



// COVER STORY

THE VOICES RESHAPING TOMORROW

THE AUGUST INTELLIGENCE ISSUE

Across artificial intelligence, cinema, beauty and business, a new generation of leaders is rewriting the rules — and this August, Ai Lens News puts them in focus.



// AI POLICY

What the next wave of regulation means for business

PAGE 08

// ENTERTAINMENT

Bollywood's new wave finds its global voice

PAGE 11

// STARTUPS

The founders building against the odds

PAGE 19

INSIDE THE AUGUST LENS

Six stories. One lens. The people, industries and ideas defining this August — curated by the ALN editorial desk.



Inside the labs where tomorrow is compiled — our cover story follows the intelligence reshaping global business. **PAGE 06**



Action — a new wave of Indian cinema goes global. **PAGE 11**

01 AI & TECHNOLOGY PAGE 06 THE INTELLIGENCE RESHAPING GLOBAL BUSINESS

Cover story — the AI systems quietly running boardrooms, and the woman teaching leaders to wield them.

02 ENTERTAINMENT PAGE 11 BOLLYWOOD'S NEW WAVE

Saira Qureshi and the directors taking Indian stories to the world — no permission asked.

03 BEAUTY & LIFESTYLE PAGE 15 THE FACE OF CHANGE

Inside the beauty labs where science, identity and inclusivity are rewriting an industry.

04 STARTUPS PAGE 19 BUILDING AGAINST THE ODDS

Two founders, one warehouse, and a logistics dream that refused to die.

05 EMERGING VOICES PAGE 24 AMPLIFYING THE UNHEARD

Kabir Anand's grassroots revolution — and the voices finally being heard.

The Stories That Deserve a Closer Look



// ROHAN IYER · EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

EVERY MONTH, the news moves faster than understanding. Headlines multiply; meaning does not. So this August, we chose to slow down — and look closer.

Our cover story follows the intelligence — human and artificial — quietly reshaping how the world does business. We sit with a new wave of filmmakers taking Indian stories global without asking permission. We step inside beauty labs where science is finally meeting identity. And we spend time with founders and grassroots builders proving that the most important stories are rarely the loudest ones.

That is the promise printed beneath our masthead: amplifying the unheard. It is not a slogan. It is an assignment — one every page of this issue tries to honour.

Thank you for reading us. The lens is yours now.

Rohan Iyer

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF · AUGUST 2026

// WHAT GUIDES THIS MAGAZINE

INTELLIGENCE

We analyse before we amplify.

PERSPECTIVE

Every story has another side.

CREDIBILITY

Facts first, always.

DISCOVERY

New voices, found early.

“A magazine is a lens. What matters is not how much it sees — but what it chooses to focus on.”

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// ON THE COVER



Anaya Rao — the beauty founder making science personal.

THE AUGUST INTELLIGENCE ISSUE

30 pages across AI, cinema, beauty, startups
and the voices that deserve to be heard —
designed to be read slowly, in a fast world.

[AILENSNEWS.COM](https://ailensnews.com)

AI & TECHNOLOGY

The machines are no longer coming — they are here, hired and quietly making decisions. This section looks at the intelligence reshaping business, and the humans teaching it to behave.

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SPECIAL REPORT



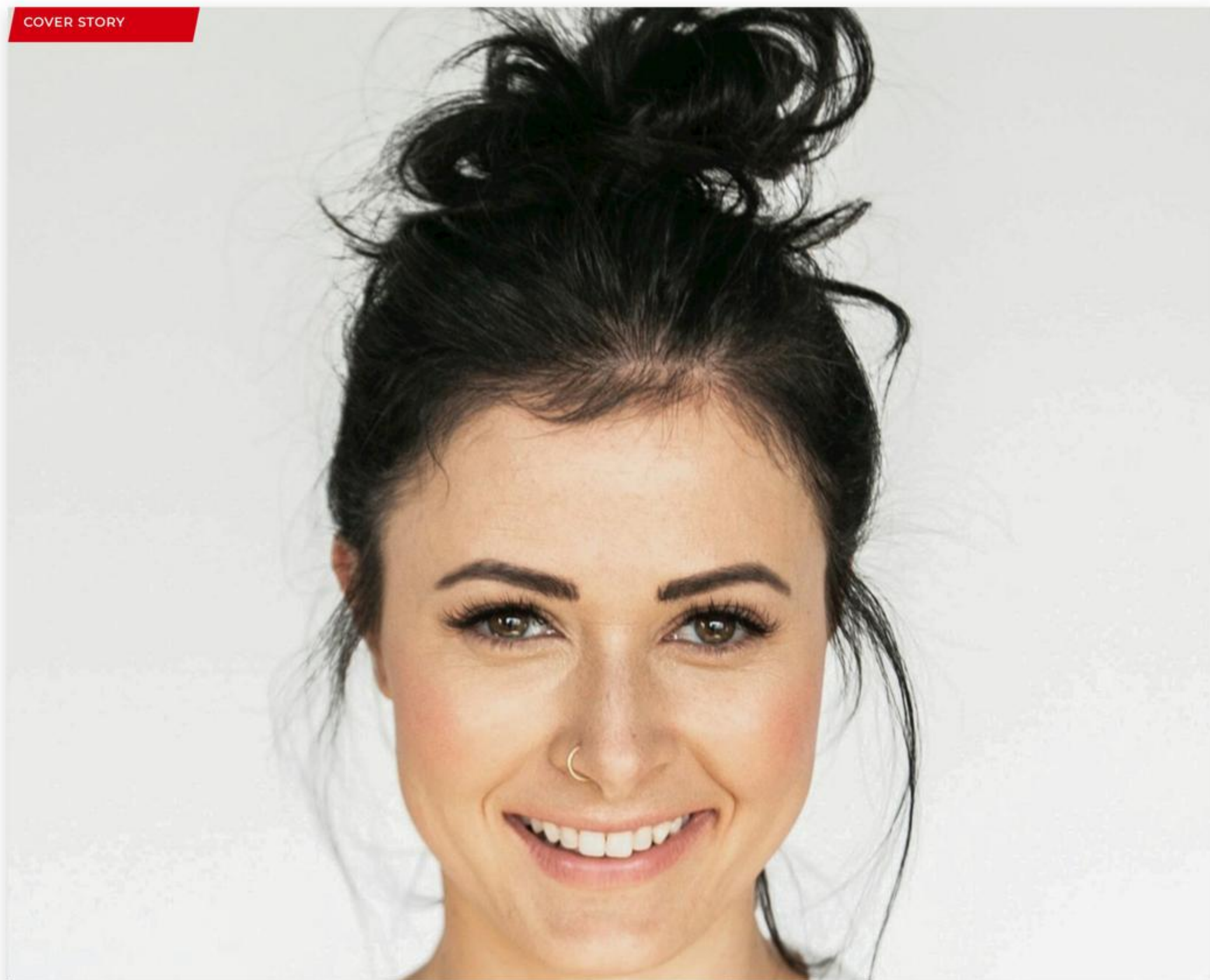
AMPLIFYING THE UNHEARD

THE INTELLIGENCE **RESHAPING** GLOBAL BUSINESS

How emerging AI systems are changing leadership, strategy and decision-making — and why Dr. Meera Krishnan believes the future must stay human-led, even as it becomes machine-powered.

WORDS · PRIYA CHANDRAN PHOTOGRAPHY · ARJUN MEHTA

COVER STORY



Dr. Meera Krishnan, founder of Bengaluru-based Meridian Systems, advises boards across three continents on deploying AI without surrendering judgment. "The companies that win," she says, "will be the ones that stay stubbornly human."

STORY · PAGE 07

“The question is no longer whether AI will sit in the boardroom. It already does. The real question is whether anyone in the room will admit it — and who remains accountable when it speaks.”

ON A TUESDAY MORNING in Gurugram, a logistics firm let an algorithm decide which of its two warehouses would close. The model took eleven minutes. The board took coffee. Nobody in the room could fully explain the reasoning — and nobody wanted to be the one to ask.

Scenes like this are why Dr. Meera Krishnan has become one of the most sought-after voices in global business. Her firm, Meridian Systems, does not build artificial intelligence. It teaches leaders how to live with it.

“Most companies do not have an AI problem,” she tells AI Lens News. “They have a courage problem. The machine gives them an answer that is 80 percent right, and 80 percent right is just comfortable enough to stop thinking.”

