Retirement?
These greypreneurs are just starting up

Meet the entrepreneurs who are busting the myth of the young startup whiz

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Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg once said, "Young people are just smarter". Anand Anandkumar, the 55-year-old co-founder of a deep science startup, begs to differ. "Age doesn't matter. Whether you are 20 or 50, you have only 30 seconds to get a VC's attention."

While India's startup space is dominated by bright young minds, there are some enterprising greys bucking the trend. Anandkumar set up Bugworks Research Inc in 2014 with two co-founders and all three of them were above 50. Being a senior founder has its benefits. "A 50-year-old CEO would have seen more of life and corporate dynamics and, hence, may be better placed to put together teams, manage and nurture investor expectations, etc," says Anandkumar.

Radha Daga, who dipped a toe into the garment export business in her forties and then went on to set up a successful food business at the age of 69, agrees that age can be an advantage, bringing with it a greater maturity and ability to cope with challenges. The 78-year-old doesn't lack in energy either. "I work eight hours every day and though I do take three to four short vacations in a year, I am always available to my team," says Daga, who is the founder and managing director of Triguni Food Pvt Ltd, a ready-to-eat food manufacturer in Chennai that produces, among other things, the rava upma sold on board Indigo Airlines.

How long does she plan to keep working? "I know my body is changing. I am searching for a suitable partner or group who can take over the company and carry it forward. But until then it's business as usual," she says.

If Daga is going strong in her late seventies, Harbhajan Kaur has found new legs at 94. After Mahindra group chairman Anand Mahindra tweeted about her home-made barfi business, her phone has been ringing non-stop. Some want barfis, and the others interviews.

Kaur's barfi recipe has always been a hit amongst her family and friends, but she couldn't turn her gift into a business as her husband was against her working. Four years ago, she told her daughters that she has done everything in her life but never earned a single penny. So, they suggested that she should sell her barfi at Apni Mandi, a weekly organic market in Chandigarh. "Every week, I make about 5kg of barfi or more depending on the orders I get,"

94 Harbhajan Kaur, runs a barfi biz in Chandigarh. Started it at age: 90

88 Yamini Mazumdar, runs her own laundry business. Started it at: 68

78 Radha Daga, managing director, Triguni Food Pvt Ltd. Started it at: 69

52 Geetha Manjunath, CEO, Niramai Started it at: 49

55 Anand Anandkumar, CEO, Bugworks Research Inc Started it at: 49

says the nonagenarian who sells the sweets for Rs 850 per kilo. She also does an organic version with organic ghee, and besan that sells for Rs 1,800 per kilo. "Who would have thought she would get so much success and fame?" says her eldest daughter, Amrit Tulsi.

Is entrepreneurship really a young man's game? Researchers have debunked the myth of the young entrepreneur. A 2018 study conducted by MIT professors and the US Census Bureau found that the average age of entrepreneurs at the time they founded their companies is 42. A 50-year-old entrepreneur is almost twice as likely to start an extremely successful company as a 30-year-old, the researchers found during the study.

But what prompts someone to start a stressful business at an age when others are looking forward to plonking themselves in rocking chairs? Anandkumar, who co-founded Bugworks in 2014 after quitting a comfortable and well-placed corporate job in the semiconductor industry, says it was "because, at that stage in my life and career I wanted to do something transformational, for myself and for society." His startup works in the field of anti-microbial resistance.

Yamini Mazumdar, mother of Biocon founder Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, set up a laundry business in 1999 at the age of 68, after her husband passed away. "I didn't want to sit idle so decided to start something of my own. I go to office every day and work for four hours. I am still quite young, only 88," she quips. Her daughter Kiran says, "My mom's entrepreneurial genes have made me who I am."

Dr Geetha Manjunath, 52, used to head data analytics research at a MNC before she decided to go solo and set up her own cancer-care venture after two of her cousins were diagnosed with breast cancer and later succumbed to it. "I had been researching the disease in my personal time and started getting some early results. So, I decided to quit my job and set up my own lab," says Manjunath who co-founded Niramai, a health-tech startup based in Bengaluru that has developed an AI-based breast cancer screening tool, in 2016.

Being a woman in the tech world, Manjunath says she's used to being the odd one out. "Now, I am a senior woman founder-CEO — still an odd sight. I am used to it. I do things differently," says Manjunath, who looks up to startup legends like Binny Bansal and Bhavesh Aggarwal.

While she doesn't hide her age, Manjunath doesn't wear it like a badge either. "I try not to wear saris for pitch sessions to investors. I don't want to overwhelm them with my age," says Manjunath.

Are investors biased towards young entrepreneurs? Many are, because controlling young entrepreneurs is easier than controlling someone in their 60s. But as Anirudh Malpani of Malpani Ventures says, "I don't really care about their calendar age, as long as they have energy and drive!" An angel investor, Malpani adds that older founders have an edge because they have a great network. "Also, the fact that they are willing to take risks at their age means they are made of a different DNA, so generic rules don't apply."

