Stars vs AI: Dhruv Anand speaks to ToI about personality rights and the intent behind protecting them

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Partner Litigation, Dhruv Anand, spoke to Times of India for its dive-deep article on 'Stars v AI' giving a 360 degree roundup of what actually makes for personality rights, what kind of misuse is actionable, the earliest known case in this domain, how AI makes it all the more 'surreal' and why a suit filed by a celebrity is not always about money.

One of the key counsel in matters concerning protection of personality rights of legendary actors such as Amitabh Bachchan, Aishwarya Rai, Anil Kapoor, Abhishek Bachchan, Jackie Shroff, Mohan Babu and Vishnu Manchu, Dhruv told ToI, *"Almost every case has the same categories of misuse but the most egregious is pornography. Next is impersonation through chatbots. A chatbot spoke as if you are talking to Aishwarya Rai...This wasn't fan art but a way to dupe innocent people in her name".*

He also spoke about domestic distress that can result from morphed images.

Dhruv tracked back to one of the earliest cases dating back to 2010 in the personality rights domain. Also handled by Anand and Anand, it had us moving court against the defendant who had made a doll that danced and sang like iconic singer-performer Daler Mehndi on the press of a button.

"...judgement in that case became India's first detailed ruling on personality rights. It defined misuse, cited international precedents, carved out exceptions, and issued an injunction. That laid the foundation."

Dhruv also talked about behind-the-scenes relentless enforcement with celebrities hiring investigators who can scan the internet, capture metadata and flag misuse while adding that genuine humour or news is never a target. *"What we target is commercial exploitation or anything defamatory or pornographic. That's where clients get emotional,"* while pointing out how personality rights have evolved into property rights in the West while India treats them as abstract reputational rights.

He also appreciated how courts are now going far with steps to curb such infringement.

Clone banega crorepati? It's stars v/s AI in courts

For decades, imitation was the sincerest form of flattery. Now it's the newest form of violation, and celebs are fighting back

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Meri awaaz hi meri pehchaan hai,' sang Lata Mangeshkar. But what happens when that awaaz is stolen by an algorithm? After AI-generated clips of Kumar Sanu went viral, the singer whose voice defined '90s Bollywood found himself fighting a legal battle for something he hadn't imagined: the ownership of his voice.

For decades, Sanu was the voice others tried desperately to sound like. Performers built entire stage acts 'singing like Sanu', and he never had a problem with it. Until now. "The tipping point came when AI-generated and morphed content began circulating online falsely claiming that he had sung for Pakistan's former Prime Minister Imran Khan," says his counsel Sana Raees Khan. "He was brutally trolled."

For Sanu, it stopped being funny the moment it stopped being human. "My voice is a gift I've nurtured. To suddenly see it being recreated by a machine, without soul or permission, felt like a violation," he told TOI.

In Delhi high court, Khan's team presented edited videos, morphed visuals and AI-generated voice clones lifted from Sanu's songs and promotions and tweaked into "mocking, misleading, or vulgar" memes, Giphy clips, and reels to drive clicks. "These weren't harmless fan edits," says Khan. "Several disparaging URLs were exploiting his decades of artistic legacy to drive engagement without permission or context."

Delhi HC issued an interim injunction last month, protecting his name, voice, likeness and signature. "Many have now been taken down. A singer's voice isn't just an asset, it's their identity," says Khan, now preparing a similar case for actor Raveena Tandon. "Legal recognition ensures that artistry and identity remain in the hands of the rightful owner," she adds.

AI voice-cloning apps have made it so absurdly easy that any bathroom singer with a smartphone and app can suddenly belt out a song like Asha Bhosle or Arijit Singh. The misuse finally pushed both playback singers — Singh in 2024 and Bhosle this October — to head to Bombay high court, which granted interim protection restraining AI platforms and instant voice-cloning apps from using their voice, name or image without consent.

If the singers feared losing control over their voice, the Bachchans faced something darker. Aishwarya Rai found her face used in pornographic deepfakes. Her husband Abhishek found himself cloned, marketed, and memed. The Delhi HC stepped in, ordering takedowns and restraining multiple defendants from using their names, initials ('ARB' and 'AB'), photos, likeness, voice, performances or any identifiable trait — via AI tools, deepfakes, face-morphing or chatbots — for commercial or even personal use without consent. The court also barred merchandise featuring them and directed platforms to remove the offending URLs within 72 hours and disclose who was behind them.

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>
> **Dhruv Anand,** LAWYER



Behind this cleanup is Dhruv Anand, partner at Anand & Anand, a go-to counsel for Bollywood's battles with their digital clones. "Almost every case has the same categories of misuse," he says. "But the most egregious is pornography." Next is impersonation through chatbots pretending to be them. "A chatbot spoke as if you're talking to Aishwarya Rai... This wasn't fan art but a way to dupe innocent people of money in her name."

Then comes the merchandising hustle — mugs, ashtrays, tees printed with celebrity faces — and what Anand calls the "general defamatory kind" that may not be explicit but "suggestive or demeaning."

"Everyone knows Aishwarya was once in a relationship with Salman Khan and is now married," he says. "To circulate morphed images of her holding hands or kissing him can cause serious personal harm and domestic distress."