THE NUMBERS SUGGEST she is describing the rule, not the exception. Across the executives we spoke with for this story — in banking, retail, manufacturing and media — AI systems now touch everything from hiring shortlists to pricing, from credit decisions to which stories an audience will ever see.

Yet ask who is responsible when those systems fail, and the room goes quiet. “Accountability has become the last human job,” Krishnan says. “And it is the one job nobody can outsource.”

Her prescription is unfashionably simple: keep a human signature on every consequential decision, audit the machine the way you would audit a chief financial officer, and never confuse a confident answer with a correct one.

IF THAT SOUNDS CAUTIOUS, Krishnan is anything but a pessimist. The same systems that worry her, she argues, are quietly amplifying people the old economy never listened to — a small exporter in Coimbatore negotiating in five languages, a solo founder running a finance department of one.

“That is the part of this revolution that excites me,” she says. “For the first time, intelligence is cheap. What remains rare — what remains priceless — is judgment. And judgment is human. It always was.”

The future she is building toward is neither machine-led nor machine-free. It is, in her words, human-led and AI-powered. After a week inside her world, it is hard to argue.

// THE TAKEAWAYS

01 Keep a human signature on every consequential decision.

02 Audit the machine the way you would audit a CFO.

03 Never confuse a confident answer with a correct one.



Inside Meridian's Bengaluru "judgment lab", where executives rehearse deciding with — not under — machines.

72%

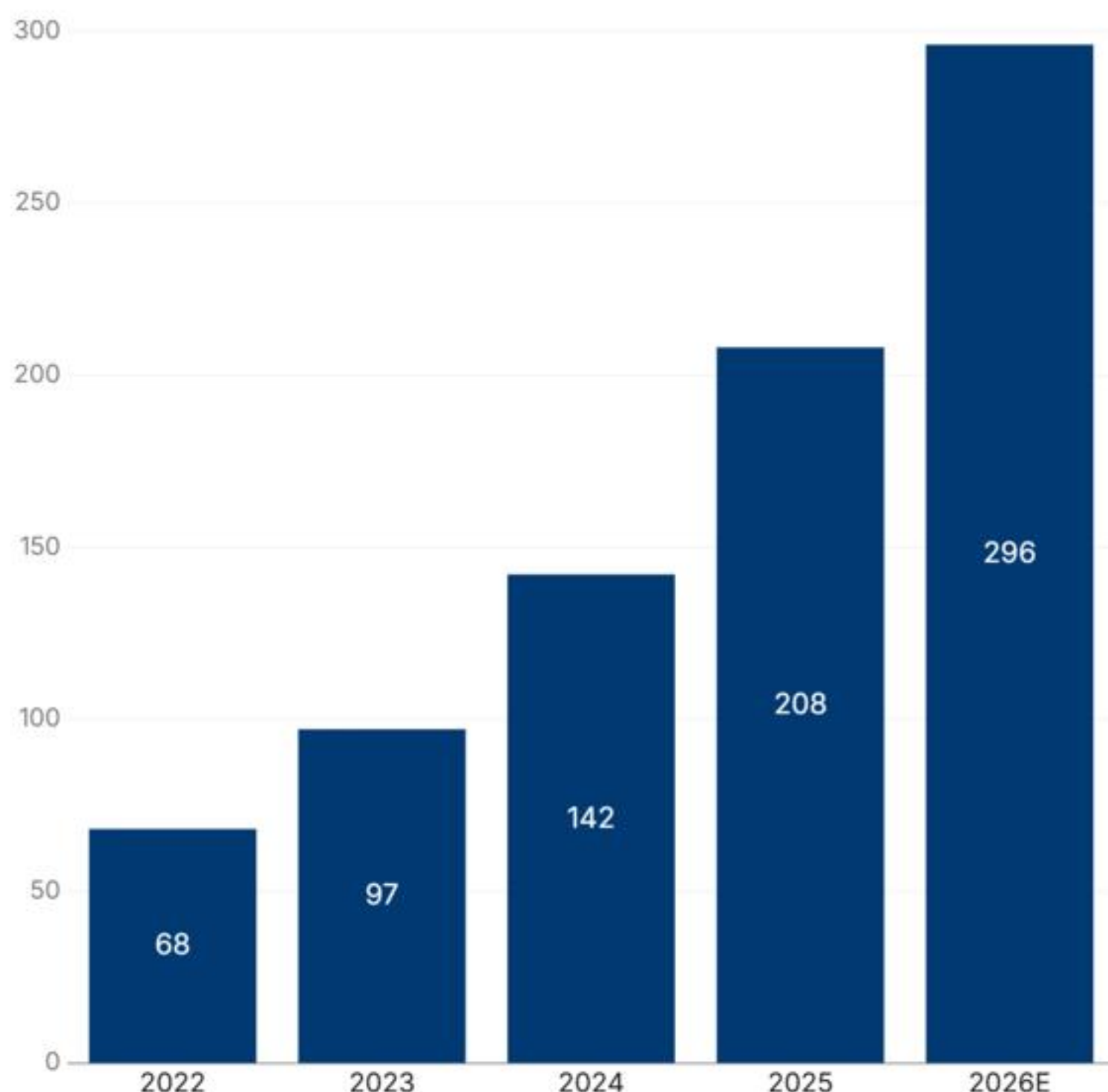
of senior leaders we informally polled say at least one AI system already influences their most consequential decisions — hiring, pricing, credit or closure.

ALN Research Desk · illustrative editorial survey, July 2026

AI, BY THE NUMBERS

The curves are steep, the budgets are real, and the estimates are getting harder to doubt. A snapshot of the intelligence economy — as best anyone can measure it.

GLOBAL ENTERPRISE AI SPEND · US\$ BILLION



ALN Research Desk estimates, August 2026. Figures are illustrative editorial projections, not investment advice.

\$1T

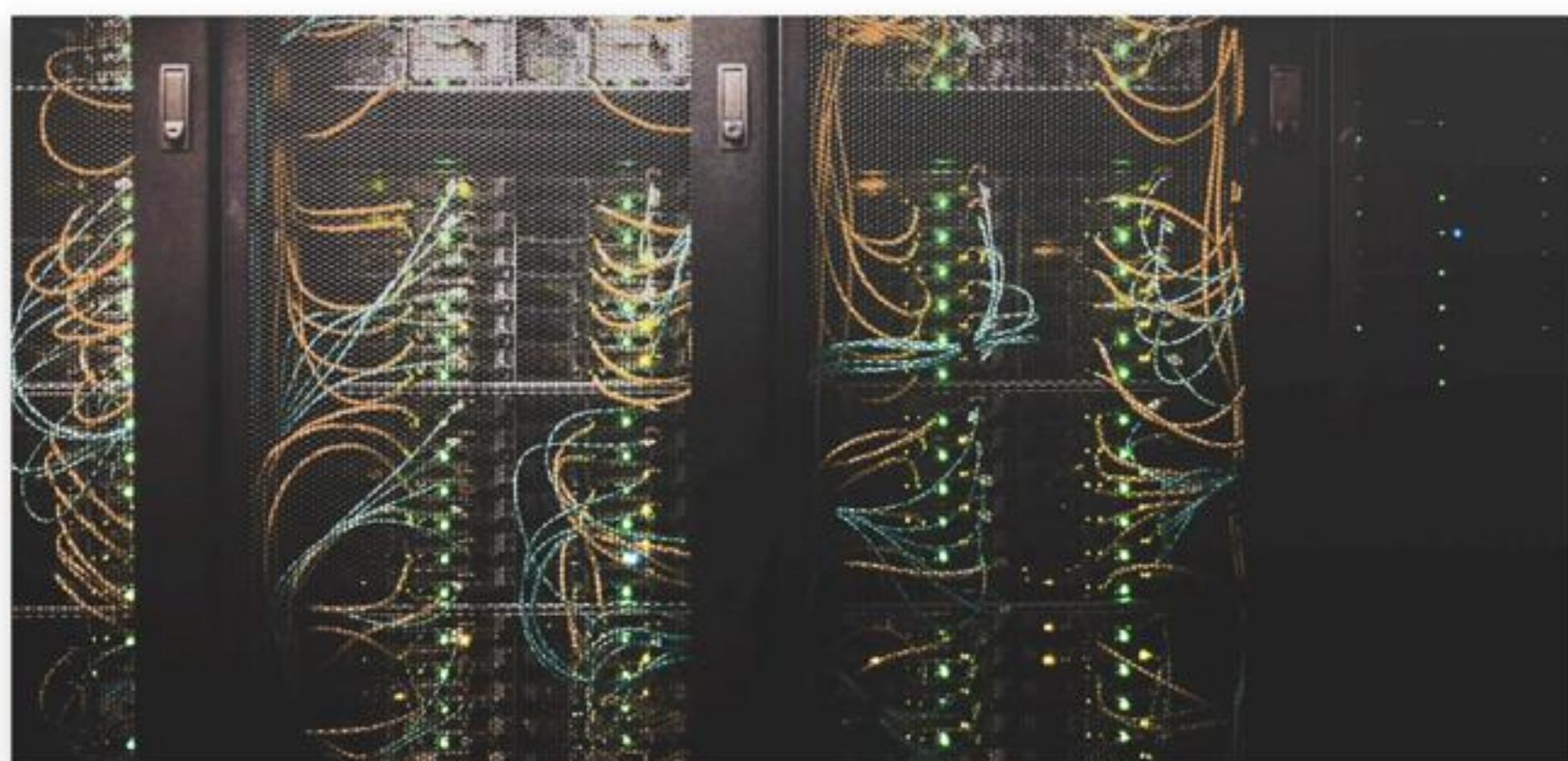
the milestone global AI spending is racing toward before this decade closes.