Manjunath adds that investors look for flexibility to unlearn things when meeting older founders. "You need to drop your prejudice and pitch your product. A huge ego is not going to help," she says.

How politics is changing office politics

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Spats over ideology are rising in the workplace as the political becomes personal

Getty Images

In our increasingly polarised environment, the term 'office politics' has taken on new meaning. It's not just a matter of who gets the promotion or who the boss favours, it's about judging co-workers based on the ideology they support.

At many offices, the line between healthy debates and rancour is being crossed, especially on issues like the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). Akash Mitra, who has spent almost a decade in an IT company, says talking politics wasn't at all unusual in his office. "But in the last couple of years, things have gotten pretty heated," he says, admitting that such discussions colour his opinion of colleagues. "If someone says something about a particular religion, I make sure that the information doesn't affect work, but of course deep down I have an opinion of them."

Though politics can become personal, most companies in India and abroad don't openly discourage such conversation.

Bengaluru-based Abhishek has decided not to discuss politics at work after an argument with a colleague over BJP's poll prospects in West Bengal became bitter. The colleague complained that he didn't like working with Abhishek. "I've realised it's best to avoid such topics, as well as co-workers on social media," says the 25-year-old

However, in an unusual move, Google, a company known for its culture of free speech and debate, recently issued an advisory asking employees to keep talk about politics out of the office. Their Community Guidelines memo read, "While sharing information and ideas with colleagues helps build community, disrupting the workday to have a raging debate over politics or the latest news story does not. Our primary responsibility is to do the work we've each been hired to do, not to spend working time on debates about non-work topics."

Despite knowing that it can put a damper on inter-cubicle relationships, why do employees still stray into dangerous waters? In a recent column for the Mint newspaper, Utkarsh Amitabh, founder of Network Capital, points out that with millennials spending upwards of 12 hours in office, it's only fair that they have the freedom to bring their true selves to work though that doesn't mean indulging in slanging matches.

But, it isn't just about conversations that happen in the confines of an office, exchanges on social media can also become vitriolic. Kolkata-based Sanjay*, 25, has held leftist views since he was in college, but the last few years of working in an MNC led him to be a bit hush-hush about his politics on social media and in the office. But that changed over the last month when he started posting about everything from JNU violence to Chandrashekhar Azad. "I'm vocal on social media, and some of my superiors who have different views have tried to engage me there and it has sometimes gotten ugly," Sanjay says. He says he does his best to be decorous, polite and stay miles away from sarcasm, but he worries about the consequences this may have for his future at his accounting firm. "The people I'm engaging with have no direct say in my career right now, but they might have some questions about me when I progress further in the organisation."

Such issues could come up in hiring as well. Rajneesh Singh, co-founder of SimplyHR, a human resources firm, points out that since checking the social media profiles of applicants has become common hiring practice, some companies may choose to not hire candidates with certain views or those who belong to a certain religion.

Bengaluru-based Abhishek has learnt his lesson the hard way. It started with an argument with a colleague "who would scroll through BJP's Instagram during meetings". "I'm from West Bengal and he brought up the elections in the state. He said BJP will definitely win and I don't have a filter so I said 'are you crazy?' which was not great of me," he says. The co-worker later complained that he didn't like working with Abhishek, citing his politics as one of the reasons. The 25-year-old says that while he has decided not to bring up politics at work, he realises that sharing values with his workplace is important to him. "Earlier before starting a new job I would check GlassDoor reviews, but now I would look up the ideology of the top leadership as well." He isn't alone in that — a 2018 LinkedIn report found that nine out of ten millennials would take a pay cut to work somewhere aligned with their values.

IT employee Mitra says he's heard from co-workers that they have faced consequences for holding a political opinion opposed to their managers. "If someone disagrees with a manager, they tend to push them and create problems. It's this whole corporate thing that isn't just about politics — 'if someone disagrees with me, they are in my bad books'."

*Name changed on request

Why our digital past makes us cringe

Big Mood
REGA JHA

'Oh my god, I was SO terrible, I can't look at it," I basically shriek. I'm sitting on my sofa with an ex boyfriend. We broke up two years ago, have lately been charting a new closeness as friends, and for some reason, tonight, have had the hilariously terrible idea to read, together, the WhatsApp chats from the week we broke up. We both know, instantly, what keywords to search — the name of the hotel we spent a weekend at as a Hail Mary, the nicknames we had for one another at the time. Within seconds, we've time travelled in blue light together, back to early 2018, and we're watching our love atrophy into meanness and rage with the unsparing focus of retrospect. Despite his consolations and laughter, I cant stop cringing at my own bad behaviour. "I want to delete it all," I say, and lock my phone.

