

TWO JOURNEYS, ONE DELUSION



TARITLA PRATEEK RAO

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One
Delusion**

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In the name of faith, in the name of age.

1

Two Journeys, One Delusion

It was a January morning in Delhi, the kind where the fog pressed itself against the windows and refused to leave. The air was thick with the metallic scent of winter, the cold sharp enough to make bones ache. Inside the Kumar household, however, there was warmth—of boiling chai, of ajwain parathas crisping on the tawa, of woolens stacked haphazardly on the bed. There was also the warmth of controlled chaos. The one that gives life to a household when it's full of people who love each other. Two sets of suitcases stood open, two journeys being prepared for with equal seriousness, though their destinations could not have been more different.

Mr. and Mrs. Kumar were leaving for Prayagraj, for the once-in-a-lifetime Mahakumbh Mela. Their children, Rohan and Rhea, were flying to Mumbai for a Coldplay concert. It was a divide that felt almost mythological, as if some cosmic force had split the family into two distinct factions—one seeking salvation, the other spectacle. None could decide which was which.

Yet, in truth, weren't both journeys about the same thing? Both involved thousands gathering in devotion, both required enduring tremendous physical discomfort, both were deeply Instagrammable. Both held supreme class relevance. But the similarities ended there. Kumbh was about spirituality and surrender, about letting go of the self in devotion. Coldplay was about grasping, about claiming an experience and packaging it as cultural currency.

The house smelled of warm food and impending departure, of last-minute additions to already overstuffed bags.

“You have enough socks, Ma. Don't wear two layers of socks, it will make your feet swell like last year, Please,” Rhea sighed, watching her mother stuff another pair into the suitcase.

Mrs. Kumar didn't look up. “The weather changes suddenly near the Sangam. I'll be glad for the extra layers.”

“We're not the ones going Rhea. And there must be some deep reason to voluntarily take that decision to be a part of a potential stampede” Rohan muttered slightly irritated. He was seated on the couch, laptop open, clearing last-minute work emails. Unlike his younger sister, he didn't have the energy to argue anymore.

“As if yours is a civilized crowd. Twenty somethings pretending to be high on life jumping in a stadium. Make sure Mumbai doesn't have an earthquake because of all the stomping.” Mrs. Kumar merely hummed in response, zipping up her suitcase with finality. The great migration of the Kumars was about to begin.

There was a quiet absurdity to the whole thing. Mr. and Mrs. Kumar would leave on a packed train, jostling for space amidst devotees who had given up worldly comforts for this pilgrimage. And yet, wasn't there an irony in the way privileged families approached faith? Their stay wouldn't be in the makeshift tents that lined the ghats; they had booked a "spiritual retreat" that cost more than an average farmer's yearly income. The Kumars were the class of people most of India aspired for. Kumbh, like everything else in India, was segmented by class, neatly divided between those who experienced it as a test of endurance and those who observed it as an aesthetic. The rich came to witness faith; the poor came to live it.

Coldplay was no different. The "regular" tickets had sold out in minutes, and now only the exorbitantly priced VIP passes remained. For most attendees, it wasn't just about the music. It was about being seen at Coldplay, about proving—through photos, stories, and check-ins—that they were part of the cultural elite. The concert itself was secondary, a mere backdrop to the performance of status. Even in the cold fog of the morning, the distinctions were clear. Mr. Kumar, adjusting the straps of his leather bag, had the look of a man preparing for a great spiritual journey. Rhea, double-checking her Dior tote, had the air of someone preparing for a different kind of pilgrimage—one of neon lights and perfectly timed Instagram reels.

In a way, neither was truly excited. They had convinced themselves that they were.

There was a particular breed of middle-class Indian discomfort that both journeys required. It was the same

discomfort that people willingly embraced when they stood in line for hours at temples, when they pushed through suffocating crowds at religious gatherings, when they endured sleepless nights in sleeper trains to reach their holy destinations.