11 min

the time one model took to recommend closing a warehouse. The board took longer over coffee.

5

languages in which a single Coimbatore exporter now negotiates — with a team of one.



The physical side of the intelligence boom: demand for compute is redrawing the map of India's data centres.

WHAT THE NUMBERS MISS

Every curve on this page measures money. None of them measures judgment, taste or trust — the things that decide whether the money was well spent.

That gap is where our cover story lives.

FIVE SIGNALS TO WATCH

Beyond the headlines, these are the quieter shifts our editors believe will matter most over the next twelve months.



01 AGENTS CLOCK IN

AI agents are moving from demos to job descriptions — booking, buying and negotiating on our behalf. The org chart will never look the same.

02 THE AUDIT ECONOMY

Algorithm auditors are becoming boardroom fixtures. If a machine can make a decision, someone will soon be paid to cross-examine it.



03 SMALL MODELS, BIG AMBITION

Compact, efficient models are bringing intelligence to factory floors and farm fields — no data centre required.

04 REGULATION GETS TEETH

The policy conversation is shifting from principles to penalties. The next wave of rules will be measured in fines, not frameworks.



05 THE HUMAN PREMIUM

As answers become cheap, judgment becomes expensive. Taste, trust and accountability are the new scarcity.

ENTERTAINMENT

Cinema is having a once-in-a-generation moment: Indian stories are travelling further, streaming is rewriting the economics, and a new wave refuses to wait for permission.

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The Business of the Box Office 13

THE NEW WAVE



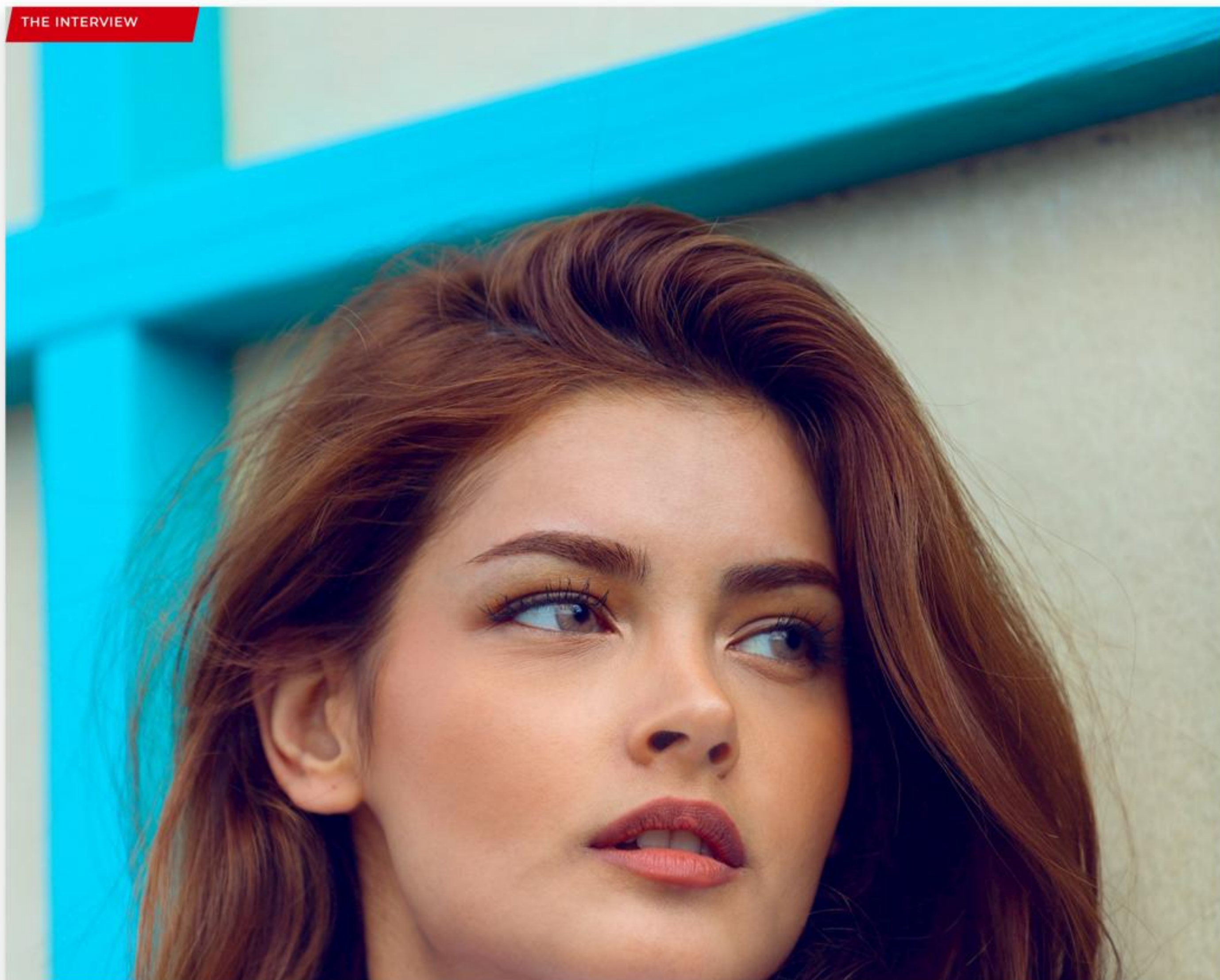
AMPLIFYING THE UNHEARD

BOLLYWOOD'S NEW WAVE

Saira Qureshi walked away from a franchise payday to make a film nobody would finance. Two years later, it is the most talked-about Indian film on the planet. She is not an exception anymore — she is the pattern.

WORDS · NEEL BHATTACHARYA PHOTOGRAPHY · KAVYA RANA

THE INTERVIEW



Saira Qureshi, photographed in Mumbai this July. Her independent drama "Monsoon Letters" — made for a fraction of a blockbuster's catering budget — has now been acquired in 40 countries.

STORY · PAGE 12

“Nobody was coming to save us. So we stopped waiting.”

ALN · You left a franchise at its peak. Everyone calls that brave. Was it?

SAIRA · It was arithmetic. I was playing the same woman for the fourth time. The industry had decided what I was worth and what I was for. Staying felt riskier than leaving.

ALN · “Monsoon Letters” was rejected by every major studio. What did they miss?

