of 10 days, I don't feel confident in my body," she says.

According to Dr Lekkala, concerns about body image and anxiety around fertility are common. Chabbra explains that the psychological burden can sometimes feel heavier than the physical symptoms. "Many young women start seeing symptoms as flaws," he says.

Logging out to feel alive

Diana Saldehna S

A group of youngsters engaged in playing a board games at Church Street *Diana*

On a Sunday evening in Bengaluru, a group of young professionals sit around a table, arguing, laughing, and celebrating small victories. There is no loud music, no dance floor, and no glowing screens. Their phones lie forgotten in their bag. Across cities and even villages, young people are slowly choosing to log out at least for a few hours to reconnect with themselves and with others. What once looked like a trend is now turning into a quiet movement. Digital detox, or taking conscious breaks from screens, is becoming a way to deal with the emotional and mental tiredness of a hyper-connected world.

Mental health experts are now seeing the effects of this digital overload. Chaitra K, a counsellor at Parihar NGO in Bengaluru says that more young people are coming with stress and anxiety linked to screen use. "Excessive screen time is affecting mental health. We see low confidence, emotional exhaustion, and constant stress," she explains. According to her, social media creates comparison and pressure. "Young people are mentally busy all the time, but emotionally disconnected," she says

She also talks about digital fatigue, a condition where people feel tired and irritated because of too much screen exposure. Sleep problems, headaches, lack of focus, and emotional imbalance are becoming common. Even when they feel overwhelmed, many continue scrolling without realising it. Breaking this cycle has become difficult.

A personal story that became a movement

The rise of offline communities in Bengaluru has often come from personal experiences. Mansi N, who runs a board game community, started her journey after seeing how games helped her mother during a serious illness. After returning from Japan to take care of her mother, Mansi introduced board games at home. Slowly, these game nights became a source of emotional support.

One moment stayed with her. Just before surgery, when a nurse came to take her mother, she asked for a few minutes to finish her turn in the game. For Mansi that moment showed the power of focus and human connection. It helped her mother forget her fear, even if only for a short time.

This inspired Mansi to open a public space where others could also experience this feeling. In the beginning, she did not even charge visitors. "We don't tell people to switch off their phones. They just forget about them," she says. The games and conversations become so engaging that screens lose their importance.

Finding real connection

Many young people say these spaces feel like a relief. Goutham Krishna, a product developer at Codetonic, first visited "The Boardgame Den" when he was going through a lonely phase. "After spending so much time on my phone, I felt empty. Here, I found real interaction," he says. Playing games with strangers gradually helped him open up.

Shavankar S, a software engineer, Wipro who recently moved to Bengaluru, shares a similar experience, "Phones are a part of life, but hobbies like reading or games help reduce dependence,"- For him, the aim is not to reject technology but to find balance.

A village that rings a siren

Interestingly, this idea is not limited to cities. In Mohityanche Vadgaon, 'a village in Maharashtra, people practise digital detox every day. At 7 p.m," a siren sounds, and everyone switches off their phones, televisions, and other devices for 90 minutes. Families talk, children study, and neighbours interact. This simple habit has improved focus and strengthened relationships. It shows that the need to disconnect is not only urban but universal.

Reclaiming focus and relationships

Mental health experts say too much screen time reduces attention and productivity. It also increases stress and overthinking. Offline activities such as hobbies, sports, and face-to-face conversations improve concentration and emotional health. Real life interaction allows people to understand feelings, body language, and empathy, things that digital communication cannot fully replace.

Today's youth are not against technology. Instead, they are trying to control it. They want deeper conversations, meaningful friendships, and moments where they can be themselves without filters or pressure.

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