

# Bollywood stars fight identity theft

**Personality rights**  
Indian celebrities are helping to shape laws that curb fake online content, says  
*Veena Venugopal*

Some of India's stars from Bollywood and from the cricket field are grappling with a surge of identity theft that has been turbocharged by AI. The significant risks to their reputations and their brands' commercial value have led a number of them to fight back, and a series of high-profile cases has begun to shape how individuals can protect their personality rights online.

In September last year, Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, a former Miss World and Bollywood actress, approached the Delhi high court seeking protection of her personality rights.

The case named more than 10 defendants and accused them of activities ranging from the unauthorised sale of merchandise featuring her name and image to the production of deepfake videos and even a chatbot offering users sexually explicit conversations.

The court ordered immediate interim injunctions requiring the defendants to take down websites and to stop producing unauthorised merchandise. It accepted that the unauthorised use of her identity had not only caused commercial harm but also undermined her right to privacy.

A key legal strategy employed by Anand and Anand, the law firm representing Rai Bachchan and several other Bollywood stars, has been to frame such cases as identity theft rather than copyright violations. The law on copyright violation has certain limitations, says Pravin Anand, managing partner at the firm, explaining that it can be easy to evade infringement charges with small changes to, for example, a posture or image.

"But identity theft offers a broader scope. The essential aspect that you have to convince the court in cases like this is commercialisation



nobody should be able to profit from impersonating a celebrity," he says.

Rai Bachchan is not the first to seek legal recourse against the surge of "fake" content. Since 2022, Indian celebrities have brought more than 20 cases of alleged infringement of personality rights to the court in Delhi, according to Anand. Rai Bachchan's father-in-law, Amitabh Bachchan, has even sought protection against the misuse of his distinct baritone. Cricketers Sunil Gavaskar and Gautam Gambhir recently secured injunctions.

Actor Anil Kapoor has protected the word "*jhakaas*",

meaning awesome, when used in his signature style. "We have effectively relied on common law principles to address these challenges," Anand adds.

What can be protected, however, remains a nuanced question and protection tends to relate to a narrowly defined category, notes Swati Sharma, partner and head of intellectual property practice at Cyril Amarchand Mangaldas.

"Take the example of '*jhakaas*'. If you simply write that word in an email, it is not a violation," she says. "It becomes one only if you imitate the actor's likeness or style, use it in the distinctive manner associated with him,

**Aishwarya Rai Bachchan: the film star has gone to court to battle a range of activities including unauthorised sale of merchandise and deepfake videos**

Lionel Hahn/Getty Images

'Nobody should be able to profit from impersonating a celebrity'

Pravin Anand

and, crucially, derive commercial benefit from it."

Courts have also issued dynamic injunctions, so that when a new offending website appears, an application can be made to the court registrar to take it down without initiating fresh litigation.

Meanwhile, an amendment in February to the Information Technology Act requires social media platforms to remove violating content within three hours of being officially notified and within two hours in the case of intimate imagery or non-consensual deepfake content.

This represents a sharp reduction from the earlier

window of 36 hours. The amendment also extends protection to non-celebrities, even in cases without commercial implications.

A three-hour window leaves limited time for platforms and creators to assess claims and respond adequately.

Rob Sherman, who looks after policy at Meta, said during a recent media roundtable that the company investigates and validates requests to take down content, and that "it is often not possible to turn this around in three hours".

While these measures aim to protect victims, they also raise concerns about potential infringements on free speech. In September 2025, the Karnataka high court rejected Elon Musk-owned X's challenge to an amendment that allowed several government agencies to make multiple content removal requests through an online portal.

Critics also question whether these protections infringe users' freedom to produce satire. Anand is not worried. "We know a rotten egg when we smell one," he says.

But Apar Gupta, co-founder of the Internet Freedom Foundation, disagrees. "There's insufficient scrutiny, and free speech interests are often not proportionately assessed," he says.

"These are essentially prohibitory orders granted to celebrities, often on the first hearing and frequently as ex parte injunctions. There is little structural incentive for defendants to contest them." Ex parte injunctions are emergency court orders that are granted based solely on the applicant's evidence, without hearing from the defendants.

"The defendants, who are often small website companies or individual social media users, will then have to engage a lawyer, make formal filings, etc. They tend to think this is not worth their while, and that the exercise is pointless since the posts have already been deleted," Gupta says.

Nonetheless, India has managed, even if imperfectly, to begin to address the proliferation of fake content online without enacting a dedicated regulatory framework — unlike, say, the EU, says Anand.