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Celebrity Rights: The Star Drill

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to critically examine the legal framework governing celebrity rights under Indian intellectual property law. It explores how existing statutes—particularly the Copyright Act, 1957 and the Trade Marks Act, 1999—extend protection to various aspects of celebrity identity. The paper also discusses the evolution of celebrity rights, their recognition by Indian courts, and the comparative treatment of these rights in other jurisdictions. Key judgments that have shaped the Indian position are analyzed to highlight judicial approaches toward protecting personality, publicity, and privacy rights. In addition, the study reviews international conventions and practices adopted by other countries to secure celebrity identities. The paper concludes with a set of recommendations aimed at strengthening the recognition and enforcement of celebrity rights in India, emphasizing the urgent need for a comprehensive legislative framework dedicated to this domain.

Keyword: Celebrity Rights; Personality Rights; Publicity Rights; Right to privacy; Intellactual Property Rights; Copyright Act,1957; Trademark Act,1999; Indian Judiciary; Digital Identity Protection; International Legal Framework.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

"Fame, like power, can never be equally shared; for even if everyone were famous, then no one would be." – McDonald

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We live in an era dominated by celebrity culture, where fame has transcended traditional boundaries. The concept of a "celebrity" has evolved dramatically—from film stars, athletes, and politicians to include digital influencers, content creators, and podcasters who command public attention through social media platforms. This transformation has broadened not only the meaning of celebrity but also the scope of legal protection required to safeguard their personal and commercial identities.

Celebrities exert significant influence across social, economic, and political spheres, shaping public opinion and consumer behaviour. Many of them actively pursue entrepreneurial ventures, converting their fame into personal brands. However, celebrity status is a double-edged sword: it brings prestige and financial gain but also exposes individuals to public scrutiny, exploitation, and invasion of privacy. The law must therefore balance public interest with the individual's right to control and profit from their persona.

Modern celebrity culture has created new categories of rights under the umbrella of intellectual property (IP)—namely, the right to personality, right to privacy, and right to publicity. These rights recognize that a celebrity's identity itself carries economic value and deserves legal protection against unauthorized commercial use.

1.1 Who is a Celebrity, and Why Must Their Rights Be Protected?

A celebrity may be defined as "a person who, through achievements, reputation, or lifestyle, attracts legitimate public interest in his or her actions, character, or affairs." This category includes actors, musicians, athletes, politicians, writers, business leaders, social media influencers, and others whose work and persona influence the public at large.

Celebrity status carries both social responsibility and legal entitlement. While fame obliges public figures to act responsibly in society, it simultaneously entitles them to protection from unjust exploitation of their image or reputation. In the digital age—where media and the internet document every movement of a public figure—the boundary between personal and public life has become increasingly fragile. Hence, the legal system must provide clear mechanisms for defending the dignity, privacy, and economic interests of individuals whose personas are of public value.

1.2 Evolution of Celebrity Rights in India

The origins of celebrity rights in India lie in common law principles and the natural right to one's own identity, which inherently accompanies fame. These rights include the right to publicity, right to control commercial use of one's image, and right to privacy—all of which find implicit recognition in the Constitution of India, particularly under Article 19(1)(a) (freedom of speech and expression) and Article 21 (right to life and personal liberty).

Article 19(1)(a): Guarantees every citizen the right to freedom of speech and expression.¹

Article 21: Ensures that no person shall be deprived of life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law.²

The emergence of intellectual property laws further strengthened this protection. The Copyright Act, 1957 introduced performers' rights, while the Trade Marks Act, 1999 recognized personal names as registrable marks. The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) also incorporated safeguards against misappropriation of celebrity identities in advertisements.³

Although India lacks a statute dedicated exclusively to personality or celebrity rights, judicial interpretation has played a vital role in developing this field. In Shivaji Rao Gaikwad v. Varsha Productions (2015)⁴, the Madras High Court recognized the personality rights of actor Rajinikanth and restrained the unauthorized commercial use of his name and image. Similarly, in Amitabh Bachchan v. Rajat Negi & Ors. (2022), the Delhi High Court granted a comprehensive injunction prohibiting any misuse of the actor's name, image, or voice for commercial gain. These cases collectively mark significant milestones in the judicial evolution of celebrity rights in India.