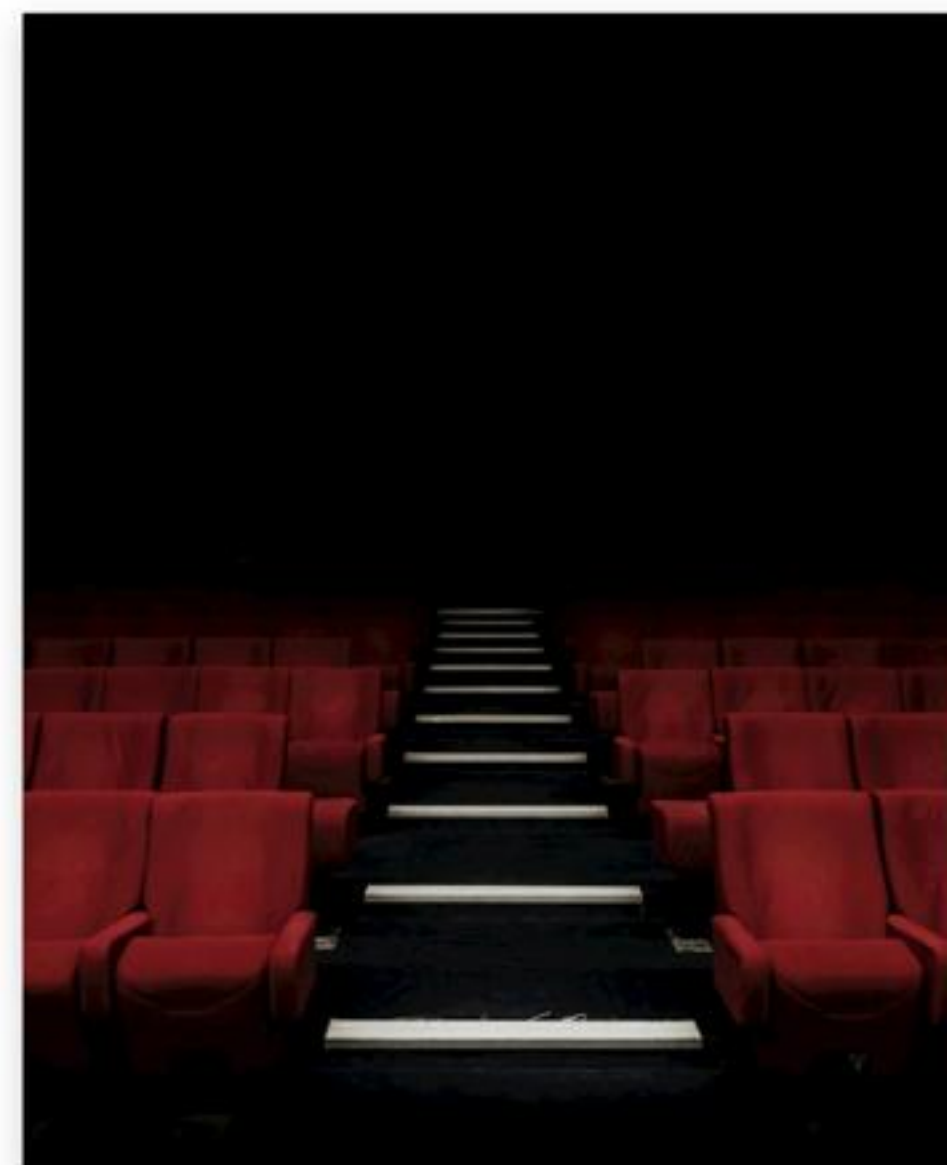
SAIRA · A grandmother, a post office, and forty years of letters nobody read. They kept asking where the hero was. I kept saying — she is sitting right there, stitching the story together. They heard small. Audiences heard true.

ALN · Indian films are travelling now in a way they never did. Why?

SAIRA · Because we stopped translating ourselves. For decades we asked — will they get it? The new wave does not ask. Specificity is the most universal language. A post office in Kochi is more global than a fake penthouse in “Anywhere”.

ALN · What would you tell a 19-year-old with a camera and no connections?

SAIRA · Connections are a tax on the connected. Shoot the story only you can shoot. The gatekeepers are busy guarding a gate the audience already walked around.



Theatres are becoming events again — premium, communal and, increasingly, global.

THE NEW-WAVE PLAYBOOK

- 01 Small budgets, precise stories
- 02 Festivals as launchpads, not finish lines
- 03 Streaming as distribution, not destiny
- 04 Stars as producers, not just faces
- 05 Regional first, global by design



The neighbourhood cinema, reimagined: independent theatres are curating the new wave for loyal local audiences.

THE BUSINESS OF THE BOX OFFICE

Theatres are not dying — they are becoming premium. Meanwhile streaming keeps climbing. Two curves, one industry, and a very different map of who gets paid.

40

countries have acquired “Monsoon Letters” — a record for an Indian independent film.

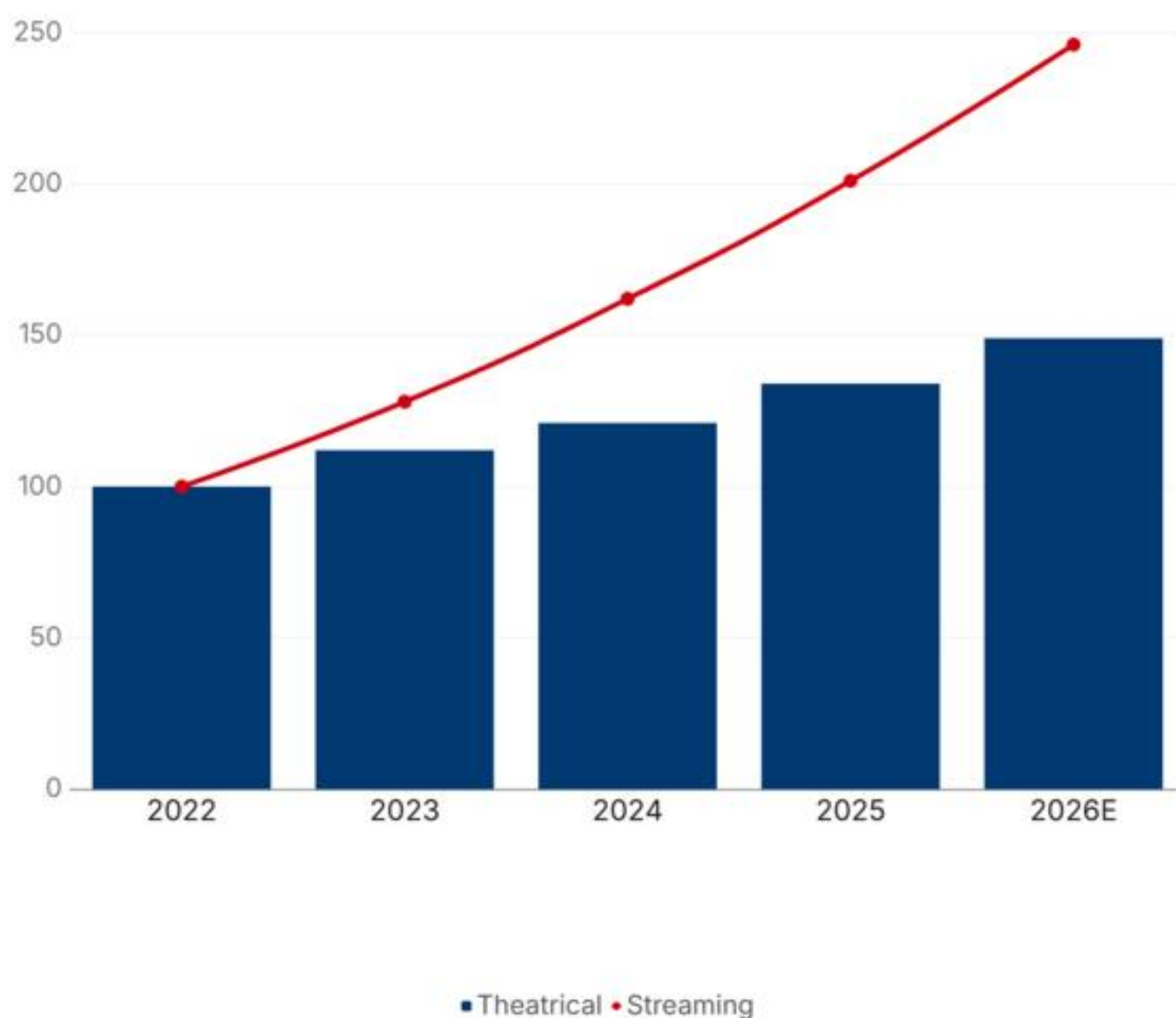
₹120Cr

the illustrative break-even line a mid-budget film must now cross to greenlight a sequel.

3×

growth in Indian titles in global streaming top-10 lists since 2023, by our newsroom tally.

INDIA ENTERTAINMENT REVENUE MIX · INDEXED (2022 = 100)



ALN Research Desk illustrative index, August 2026 — editorial estimates, not audited figures.



On set in Film City: mid-budget productions are the industry's new centre of gravity.

WHAT TO WATCH

Watch the middle. Blockbusters will always roar and micro-indies will always charm — but the industry's health now lives in the ₹20–120 crore band, where risk is survivable and originality is fundable.

“The audience did not abandon the cinema. The cinema briefly forgot the audience. They are finding each other again — in every language at once.”

