

Homegrown apps are making dating in India less awkward

AI tools compose love poems on behalf of tongue-tied suitors

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IMAGINE SHOWING up for a first date with someone you met online, only to find your romantic prospect has brought along their mum. In India that experience is not uncommon. The country's unique dating culture requires homegrown dating apps—or so say a horde of entrepreneurs who are trying to part lonely hearts from their cash. By one count India has more than 2,500 matchmaking startups, perhaps the most in the world.

On paper, India is a hot market for matchmaking firms. It has 1.4bn people, a median age of 30 and dirt-cheap mobile data. Well-known Western dating apps began entering India about a decade ago, with high hopes. They have managed to pull users, but have found it difficult to make money from their meat-markets. Over the past 18 months some big foreign apps have begun to consciously uncouple from India.

It is not a surprise that apps originally built for foreign markets should struggle, say Indian entrepreneurs. When it comes to dating, many young Indians feel that they are caught between two worlds. A lot of them still enter marriages that are arranged by their parents. Some of them meet their future spouse only a few times before their weddings. If they have ever searched for love online, there is every chance that they have done this only under parental supervision.

Then there is the new world where Indians seek to take control of their own love lives. Dating widely is appealing—but in practice it is also fraught. “India is a country where pop culture actually romanticises things such as stalking. Just look at our movies,” says Samarpita Samaddar, who used to work for Bumble, a big Western matchmaking firm.

In India many Western apps are seen as search engines for casual sex (which many Indians consider taboo). Apps developed in India tend to serve a market that they call “date to marry”. Flutter, one such app, targets aspirational youth in second- and third-tier cities. These users are too modern to accept partners picked by their parents, says Kaushik Banerjee, its boss. But they are also “completely culturally alienated from Western apps”.

To reach users outside India’s Anglophone elite, Flutter comes in seven languages. Unversed in the art of seduction? An AI tool will compose love poems on behalf of tongue-tied suitors. Users need not worry about encountering crude sexual innuendos; a profanity filter helps keep chats chaste. Juleo, a competitor, also promises

safety: it claims to tap into the Indian government's much vaunted digital-identity system in order to check that all the tall, handsome playboys are really who they are claiming to be.

So have the Indian startups figured out how to make pots of money? Not yet. Even old-school matrimonial platforms that have been around for decades seem to find it hard to turn big profits. The problem? In India "our tolerance for pain is so high that we will suffer for a free app," explains Simran Mangharam, a relationship coach who used to run Floh, a now defunct Indian dating site. "We only pay when we are really at the end of our tether." ■