And it was the same discomfort that the elite, too, had begun to fetishize—except theirs came with air travel, curated itineraries, and overpriced merchandise. Waiting in long lines at immigration was framed as an adventure. Standing for six hours in a sea of sweaty bodies at a music festival was considered an experience. Struggling for breath at high-altitude treks was seen as “spiritual.” Skydiving and rock climbing in South Asia was “finding oneself”. Discomfort, when chosen, became a badge of honor. When imposed, it was suffering.

And so, both generations had trained themselves to love their respective hardships. Mr. Kumar had convinced himself that dipping in the freezing Ganga would be a moment of divine transcendence, not a shock to his aging bones. Rhea had convinced herself that standing in a packed stadium for hours, straining to hear a British man sing about paradise, would be a life-changing experience, not an overpriced ordeal.

Both were about faith—faith that the suffering was worth it, that it would mean something in the end. Faith in an outside force to heal their inner chaos. Faith in others’ faith since they also have decided to come together for this supposed renaissance. Faith as a placebo to fight inner demons.

The train to Prayagraj was leaving around the same time as the flight to Mumbai. The bags were packed, the goodbyes were brief. Soon, the Kumars would step into their respective discomforts, trying to extract meaning from the chaos.

Maybe, in some way, they would succeed.

2

The Irony of Faith and Spectacle

The New Delhi Railway Station was drowning in a fog so thick that the overhead announcements felt like voices from another realm. Mr. and Mrs. Kumar had managed to find their seats after a polite but firm territorial negotiation with another couple who had mysteriously been assigned the same berths. They too were headed to the Kumbh. Surprising how Bhagwan can bring people together to reach a negotiation. Mutual respect for each other for going to the Kumbh outweighs assigned seats, confirmed seats that are a rarity in a country like ours.

“This always happens,” Mr. Kumar muttered, adjusting the newspaper under his arm. “Railways should fix their system. But Mahakumbh is a big big deal, maybe some chaos is expected. *Thoda kasht toh sehna padega* (Some pain has to be endured for the Lord).”

Mr. Kumar, ever the problem solver, immediately WhatsApped a forwarded message about train ticket scams to their Kumar Family Group, accompanied by a folded hands emoji. It was duly acknowledged by five blue ticks but no replies.

The other passengers were settling in, each one carrying the weight of their own version of faith. There was a group of sadhus wrapped in saffron, discussing the merits of different bathing ghats. A businessman in a puffer jacket, balancing a plate of samosas on his lap, scrolled through stock market updates. A young woman in Nike sweatpants FaceTimed her mother, complaining about how the train bathrooms were “literally hell.” There was also a section of very young teens and early twenty year olds that were the most obsessive in their outreach to the Kumbh and were vocal too. Chants of “Jai Shri Baba, Jai Shambhoo ...” And others were frequent, sometimes just to catch attention of the people around. As if it was a sign on machismo or sadly even sometimes of religious fanaticism that was seen as cool by a certain section.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Kumar was staring out the window, where the fog had thickened into an impenetrable white wall. She felt a strange unease, as if the fog had seeped into her mind. Why am I even doing this? she wondered. She wasn't a particularly religious person. Sure, she visited temples occasionally, but mostly out of habit or social obligation. The Kumbh, though, felt different. It felt like a performance—one she wasn't sure she was ready for.

“Do you think we'll actually feel... something?” she asked her husband, breaking her silence.

Mr. Kumar looked up from his phone, startled. “Of course we will. It’s the Mahakumbh. Millions of people can’t be wrong.”

“Millions of people also voted for Trump,” Mrs. Kumar muttered under her breath.

Mr. Kumar nodded politely, though his mind was elsewhere. He was scrolling through his phone, where his niece had sent her a viral reel of a “sadhvi influencer” meditating by the Ganga. The caption read: “Spiritual Glow-Up: From Corporate Slave to Divine Goddess.” Mr. Kumar couldn’t decide whether to feel inspired or insulted.