— SAIRA QURESHI, IN CONVERSATION WITH ALN

BEAUTY & LIFESTYLE

An industry built on aspiration is being rebuilt on evidence. Inside the labs, vanities and founder desks where beauty is becoming personal — and finally inclusive.

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Three Innovators Rewriting Beauty 17



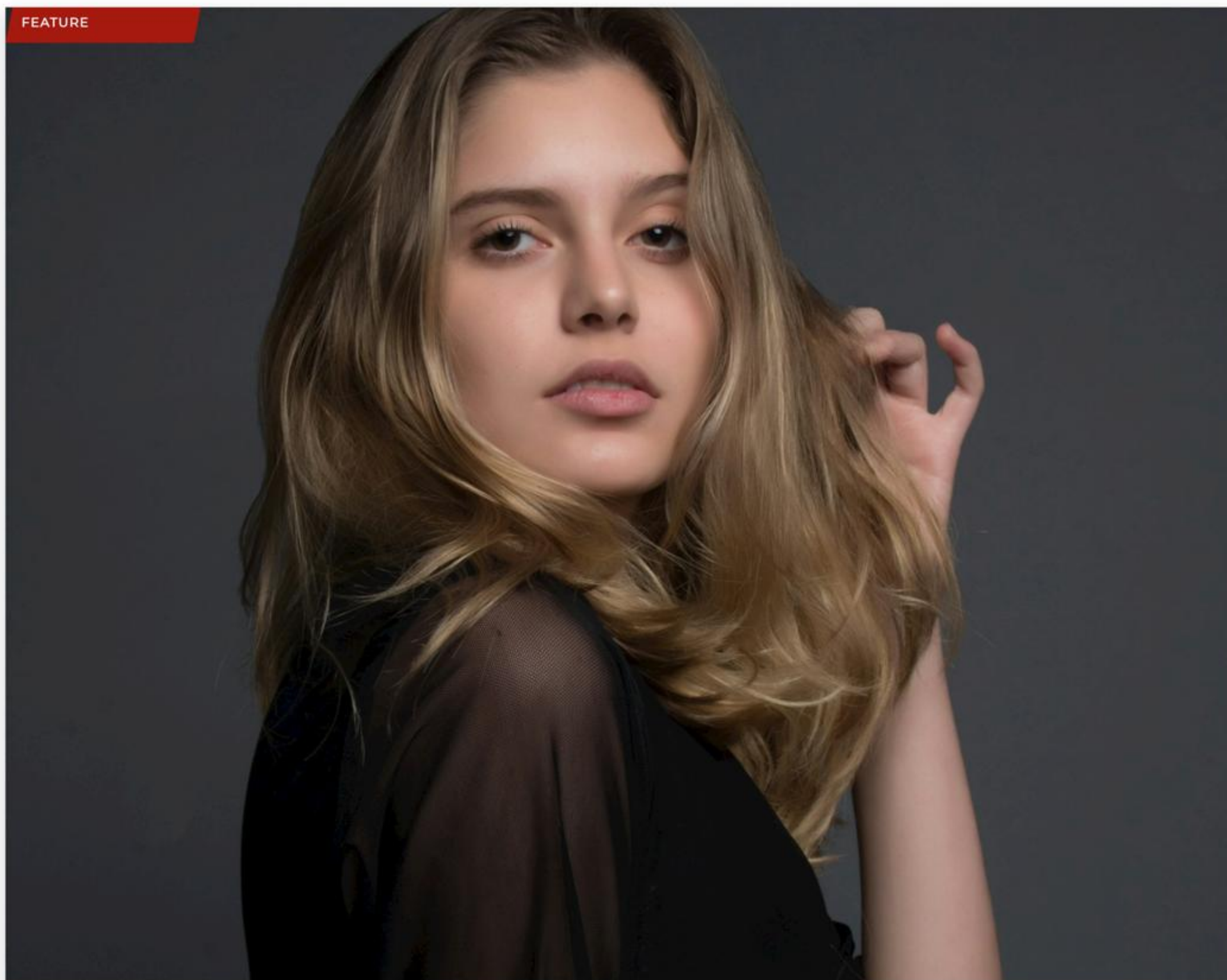
AMPLIFYING THE UNHEARD

THE FACE OF CHANGE

For a century, beauty sold one face to everyone. Now a generation of founders, chemists and artists is doing something radical — formulating for the faces that were never in the picture.

WORDS · ISHA VERMA · PHOTOGRAPHY · DHHRUV KAPADIA

FEATURE



Backstage, five minutes before showtime. The modern beauty kit now carries lab assays next to lipsticks — efficacy has become the new glamour.

STORY · PAGE 16

THE LAB COAT is the new black. Walk into any serious beauty startup in Mumbai, Seoul or São Paulo and the first thing you see is not a mood board — it is a centrifuge.

The industry's centre of gravity has shifted from aspiration to evidence. Consumers read ingredient lists the way investors read term sheets. Claims are audited in comment sections within hours. "Clinically proven" has gone from marketing garnish to table stakes.

"My customers ask about pH," laughs Anaya Rao, whose skincare line Rao Botanics grew out of a kitchen bench in Pune. "Five years ago, nobody asked about pH. Now my nineteen-year-old customers correct my chemists."

THE SECOND SHIFT is deeper. Beauty is finally widening its definition of who it is for. Foundation ranges that once stopped at six shades now launch with forty. Textured hair, melanin-rich skin, men, older faces — the audiences the industry treated as niches have turned out to be the market.

This is not altruism; it is arithmetic. The "underserved" consumer was simply the unserved one — and founders who served her first are being rewarded with the kind of loyalty advertising cannot buy.

"Inclusivity was framed as a cost," says dermatologist Dr. Elena Marsh. "It was actually the largest unclaimed revenue pool in the industry's history."



The modern vanity: lab-grade actives beside the classics.

"Inclusivity was framed as a cost. It was actually the largest unclaimed revenue pool in the industry's history."

— DR. ELENA MARSH, DERMATOLOGIST

// THREE SHIFTS RESHAPING THE INDUSTRY

SCIENCE FIRST

Formulation transparency, published trials and ingredient literacy are the new baseline of trust.

SHADES OF EVERYONE

Ranges designed for the full spectrum of real skin — from launch day, not as an afterthought.

FOUNDER-LED

Small, story-driven brands are outcompeting legacy houses on speed, honesty and community.

THREE INNOVATORS REWRITING BEAUTY

A chemist, a dermatologist and an artist — three people proving the industry's future belongs to whoever listens hardest.



01 ANAYA RAO

Founder, Rao Botanics · Pune

Started at a kitchen bench with a grandmother's hair oil and a borrowed pH meter. Her "radical transparency" labels — every ingredient, every concentration, every source — made Rao Botanics the fastest-growing indie skincare brand in our newsroom's tracking.

// HER BET: Honesty is a growth strategy.



02 DR. ELENA MARSH

Dermatologist & Formulator · Mumbai

Spent a decade watching patients struggle with products never tested on skin like theirs. Her clinic-to-lab practice now formulates for melanin-rich skin first — and consults for three global houses racing to catch up.

// HER BET: The underserved consumer is the market.



03 RHEA D'SOUZA

Makeup Artist & Educator · Goa

A backstage veteran whose tutorials teach technique over consumption — "skills, not hauls". Her masterclasses have trained two thousand working artists, many from towns the industry never visited.

// HER BET: Education outlasts trends.

STARTUPS & BUSINESS

Capital is cautious, customers are sceptical, and the easy growth stories are gone. Which is exactly why the companies in this section are worth reading about.

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THE BUILDERS

AMPLIFYING THE UNHEARD

BUILDING AGAINST THE ODDS

Two founders, one rented warehouse and 340 rejected pitches. KargoLane's journey from a whiteboard in Indore to moving a million parcels a month is a masterclass in stubbornness — with spreadsheets.

WORDS · FARHAN ALI PHOTOGRAPHY · SANA KHER

FOUNDER STORY



Priya Nair (standing) leads the Monday route review at KargoLane's Indore hub. The wall of sticky notes is deliberate: "If the plan cannot fit on paper," she says, "it will not fit in a truck."

STORY · PAGE 20

“We were rejected 340 times. On pitch 341, an investor asked a question we could not answer — and that question built our company.”

— ARJUN MALHOTRA, CO-FOUNDER, KARGOLANE

THE QUESTION WAS BRUTAL in its simplicity: “What happens to your margin when diesel moves ten rupees?” Arjun Malhotra and Priya Nair did not have an answer. So they built a company around finding one.