As technology advances and the internet becomes an intrinsic part of daily life, digital misappropriation of identity—through deepfakes, impersonation, or unauthorized endorsements—has intensified. This necessitates continuous legal innovation to ensure that celebrities retain control over the use of their persona while balancing the public's right to information. CR

1.3 Importance of Celebrity Rights

Celebrities are not merely entertainers; they are economic assets whose influence shapes consumer decisions and social discourse. Their association with causes, products, or organizations enhances visibility and trust. Consequently, misuse of a celebrity's name or image can cause reputational harm and unjust enrichment to unauthorized parties.

Recognizing celebrity rights serves multiple purposes:

- 1. Protection of personality preventing unauthorized exploitation of identity.
- 2. Economic security ensuring fair compensation for commercial use of a persona.
- 3. Preservation of privacy shielding personal life from excessive intrusion.
- 4. Public trust maintaining authenticity in endorsements and representations.

¹ Article 19 – The Constitution of India, 1950

² Article 21 – The Constitution of India, 1950

³ Ameet Naik "evolution of celebrity rights and the way forward"

⁴ 2015 (62) PTC 351 (Madras)

Courts have consistently emphasized that a celebrity's name and likeness possess independent commercial value beyond personal privacy. Hence, safeguarding these rights is essential to maintain fairness in commerce, uphold moral integrity, and preserve the creative and professional autonomy of public figures.

CHAPTER 2: PROTECTION OF CELEBRITY RIGHTS

Celebrities, by virtue of their public visibility, require legal safeguards to protect both their intellectual creations and their personal identity. Their fame, reputation, and persona constitute valuable assets that can be commercially exploited. The law, therefore, extends protection to ensure that a celebrity's individuality—whether expressed through name, image, voice, signature, or performance—is not misused or misappropriated for unauthorized benefit.

The Indian legal framework, though not codified specifically for celebrity protection, offers remedies under existing statutes such as the Copyright Act, 1957 and the Trade Marks Act, 1999, along with common law principles such as the tort of passing off and infringement of privacy. These collectively form the backbone of celebrity rights protection in India.

2.1 Major Categories of Celebrity Rights

Celebrity rights can be broadly divided into several interconnected categories, each addressing a unique dimension of a celebrity's persona.

(a) Personality Rights

Personality rights form the core of celebrity protection. These rights safeguard an individual's distinct characteristics—such as name, likeness, voice, gestures, and overall persona—from unauthorized commercial exploitation. They represent the recognition that a person's public image carries commercial value and that this value belongs exclusively to the individual concerned.

Personality rights often overlap with publicity rights, as both recognize the monetary worth of a celebrity's identity. Unauthorized use—such as featuring a celebrity's photograph or mimicry in advertisements—constitutes infringement. Indian courts have acknowledged these rights as deriving from Article 21 of the Constitution, which protects the dignity and privacy of an individual.

(b) Right to Privacy

Although fame naturally invites public attention, celebrities retain the constitutional right to privacy. Media curiosity often crosses ethical boundaries by intruding into the personal lives of public figures—disclosing details about their relationships, family, or preferences without consent. This violates not only their dignity but also their personal liberty under Article 21.

The right to privacy empowers celebrities to restrict the publication or dissemination of private information unrelated to their professional life. It ensures that the public interest in entertainment does not override the fundamental human right to personal space. However, this right is not absolute and must be balanced against the freedom of speech and expression guaranteed under Article 19(1)(a).

(c) Right to Publicity

The right to publicity enables a celebrity to control the commercial use of their identity. It is derived from the right to privacy but operates in the opposite direction—where privacy protects against unwanted exposure, publicity rights secure the economic value of voluntary exposure.

Publicity rights prohibit third parties from exploiting a celebrity's persona—such as name, image, voice, or signature—for commercial gain without authorization. For instance, if a company uses a film actor's photograph to market a product without consent, it amounts to infringement. Section 14 of the Trade Marks Act, 1999 reinforces this by prohibiting the use of personal names or representations without permission. Likewise, the Copyright Act, 1957 protects creative outputs—like photographs, performances, or recordings—against unauthorized reproduction or adaptation.