It was not just a cultural and age gap that defined the audiences for the two events. There were enough young people who were as enamoured by Mahakumbh as were the middle aged and the Sadhus. There was an IITian baba who was attracting crowds, not just because he was a bigger saint than others but being an IIT grad “what he had given up to become an ascetic etc etc .“ There were reels being made for beautiful tapasvis who were thronging the mela and grabbed eyeballs for the same reason any beautiful person did on online apps. Just that a Sadhvi or Tapasvi being beautiful was attractive and viral because religion and spirituality was never mixed with glamour until now, now in the age of social media rampage everything was driven by Look-ism. How things looked was more important, almost always. Thus this conundrum is reflective of age of cultural unitarianism that forced micro-groups and macro-movements, even if fleeting, to become apparent locations and events of mass perceived catharsis.

Meanwhile, at Terminal 2 of Indira Gandhi International Airport, Rhea was in her element. She had perfected the art of looking effortlessly glamorous while traveling, a skill she had honed through countless hours of studying influencer tutorials. Her Balenciaga sneakers gleamed under the fluorescent lights, and her Rimowa cabin bag was positioned just so, as if it had casually wandered into the frame.

“Okay, guys, so we’re off to Mumbai for Coldplay, and I cannot EVEN,” she gushed into her phone, flipping the camera to show the bustling airport behind her. “This is going to be, like, the most iconic night of our lives. Don’t forget to smash that like button and follow for more!”

Rohan, seated nearby, rolled his eyes. “You do realize Coldplay is a band, right? Not a lifestyle brand. You’re acting like you’re front row at the Met Gala.”

She ignored him, her mind already whirring with possible TikTok edits. Somewhere between planning outfit transitions and scouting the best airport café for an aesthetic cappuccino shot, a thought struck her: Maybe this was her calling. Maybe she didn’t want to just go to Coldplay. Maybe she wanted people to see her at Coldplay. Influencers were the new old money, after all.

“What do you think of the term ‘soft life’?” she asked suddenly, turning to Rohan.

“What?”

“You know, the aesthetic lifestyle. Like, good skincare, minimalist luxury, passive income.”

Rohan gave her a long look. “You mean being rich?”

Rhea sighed. He didn’t get it.

Rohan shifted in his seat, adjusting the noise-canceling headphones around his neck. The hum of the airplane was oddly soothing, a white noise that drowned out the small talk of excited concert-goers. He stared out of the window, watching the vast stretch of clouds below, and felt a familiar mix of superiority and reluctant anticipation.

Coldplay in Mumbai. He had been to real concerts—the kind that weren’t trying so hard to be an event. Madison Square Garden. The Hollywood Bowl. Even that tiny rooftop gig in Brooklyn where the opening act was a nobody, and now they were headlining Glastonbury. The sheer intimacy of those performances had been electrifying. This, though? This was India trying to prove itself.

He scrolled through Twitter—#ColdplayMumbai was trending. People were posting about “the greatest night of their lives” before it had even happened. That was the problem, wasn’t it? People weren’t here for the music. They were here for the story. The proof of experience. The West got concerts. India got happenings.

And yet, he was here.

Wasn’t he above this? He told himself that he was only coming along to see how India did things, to compare, to

critique. And yet, there was something else, something nagging at the edges of his cynicism.

Maybe, deep down, he wanted to be swept up in it. Maybe, despite all his complaints, he still wanted to feel that rush when the first chord rang out, when the crowd roared in unison, when for a few fleeting hours, a stadium became a world.

Maybe he wasn't so different from them after all.

By the time both sets of parents and children had settled into their respective discomforts—train compartments that smelled of old upholstery and desperation, airplane cabins filled with overpriced perfume and recycled air—they had also begun their self-justifications.

Mr. Kumar, struggling to sleep on a berth too thin for comfort, reminded herself that this was a divine test, that enduring hardship was part of the pilgrimage.

Rhea, adjusting her posture in the narrow airplane seat, reminded herself that this was luxury, that she was on her way to an elite cultural experience.

And so, both generations lied to themselves. Both held on to their illusions of significance. Both were slightly uncomfortable, yet convinced it was worth it.