KargoLane began in 2023 as two desks in a rented Indore warehouse, promising small manufacturers something the giants would not: predictable, priced-to-the-rupee logistics for shipments too small to matter to anyone else.

“Everyone was chasing the big shippers,” Nair recalls. “We went looking for the ones loading one tempo at a time. Nobody throws a parade for them. We did.”

THE MODEL IS UNGLAMOROUS — shared routes, ruthless route maths, and drivers treated as partners rather than costs. It is also, increasingly, profitable: the company says it crossed a million monthly parcels this summer, with tier-2 and tier-3 towns supplying most of the growth.

The founders credit constraint, not vision. “Scarcity is a better chief technology officer than money,” Malhotra says. “We could not afford inefficiency, so we never learned to tolerate it.”

Their advice to founders in a cautious market is equally austere: build for the customer nobody is courting, price honestly, and treat every rejection as unpaid consulting.



The Indore hub at shift change — growth has meant hiring from the same towns the company serves.

// THE ROAD SO FAR

- 2023** Two desks, one warehouse, 11 founding customers.
- 2024** Shared-route model launches across three states.
- 2025** First profitable quarter; driver-partner programme begins.
- 2026** A million parcels a month — and a very long to-do list.

1M+

parcels moved every month

340

rejections before the first yes

3

states served — and counting

THE NEW LANGUAGE OF LEADERSHIP



// VIKRAM SETHI
Managing Director, Astral Textiles · 38 years in manufacturing

ALN · You run a 38-year-old company in a five-year-old economy. How do you keep the two talking?

By translating, constantly. Our loom operators carry knowledge no sensor has fully captured. Our data team carries questions no operator has had to ask. My job is to make each side legible to the other — leadership has become a language function.

ALN · What did you get wrong?

Speed. I mistook decisiveness for leadership. Some of my fastest decisions were my most expensive. These days I measure myself by the quality of my second thoughts.

ALN · What are young leaders overvaluing?

Visibility. A leader who needs to be seen leading is performing, not leading. The best managers in my company are the ones whose teams barely notice them — until the numbers arrive.

ALN · And what are they getting exactly right?

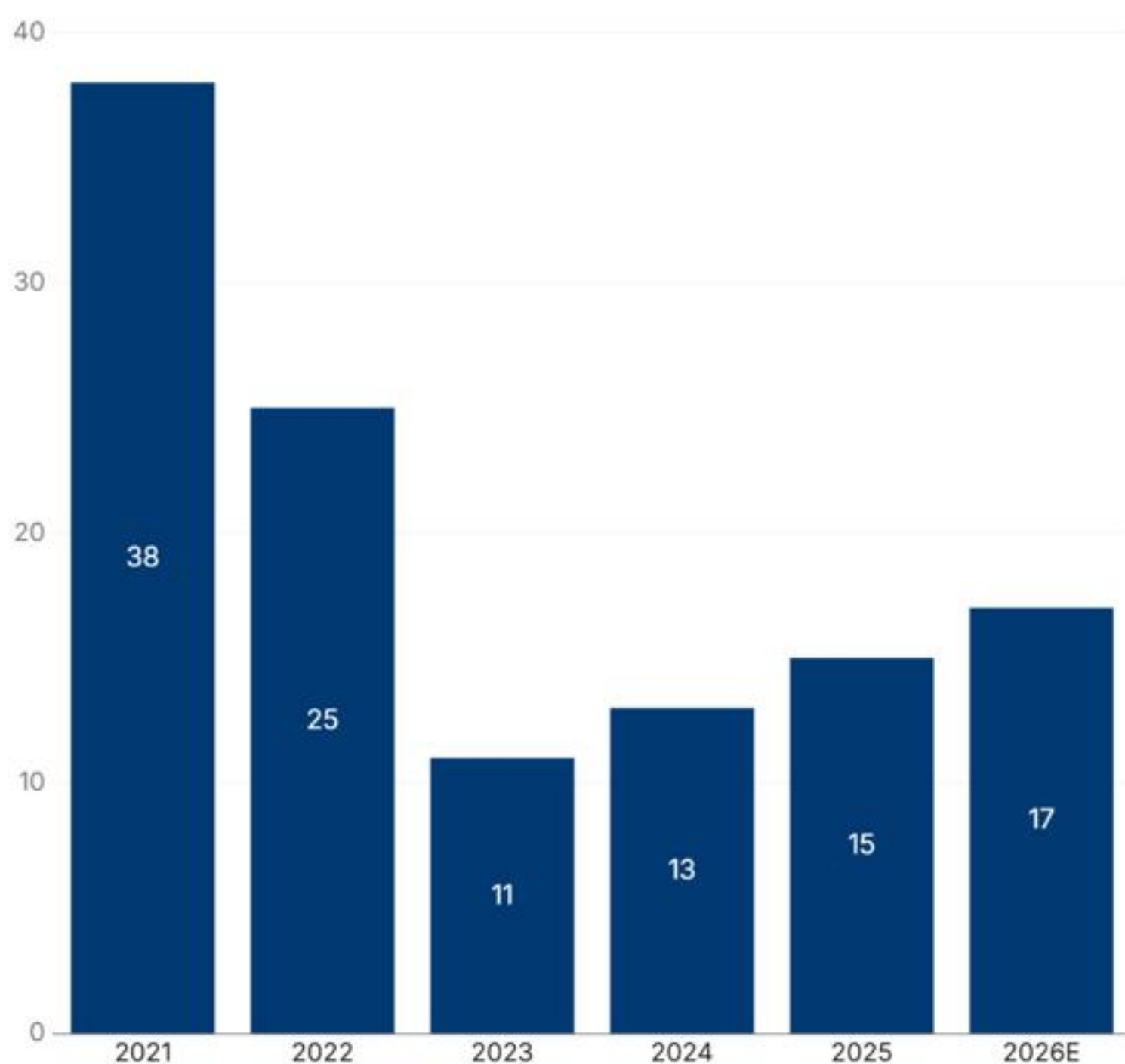
Candour. This generation asks “why” in rooms where we were trained to nod. It slows meetings down. It has also saved us from three genuinely terrible ideas this year alone.

“Leadership used to mean having the answers. Now it means keeping the room honest enough to find them.”

WHERE THE MONEY IS MOVING

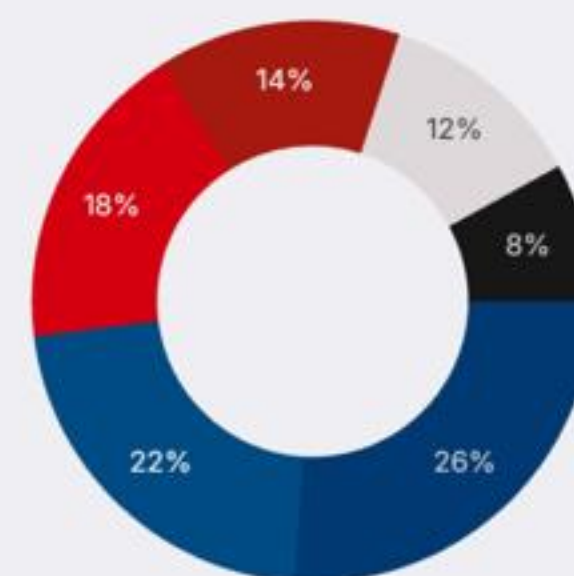
Funding has not vanished — it has grown selective. Cheques are smaller, diligence is longer, and boring companies are suddenly beautiful. A two-chart tour of the new caution.

STARTUP FUNDING INTO INDIA · US\$ BILLION



ALN Research Desk illustrative estimates, August 2026. Rounded figures for editorial use.

H1 2026 · WHERE THE CHEQUES WENT



■ Logistics & supply chain ■ Fintech ■ Climate & energy
■ Healthtech ■ AI & SaaS ■ Other

Illustrative share of deal value, ALN Research Desk.

READ OF THE MONTH

Logistics leading the table would have been unthinkable in 2021. Boring is bankable now — and companies like KargoLane (page 19) are why.



01 PROFITABILITY IS THE NEW PITCH

Decks now lead with contribution margins, not total addressable markets. Founders report term sheets arriving slowly — but sticking.

02 TIER-2 IS THE NEW THESIS

Investors are reading incorporation data from Indore, Coimbatore and Jaipur the way they once read Bengaluru's. The map is redrawing itself.

03 PATIENCE IS THE NEW ALPHA

Funds are publicly preaching seven-year horizons. Whether they hold them is the story we will be reporting all year.