Personality rights in India aren't new, but they've never been this contested. Anand says one of the earliest cases dates back to 2010. "Someone made a doll that danced and sang like Daler Mehndi on the press of a button," he recalls. "Justice Ravindra Bhat's judgment in that case became India's first detailed ruling on personality rights," recalls Anand. "It defined misuse, cited international precedents, carved out exceptions, and issued an injunction. That laid the foundation."

The next big case was in 2022, when Amitabh Bachchan sued over fake Kaun Banega Crorepati lottery scams and secured a sweeping injunction against misuse of his name, voice, image, and even identifiable traits. "When we filed Mr Bachchan's case, it triggered awareness," says Anand. Soon after, in 2023, Anil Kapoor secured a ruling restraining the unauthorised use of his name, voice, image, and even the way he says 'jhakaas'. In 2024, Jackie Shroff asked the court to block misuse of his persona, including his catchphrase 'bhidu'.

Since then, an entire battalion of Bollywood stars have marched into court: Besides Sanu and the Bachchans, there is Karan Johar, Akshay Kumar, Hrithik Roshan, and Nagarjuna.

Recent rulings have widened what counts as 'identity', to no longer include just names and voices, but even signature gestures and mannerisms. In Akshay Kumar's case, Bombay HC observed that today's deepfakes are so "sophisticated and deceptive" that it's nearly impossible to tell they aren't real. Kumar approached the court after videos surfaced showing him as UP CM Yogi Adityanath and another making inflammatory remarks about Rishi Valmiki that triggered protests.

But what legal box do such cases even fall into? "These matters usually straddle multiple areas... defamation, intellectual property, and even privacy," explains Khan. "When a celebrity's image or voice is used for commercial gain without consent, it's both a moral and legal wrong."

Behind the scenes, enforcement is relentless. "Celebrities are now hiring investigators who scan the internet, capture metadata, and flag misuse," says Anand.

The harder question, though, is whether these lawsuits might muzzle humour, mimicry, or fan creativity. The line, Anand says, lies in intention. "Are you making art or are you making money off someone else's face?"

Courts are reading it the same way. In Jackie Shroff's case, the judge exempted memes, parody, satire and even commemorative work. Anand clarifies, "We don't go after genuine humour or news. What we target is commercial exploitation or anything defamatory or pornographic. That's where clients get emotional."

Creativity can't trump consent, insists Khan. "AI changed the game. We now need a consent-based framework that protects identity without stifling creativity."

Unlike copyright or trademark, personality rights aren't yet codified. "In the West, publicity rights evolved into a property right," explains Anand. India still treats it as an abstract reputational right.

Anand rattles off what courts are now granting: injunctions restraining misuse, takedown orders for URLs and videos — even anonymous ones — plus directions to telecom departments and the ministry. "A lot of them have taken down the information or disabled it. Many parties have reached out for settlement with written undertakings never to do it again."

For all the legalese, Anand says these suits aren't just about money. "Some clients are deeply disturbed by what's out there. AI has made it surreal. You can literally rent a dead person's voice now," he says. "Imagine hearing a synthetic version of someone singing or speaking words they never said. That's eerie."

While celebrities are scrambling to protect their identity, creators ride on trends in an effort to be funny, fast and first. Five years ago, when a bored mechanical engineer from Bengaluru started The Indian Memes on Instagram, Sudarshan Das didn't expect it to snowball into a page with over four lakh followers.

Das, who now runs 25 social media pages, says the kind of humour that works online changes at algorithmic speed. That's why, he believes, some creators reach for cheap thrills. "They think one viral AI video will get them 1,00,000 followers in ten days. But you might get millions of views, but no real followers. No brand will approach you either."

He learnt the hard way after losing a page with 500,000 followers overnight for copyright violations. "I used to post cricket clips without realising BCCI had copyright. It was like losing a baby." Now, he polices himself. "We don't touch sensitive topics like tragedies or serious legal or political issues. We post celebrity memes but not if it's unconfirmed private gossip."

The line between humour and harm is getting razor thin, he concedes, when it comes to rise in AI-tweaked celeb videos. But for creators today, the 'real' metric he says, should be, "Would the actor smile if they saw it?"

NAME, POSE, SIGNATURE, LOGO... CELEBS TRADEMARKED IN INDIA

Sachin Tendulkar
What's trademarked: Signature and name with logo (word & label mark)
Covers: Bags, wallets, purses, travel bags, leather goods, umbrellas as well as broadcasting, chatrooms, social media and blogs

Kajol
What's trademarked: Her name and a stylised logo (word & label mark)
Covers: Advertising, brand promotions, entertainment services, public appearances



Shah Rukh Khan
What's trademarked: His full name (word mark)
Covers: A staggering range of products including perfumes, cosmetics, jewellery, clothing, and beverages to surgical apparatus, disinfectants and firearms

Usain Bolt
What's trademarked: His signature lightning-bolt victory pose (device mark)
Covers: Clothing, footwear, sports equipment, merchandising items, select services

Cristiano Ronaldo
What's trademarked: 'CR 7' (word, label & device mark)
Covers: In India, it covers clothing, footwear, headgear and lifestyle and sportswear categories



Jasprit Bumrah
What's trademarked: His signature run-up bowling action (device mark)
Covers: Clothing, footwear, caps to prevent unauthorised merch

Word mark protects just the name; device mark protects a visual logo/ symbol/ icon/ silhouette; label mark protects stylised representation of the name & design together

KEY CONTACT



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View Bio of Dhruv Anand

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