By the time the Kumars arrived in Prayagraj, the city had transformed into a sprawling carnival of faith. The streets were lined with makeshift stalls selling everything from rudraksha malas to LED-lit tridents. Sadhus in saffron robes mingled with tourists in designer athleisure, creating a surreal blend of the sacred and the borderline profane.

Mrs. Kumar felt a pang of guilt as their chauffeur-driven SUV navigated the narrow lanes. They passed families sleeping on the sidewalks, their belongings wrapped in thin plastic sheets.

“Should we have stayed in a tent?” she asked her husband, half-joking.

Her privilege was overbearing at the sight of houses on side of the road selling merchandise for the Kumbh, wanting to exploit the economic opportunity in the theistic fervour.

Mr. Kumar shook his head. “Don’t be ridiculous. We’re not here to prove anything. We’re here to... experience.”

Their “luxury spiritual retreat” was a far cry from the austerity of the Kumbh. The resort boasted a spa, a yoga studio, and a “Ganga-view restaurant” where the waiters wore tunics embroidered with Om symbols.

As they checked in, Mrs. Kumar couldn’t help but notice the irony. They had come to renounce worldly comforts, only to be surrounded by more luxury than they had at home.

The first dip in the Ganga was scheduled for dawn. Mr. Kumar had read online that the “auspicious window” for bathing was between 5:17 and 5:43 a.m.

“We can’t miss it,” he said, setting three alarms on his phone. He didn’t need all of them though. His excitement made him get up at 4:30 and it was like a child preparing for a picnic day from school.

When the time came, they joined a throng of devotees making their way to the ghats. The air was thick with the smell of incense and sweat, the sound of bells and chants blending into a cacophony of devotion. Mrs. Kumar felt a strange sense of detachment, as if she were watching the scene from afar.

As they waded into the freezing water, Mr. Kumar closed his eyes and whispered a prayer. Mrs. Kumar, however, found herself distracted by the sight of a young man taking a selfie mid-dip. The man’s phone was encased in a waterproof pouch, his smile perfectly framed against the rising sun.

“Do you think he’s here for the ‘gram or for God?” Mrs. Kumar muttered to her husband.

“Maybe both,” he replied, his eyes still closed. “Isn’t that what faith is about these days?”



Back in Mumbai, the Coldplay concert was reaching its crescendo. The stadium was a sea of glowing wristbands, synchronized to the beat of the music. Rhea was in her element, dancing with abandon as she filmed herself for her Instagram story.

Rohan, however, was having a crisis of conscience. The music was good—great, even—but he couldn't shake the feeling that he was part of something hollow. The crowd's enthusiasm felt performative, their cheers less about the music and more about the spectacle.

“Why do we do this?” he shouted to Rhea over the noise.

“Do what?” she shouted back, not taking her eyes off her phone.

“This!” he gestured to the crowd. “Spend thousands of rupees to stand in a stadium and watch a band we could listen to on Spotify for free!”

Rhea paused her recording and turned to him, her expression a mix of pity and exasperation. “It's not about the music, Rohan. It's about the experience. The memories. The... vibes.”

“The vibes?” Rohan repeated, incredulous.

“Yes, the vibes,” Rhea said firmly. “You're overthinking this. Just let go and enjoy it.”

As the band launched into “Fix You,” Rohan felt a lump in his throat. The song had always been a favorite of his, a

reminder of simpler times. He closed his eyes, letting the music wash over him. For a moment, he forgot about the Instagram posts, the overpriced tickets, the performative nature of it all. For a moment, he was just a man in a crowd, lost in the music.

And then Rhea elbowed him. “Quick, take a video of me crying! This is going to be so emotional.”

Rohan sighed. Some things never changed.

3

The Meaning in the Milieu

As the Kumars made their way back to their resort, they were silent, each lost in their own thoughts. Mr. Kumar felt a sense of accomplishment, as if he had checked off a box on some cosmic to-do list. Mrs. Kumar, however, felt only emptiness. The dip in the Ganga had been cold and uncomfortable, but it hadn't brought her the spiritual awakening she had hoped for.