EMERGING VOICES

The most important stories in this issue are the ones with the smallest platforms. A teacher, a coder, a farmer-inventor — this is why the tagline exists.

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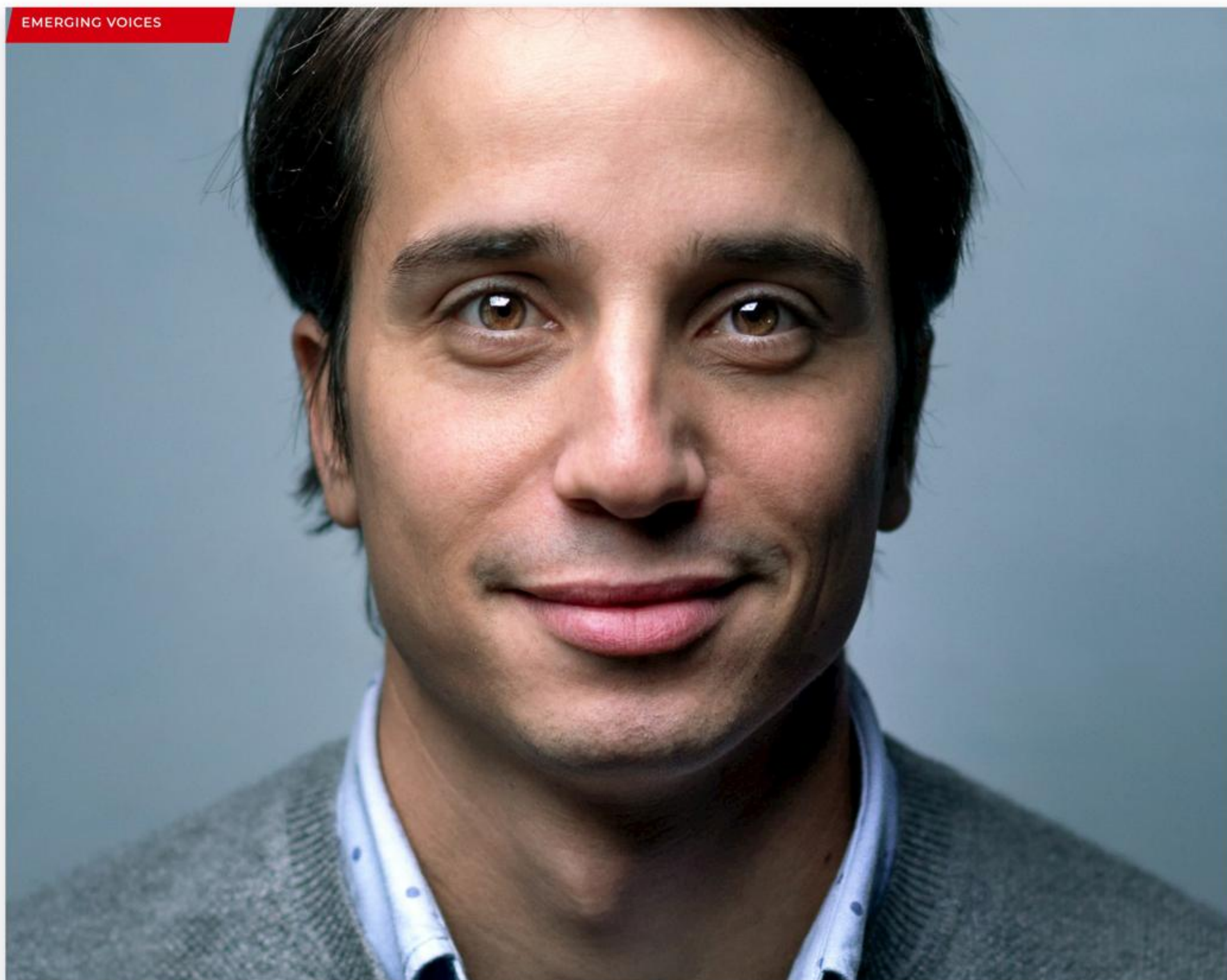
AMPLIFYING THE UNHEARD

AMPLIFYING THE UNHEARD

Kabir Anand taught himself to code on a donated phone in a village with two hours of electricity a day. His irrigation app now serves forty thousand farmers. He had never spoken to a journalist before us.

WORDS • MEERA NAIR PHOTOGRAPHY • DEV PATEL

EMERGING VOICES



Kabir Anand, 24, photographed at his family's farm outside Vidisha. His app, SinchAI, reads pump sensors and village rain gauges to tell farmers when — and when not — to irrigate.

READ ON • PAGE 25

THE GLOBAL NOTEBOOK

Six short dispatches from the places where this issue's themes are already daily life — reported by the ALN contributor network.

// VIDISHA, INDIA

AGRICULTURE

When not to water

Kabir Anand's SinchAI now pings forty thousand farmers. Its most valuable alert, users say, is the one that tells them to do nothing — saving water, diesel and debt in a single vibration.

// LAGOS, NIGERIA

STARTUPS

The logistics of trust

A motorcycle co-operative is building parcel delivery for informal markets where addresses are landmarks. Riders carry reputation scores negotiated in person, not apps.

// SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL

BEAUTY

Shade forty-one

A pharmacy chain's own-label foundation line launched with fifty-one shades — and sold out the darkest eleven first. The waitlist is now the industry's favourite case study.

// JAKARTA, INDONESIA

CINEMA

Subtitles as strategy

An independent studio releases films in seven regional languages on day one. Piracy is down, pride is up, and the "provincial" audience is underwriting the studio's boldest slate.

// NAIROBI, KENYA

AI & SOCIETY

The audit will be televised

A civic-tech collective now live-streams its algorithm audits of public services. Attendance is voluntary, popcorn is present, and officials increasingly show up to watch themselves be reviewed.

// BERLIN, GERMANY

WORK

The four-day ledger

A mittelstand manufacturer published two years of four-day-week accounts: output steady, sick days down, applications up sixfold. The CFO calls it "the cheapest marketing we never bought".

HUMAN-LED, AI-POWERED — AND PROUD OF IT

We keep asking the wrong question about machines. It was never “will they replace us?” It is “what will we finally have time to become?”

EVERY TECHNOLOGY arrives twice: first as a tool, then as a mirror. Artificial intelligence is now in its mirror years — and the reflection is uncomfortable. We built machines to answer, and discovered how rarely we ourselves were asked good questions.

The panic follows a familiar script. The printing press would ruin memory. The calculator would ruin arithmetic. The spreadsheet would ruin accountancy. Each tool did ruin something — usually drudgery — and each time we quietly moved the definition of “real work” one rung up the ladder, from recall to reasoning, from reasoning to judgment.

That ladder has not ended. If anything, the rungs above us are finally visible. When answers become abundant, the valuable things are the ones that cannot be generated on demand: trust, taste, accountability, courage. Notice that none of these can be downloaded.

So let the machines draft, calculate, predict and sort. Let them be brilliant at everything that can be measured. The remainder — choosing what matters, and standing behind the choice — is not a remnant of the old world. It is the promotion we have been postponing for a century.

The future this magazine believes in is not human versus machine. It is human-led and machine-powered — with the emphasis, always, on who leads.



DEVIKA RAO

Columnist, AI Lens News · writes The Long View, monthly

Previously: “The Audit Economy”, “Why Boring Is Bankable”,
“In Praise of Second Thoughts”.