It's easy now to revisit our worst selves. In fact, often, they come to us uninvited. You type a vague search term in your email inbox and find your gushing love letters to that boyfriend in San Francisco from when you still believed in soulmates. Instagram transports you back years, "On this day", Facebook tosses up Memories. We constantly find ourselves at unsolicited shrines to dead friendships and long-disowned positions. There it all is — the stupid perms and slogan tees, stupider opinions and slang, all those words we aren't allowed to say anymore, so casually tossed wall-to-wall, those shoes we wouldn't be caught dead in. Sometimes we smile wistfully at the baby fat and the baby problems. Mostly, we cringe. Hard.

It isn't that we want to leave our past selves in the dust. In fact, we quite like to visit them. For at least the past five years, trends like #2009vs2019 (also #2008vs2018 and #2007vs2017), #10yearchallenge, #HowHardDidAgingHitYou, #GlowUp, #UpgradeChallenge, and other localised or culturally specific versions (like #Longbottoming, which Potterheads will recognise as the process of growing wildly more attractive with age) have organically bloomed year after year, and we've pounced en masse on the opportunity to pull our past selves out of hiding and give them another, perhaps warmer day in the sun.

Preceding all of these and thriving still is internet dinosaur #Throwback-Thursday, born in the early 2000s, years before Instagram, and which one 2015 Urban Dictionary definition clarifies, "does not actually have to be on a Thursday".

The instinct has an offline predecessor — family photo albums. We've always liked to revisit the evidence of our having been happy before, beautiful before, loved before, and we've always opened the past up to show people of our present what it was like.

I'm thinking of a line from a Joan Didion essay I revisit often, about the habit of keeping a notebook. "We are well advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not," she writes. "Otherwise they turn up unannounced and surprise us, come hammering on the mind's door at 4 a.m. of a bad night and demand to know who deserted them, who betrayed them, who is going to make amends."

There is a vast cringe-fest of a difference between staying acquainted with a past self in a private notebook and finding public record of a past self pop up on your phone screen, complete with friends' comments and likes — the evidence that others saw her too. That they judged her slang and hair choices in real time, as you're doing in retrospect now. We'd forgotten, but had they? Will they ever?

The cringe is laced with an anxiety. The painstaking record of past selves can be weaponised. It isn't rare on Twitter to see present day opining cut down by a screenshot of the same person's own contradictory tweets from past years. We are afraid, naturally, that our past convictions will betray our present positions, and we'll be completely blindsided by it.

Technologically unaided, we don't actually hold our own histories well. Our brains are designed to protect us from remembering too clearly. Theories abound in psychology and neuroscience about how and why we forget the details of our own lives. The "motivated forgetting theory" posits that our minds reject memories that would be too painful, or destructive, to hold. The "decay theory" argues that memories not recalled often simply fade. The "false memory theory" lays out, convincingly, that we are prone to forgetting the facts of what happened to us and filling in details to match our beliefs, our lasting emotions, about them instead.

Outside of Silicon Valley servers, our records of our own lives are more confabulation than fact. Often, we ourselves don't remember what we've actually said, the real order of events, the exact jabs or letdowns, and that's for the best. All the science agrees that forgetting some of who we've been is a feature, not a bug. It's how we survive having to relentlessly live with ourselves.

Who hasn't felt the sheer freedom of being in a drunk mind, in drunken company, knowing that all our words and actions that night, our dance moves and proclamations of love, exist outside of anybody's sharp memory? Stepping outside our minds' record-keeping is a luxury, evidenced by our rabid fondness for 24-hour-disappear-

Chad Crowe

Thanks to the internet, we constantly find ourselves at unsolicited shrines to dead friendships and long-disowned positions. There it all is — the stupid perms and stupider opinions and slang, all those words we aren't allowed to say anymore, those shoes we wouldn't be caught dead in

ing Stories.

We're free to try out different ways of being because we will be spared the memory of each failed experiment, free to grow into better selves each day because of how thoroughly we can leave old tendencies behind. Our new addiction to self-memorialising is closing in on that freedom. Never in human history has such a painstaking record been kept of all the people we've each been. Most people in history got one portrait of them in an entire life, if that. I've usually taken 8 selfies before lunch.

It's brand new, in the history of human minds, to have so much cold, hard record of who we've been before — the blonde highlights and the problematic opinions and the weird adolescent angst. Weirder still: we know that even right now, this day, we are posting versions of ourselves that will cringe at from some future perch.

To keep up with this new ability to revisit past selves, we'll have to exercise new muscles that accept and forgive them. I try to forgive my younger self what she hadn't found yet, the care routine she hadn't found yet, the counter-arguments she hadn't considered, the goodnesses she hadn't yet thought to cultivate. Ultimately, I can think of only one thing scarier than being caught off guard by a past self that isn't like me — and that is finding a past self that is.