“Do you think we'll ever find what we're looking for?” she asked her husband as they sipped chai on their balcony.

Mr. Kumar hesitated. “Maybe not. But isn't the search itself what matters?”

Meanwhile, Rohan and Rhea were sitting in a Mumbai café, decompressing after the concert. Rhea was busy editing her Instagram posts, while Rohan stared into his coffee, lost in thought.

“Do you ever feel like we’re all just... pretending?” he asked suddenly.

Rhea looked up from her phone. “Pretending what?”

“I don’t know. Like we’re all just playing roles—at concerts, at pilgrimages, on social media. Like nothing is real anymore.”

Rhea considered this for a moment. “Maybe. But isn’t that what makes it fun? Life’s a performance, Rohan. You just have to learn to enjoy the show. Every man an actor on this stage . . .”



The Mahakumbh Mela was in full swing, and the banks of the Ganga were teeming with humanity. Amidst the chaos, two figures stood out—not for their saffron robes or their Instagram-ready poses, but for their quiet dignity. One was a tall, lean man with a neatly trimmed beard, dressed in a simple white tunic. The other was shorter, stockier, and wore a look of perpetual contemplation.

They were, of course, Seneca and Marcus Aurelius—time travelers, philosophers, and unlikely attendees of the Mahakumbh.

“I must admit,” Seneca said, surveying the scene, “this is not what I expected when you suggested a ‘spiritual retreat.’”

Marcus Aurelius smiled faintly. “And yet, is it not fascinating? Millions of souls, each seeking something greater than themselves. Is that not the essence of philosophy?”

Seneca raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps. But I can’t help but notice the... commercialization of it all. Look at that man over there, selling ‘blessed’ water bottles for five hundred rupees. Is this what faith has become?”

Marcus Aurelius nodded thoughtfully. “The external trappings of faith may change, but the inner longing remains the same. These people are not so different from the citizens of Rome, seeking solace in temples and rituals.”

“True,” Seneca conceded. “But there is a danger in mistaking the ritual for the reality. As I once wrote, ‘Religion is regarded by the common people as true, by the wise as false, and by the rulers as useful.’”

Marcus Aurelius chuckled. “You always did have a way with words. But tell me, Seneca, do you not see value in this collective experience? In the shared sense of purpose, however fleeting?”

Seneca sighed. “I suppose there is something to be said for the unity of it all. But I worry that it is merely a distraction—a way to avoid confronting the deeper questions of existence.”

“Perhaps,” Marcus Aurelius agreed. “But is that not the human condition? To seek meaning in the external, even as we ignore the internal?”

As they spoke, a young man approached them, holding out his phone. “Excuse me, can I take a selfie with you two? You look so... wise.”

Seneca and Marcus Aurelius exchanged a bemused glance.

“By all means,” Seneca said dryly. “Though I must warn you, wisdom is not always photogenic.”

The young man snapped the photo and hurried off, already uploading it to Instagram with the caption: “Met these two legends at the Kumbh. #Blessed #SpiritualVibes.”

Marcus Aurelius shook his head. “It seems even we are not immune to the allure of spectacle.”

“Indeed,” Seneca replied. “But let us not judge too harshly. After all, as you once wrote, ‘The soul becomes dyed with the color of its thoughts.’ Perhaps this young man’s soul is merely reflecting the world he inhabits.”

Marcus Aurelius nodded. “A fair point. And perhaps our presence here is a reminder—not just to him, but to ourselves—that true wisdom lies not in the external, but in the internal.”

As they walked away from the ghats, the sounds of chanting and commerce fading behind them, Seneca turned to Marcus Aurelius. “So, what now? Shall we return to our respective centuries, or shall we explore this strange new world a little longer?”

Marcus Aurelius smiled. “Let us stay awhile. After all, as you once said, ‘Life is long, if you know how to use it.’”

Seneca laughed. “Touché, my friend. Touché.”