WRITE BACK

Disagree with this column? Good — that is what it is for. Letters to the editor are read, argued over, and the best are printed.

letters@ailensnews.com

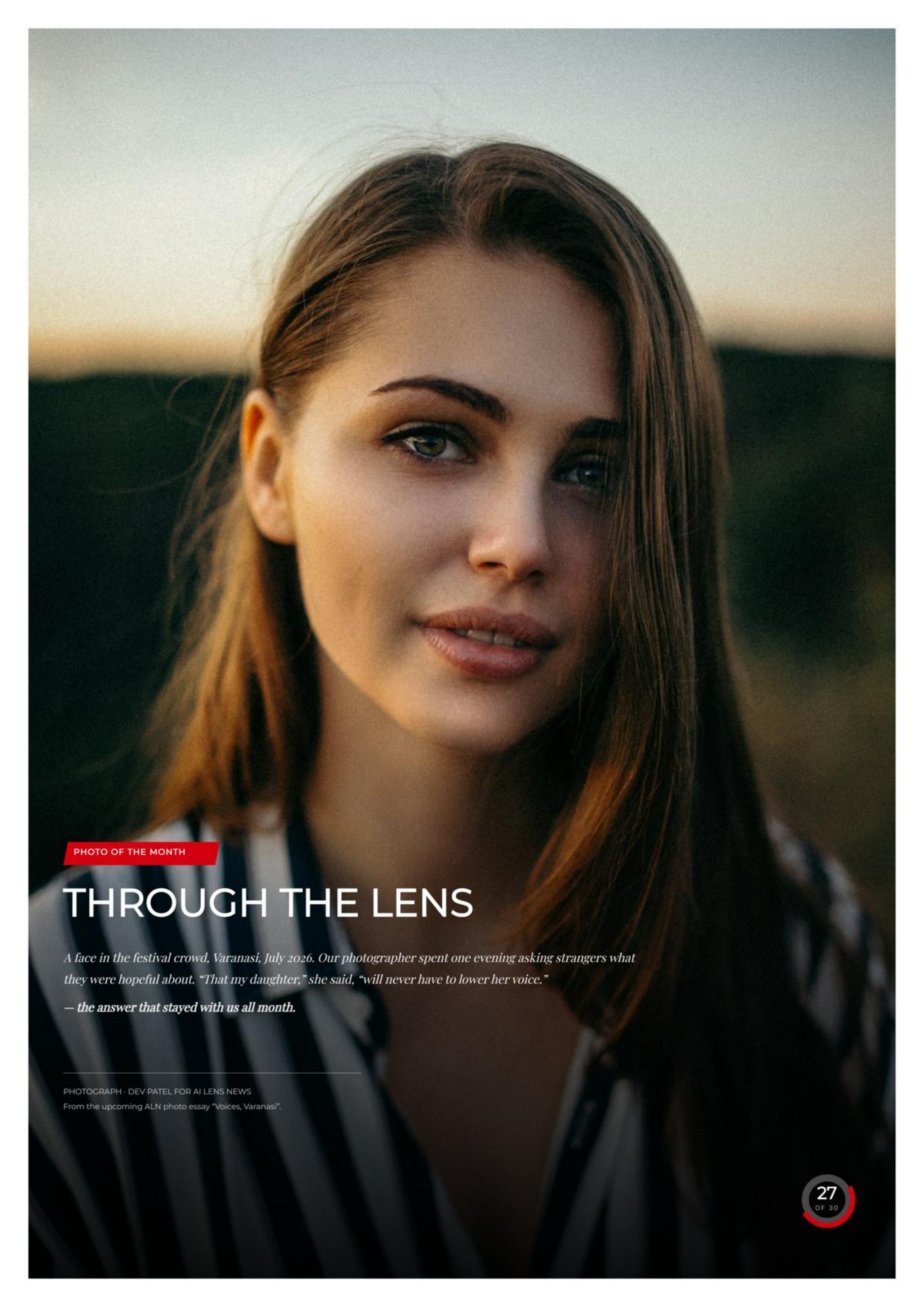


PHOTO OF THE MONTH

THROUGH THE LENS

A face in the festival crowd, Varanasi, July 2026. Our photographer spent one evening asking strangers what they were hopeful about. "That my daughter," she said, "will never have to lower her voice."

— the answer that stayed with us all month.

PHOTOGRAPH · DEV PATEL FOR AI LENS NEWS

From the upcoming ALN photo essay "Voices, Varanasi".

THE LENS INDEX

Every number below appeared somewhere in this issue — a one-page dashboard of August, as measured by our editorial desk.

40

COUNTRIES

acquired the independent film "Monsoon Letters" — a record for Indian indie cinema.

PAGES 11–13

340

REJECTIONS

endured by KargoLane's founders before their first yes — unpaid consulting, they call it.

PAGE 19

40K

FARMERS

receive SinchAI's irrigation alerts — the most valued one says "do nothing today".

PAGE 24

51

SHADES

in the pharmacy foundation line that sold out its darkest eleven first.

PAGE 25

72%

OF LEADERS

in our informal poll say an AI already influences their biggest decisions.

PAGE 07

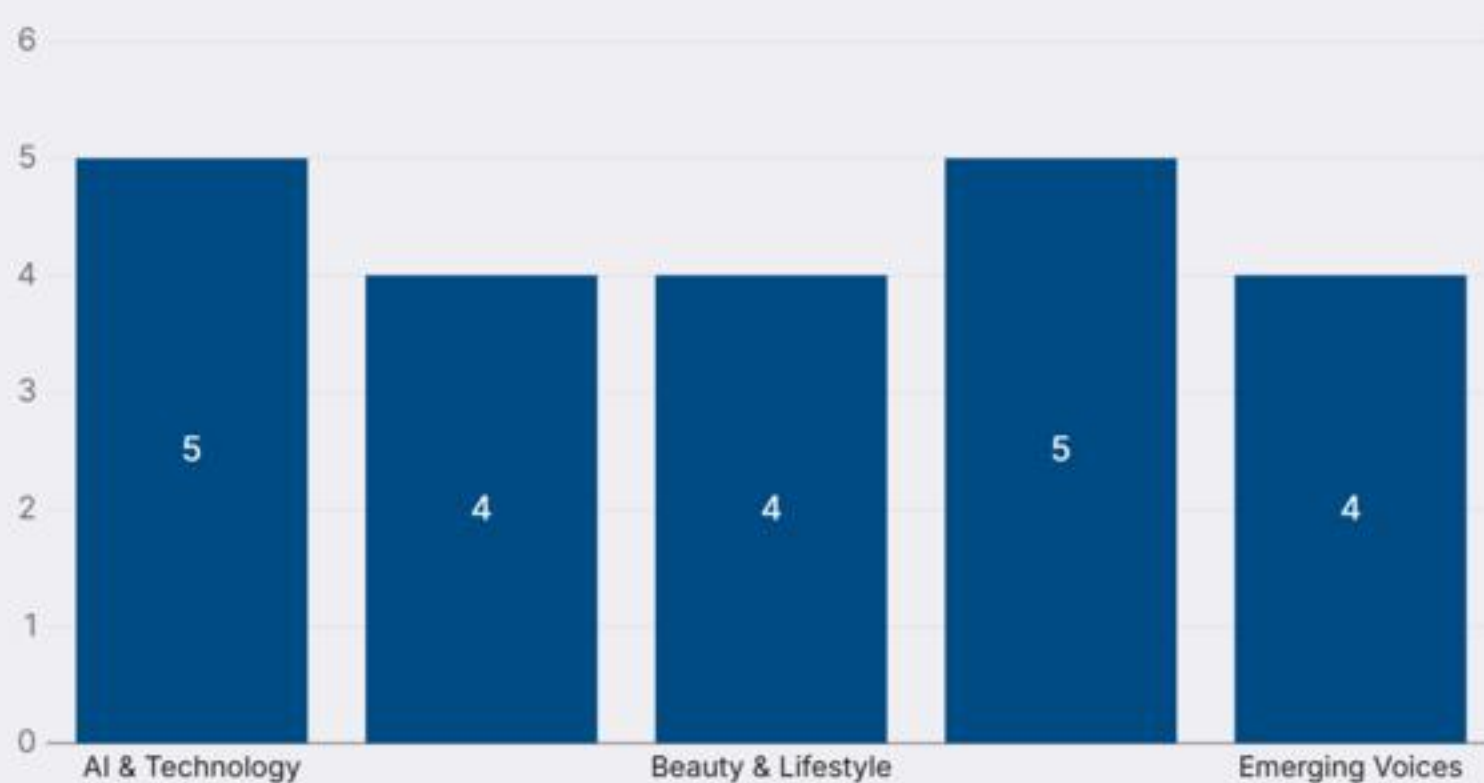
₹20–120Cr

THE MIDDLE

the budget band where Indian cinema's health — and originality — now lives.

PAGE 13

THIS ISSUE, BY SECTION · SHARE OF PAGES



WHY WE COUNT

Numbers are how a magazine keeps itself honest. Each figure in this index is traceable to a story in this issue — and each story, in the end, is about a person the number cannot capture.

Count carefully. Then look up.

// COMING IN SEPTEMBER 2026

THE GREEN INTELLIGENCE ISSUE

Climate tech leaves the conference hall: the founders, farmers and financiers turning sustainability from a slogan into a supply chain.

01 THE CARBON LEDGERS

Inside the audit firms keeping net-zero honest.

02 WATER WARS, WATER WINS

The tanker towns betting on rain intelligence.

03 GREEN PREMIUM, REAL PRICE

What sustainable actually costs — itemised.

ON SCREENS · SEPTEMBER 15, 2026

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