The Coldplay concert in Mumbai was a sensory overload—neon lights, pulsating music, and a sea of glowing wristbands synchronized to the beat. Buddha and Alain de Botton, had decided to experience the spectacle for themselves.

Buddha, serene and barefoot, looked around with a gentle smile. Alain de Botton, ever the modern philosopher, adjusted his glasses and muttered, “This is either the height of human connection or the epitome of performative culture. I can’t decide.”

Alain, arms crossed, surveyed the crowd with a mix of curiosity and disdain. “I must admit, I didn’t expect philosophy to lead me here.”

Buddha, ever the pragmatist, replied, “Every experience is an opportunity for reflection. Even this.”

As the opening chords of “Viva La Vida” filled the stadium, the crowd erupted into cheers. Buddha closed his eyes, letting the music wash over him. Alain de Botton pulled out his notebook, scribbling furiously.

“What are you writing?” Buddha asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Observations,” Alain replied. “This is a fascinating case study in modern tribalism. Thousands of people, united by a shared love for a British band. It’s almost... religious.”

Buddha opened his eyes and smiled. “Music has always been a path to transcendence. But tell me, Alain, do you think these people are truly present in the moment, or are they merely chasing an illusion?”

Alain hesitated. “I think they’re chasing both. The music is real, but the experience is mediated—through social media, through the need to document and share. It’s a paradox.”

Buddha smiled faintly. “And yet, is it not fascinating? Thousands of souls, each seeking something greater than themselves. Is that not the essence of human longing?”

Alain nodded, though his expression was skeptical. “Perhaps. But I can’t help but notice the... performative nature of it all. Look at that woman over there, filming herself crying during ‘Fix You.’ Is this what love has become?”

Buddha’s gaze followed Alain’s to a young woman holding her phone aloft, tears streaming down her face as she lip-synced to the lyrics. “The trappings of love may change,” he said gently, “but the longing remains the same. These people are not so different from the seekers of ancient times, yearning for connection and meaning.”

“True,” Alain conceded. “But there’s a danger in mistaking the performance for the reality. As I’ve written, modern love is often less about the other person and more about

the story we tell ourselves. We fall in love with the idea of love, not the person.”

Buddha nodded. “And yet, is that not a form of suffering? The attachment to an idea, the craving for an experience that can never fully satisfy?”

Alain sighed. “You’re right, of course. But isn’t there also something beautiful in it? In the way people try, however clumsily, to connect? To feel something, even if it’s fleeting?”

Buddha’s expression softened. “There is beauty in the attempt, yes. But there is also pain. The pain of unmet expectations, of unfulfilled desires. This is the nature of dukkha—the suffering that arises from attachment.”

“But . . .”, exclaimed Alain.

Buddha interjected softly, “Joy is fleeting by nature. The question is not whether it lasts, but whether it is genuine.”

As the band launched into “Fix You,” the crowd swayed in unison, their glowing wristbands creating a sea of light. Alain de Botton turned to Buddha. “What do you think of all this? Is it enlightenment or escapism?”

Buddha smiled. “It is neither. It is simply what it is. The music, the lights, the crowd—they are neither good nor bad. They simply exist. It is our attachment to them that creates suffering.”

Alain raised an eyebrow. “So, you’re saying we should enjoy the concert without... enjoying it?”

Buddha chuckled. “I am saying that true freedom lies in detachment. Enjoy the music, but do not cling to it. Experience the moment, but do not demand that it last.”

Alain de Botton nodded, scribbling in his notebook. “That’s going in the book.”

As the concert reached its climax, the philosophers stood in silence, each lost in their own thoughts. Buddha found solace in the unity of the crowd. He remained serene, untouched by the chaos. And Alain de Botton? He was already drafting a lecture titled “Coldplay and the Meaning of Life”, meanwhile feeling a grudging admiration for the spectacle

4

Home

After several days, both sets of travelers returned to the warm chaos of the Kumar household. Suitcases unpacked, souvenirs—and dirty laundry—spilled across the living-room floor. Over dinner of dal, roti, and piping-hot chai, they swapped tales.

Mrs. Kumar spoke hesitantly about the first dip in the Ganga—how she felt an initial jolt of excitement, followed by confusion. “I’m still not sure if I found ‘spiritual awakening,’ but... I did realize how small I am in the grand scheme of things.” For her it was a revelation of the biggest questions that life had thrown at her in a while. Who was she? Was she living a duality? Was she ever honest, even in her thoughts to herself? All these material years spent as a mother, caretaker, wife, giver did she ever want to do only that? Weren’t there things she would have enjoyed along with? She was happy though that these journeys had brought a more friendly undercurrent to the house.

Mr. Kumar, more practical, bragged (with a laugh) that at least he didn't catch pneumonia, while acknowledging he felt a strange mix of humility and indulgence. "We stayed in a five-star retreat, yet prayed among millions who slept on the ground. It's complicated." He wished he could actually tell them how he felt. Can he break the mould of the all-knowing strict father who's slowly turning into a bigot who believes WhatsApp forwards to actually tell his family how sometimes he feels insecure, fearful and sometimes he also needs affirmation and safety nets ?

Rhea recounted the spectacle of Coldplay—her voice brightening as she described the neon wristbands and electric crowd. "But you know, the best part was that one quiet moment during 'Fix You.' I actually felt something real. Then I took a video of it," she added, with a sheepish grin. Rhea saw her parents for possibly the first time. After the long and arduous spectacle they came back bare and true, without masks. This seemed possibly more important than Coldplay, more important than her Dior tote. She was seeing cracks in the characters adorned by all adults in the garb of adults-cant-be-soft syndrome that grips almost all of India. She was happy to see, for once.

Rohan admitted he'd been secretly carried away by the music. "I'd gone there ready to mock the superficiality, but I—" He shrugged. "I felt connected. Even if we were all trying to show off on social media, the music itself broke through. At least for a second." *Shut Up !!* He thought to himself. Why are you blabbering mushily in front of your family. What will Rhea think of him ? But Rohan didn't care, atleast for today, he felt he needed to release in order

to move on from trappings of being the oh-so-important NRI who couldn't accept his own country. He was relaxed, at last he was home.

Somewhere between sips of chai and bites of paratha, laughter bubbled up in the Kumar household. They realized the inherent comedy: the pious pilgrims who stayed in luxury, the skeptical music lovers who still thirsted for a transcendent chord. Each had faced discomfort—be it a freezing dip or a sweltering stadium—and come out clinging to some ephemeral sense of meaning.

“In the end, we're all a bit delusional,” Rohan joked.

“True. But maybe that's what keeps us going,” Mrs. Kumar replied, smiling at her son.

Their phone notifications blinked with new highlights from extended family, friends, and acquaintances—endless reels from the Kumbh or the concert, each angled to convey a perfect moment. But there, in the intimate chaos of their dining table, the Kumars found something less performative: each other.

In the end, both the Mahakumbh and the Coldplay concert were attempts to fill a void—a void created by the relentless pace of modern life, the constant pressure to perform, to prove, to perfect.

Perhaps the real pilgrimage is not to a holy river or a neon-lit stadium, but to the quiet corners of our own hearts.

Perhaps the real spectacle is not the one we capture on our phones, but the one we experience in the moment.

And perhaps, in the end, the only thing that truly matters is the love we share, the connections we forge, and the memories we create—not for the ‘gram, but for ourselves, our true-selves.





About the Author

Prateek is a writer, musician, keen observer, and civil servant. He explores topics that intrigue him, aiming to create an impact—one person at a time. His writing delves into ideas he finds compelling, hoping they resonate with others as well.

A self-taught singer and guitarist, he composes songs inspired by his experiences. His passion for photography allows him to capture moments with an observant eye, often seeking the stories hidden within each frame.

Prateek's journey is shaped by his calling. An IAS officer from the 2021 batch and a former IRTS officer, he follows where his duty takes him. Academically, he holds an engineering degree from NIT Surathkal and an MBA from IIM Calcutta.