(d) Moral Rights

Beyond economic and privacy-based entitlements, celebrities also possess moral rights, which protect their dignity, reputation, and emotional connection to their work. Moral rights ensure that a celebrity is not portrayed in a false or degrading manner and that their creative contributions are respected.

Instances of public outrage—such as vandalism or personal attacks following poor performance in sports or films—reflect violations of moral and ethical standards. The law emphasizes healthy criticism while discouraging defamatory or abusive conduct that harms a celebrity's mental well-being and social standing.

2.2 Protection under the Copyright Act, 1957

The Copyright Act, 1957 plays a significant, though indirect, role in protecting celebrity interests. It grants creators exclusive rights to control the reproduction, distribution, adaptation, and public performance of their works. While the Act does not explicitly define or protect "celebrity rights," it recognizes performers' rights under Section 2(qq) and Sections 38 to 38B, which include the right to control the use of one's performance in recordings, broadcasts, and reproductions.

Celebrities such as actors, musicians, and authors derive protection from unauthorized duplication or distortion of their works. For example, authors like Chetan Bhagat can prevent others from adapting or selling copies of their literary works without permission. Similarly, the Act protects photographs, sketches, and drawings as artistic works, empowering celebrities to control their use in media or advertising.

A landmark case, Raja Pocket Books v. Radha Pocket Books, ⁵ extended copyright protection to a fictional character, "Nagraj," recognizing that even creative representations tied to a persona deserve protection. Though the law does not explicitly recognize copyright in a celebrity's image or name, judicial interpretation continues to expand its boundaries to address new challenges in media and entertainment.

2.3 Protection under the Trade Marks Act, 1999

The Trade Marks Act, 1999 provides another crucial layer of protection for celebrities. Its definition of a "mark" under Section 2(m) includes names, signatures, sounds, and symbols capable of distinguishing one person's goods or services from another's. This allows celebrities to register their names or likenesses as trademarks, thereby gaining exclusive commercial rights.

Many public figures have leveraged this provision to secure their brand identity. For example, Sachin Tendulkar registered his name as a trademark in India to prevent misuse for unauthorized endorsements. Similar protection is available for film titles, product lines, or artistic logos associated with celebrities.

Trademark protection offers dual benefits:

- 1. It enables celebrities to license or assign aspects of their identity for merchandising and brand collaborations.
- 2. It empowers them to take legal action against misrepresentation or passing off by third parties.

However, in India, such protection remains limited. Unlike in countries such as the United States, where the right of publicity is statutorily recognized, Indian celebrities rely on civil remedies and trademark law to safeguard their persona. Nonetheless, judicial awareness and increasing global influence are gradually pushing Indian law toward a more comprehensive regime for personality protection.

CHAPTER 3: PROTECTION OF CELEBRITY RIGHTS UNDER THE INTERNATIONAL **REGIME**

In an increasingly interconnected and digitalized world, the fame and public persona of celebrities extend beyond national borders. A movie star, athlete, or influencer in one country can enjoy instant recognition across continents through global media and the internet. Consequently, the protection of celebrity rights must operate not only at the domestic level but also within an international legal framework.

A number of international conventions and treaties have been established to protect performers, artists, and other public figures from unauthorized exploitation of their image, name, voice, or creative works. This

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⁽¹⁹⁹⁷⁾⁽⁴⁰⁾ DRJ 791

chapter examines the principal international instruments and the approaches adopted by various jurisdictions toward protecting celebrity rights.

3.1 Protection under International Conventions

(a) The Rome Convention, 1961: The Rome Convention for the Protection of Performers, Producers of Phonograms, and Broadcasting Organisations (1961) marked the first international effort to formally recognize the rights of performers. The Convention primarily focuses on safeguarding performers against the unauthorized broadcasting, recording, and reproduction of their live performances.

While the Rome Convention acknowledges the performer's interest in their work, it offers limited protection—especially with respect to secondary use and moral rights. It grants only the right to equitable remuneration rather than exclusive control over performances. Despite these limitations, it laid the foundation for future treaties by recognizing that performers deserve a degree of control and compensation over the use of their creative output.⁶

(b) The TRIPS Agreement, 1995

The Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), administered by the World Trade Organization (WTO), represents a significant advancement in the global protection of intellectual property, including performers' rights.

Under Article 14(1), performers are granted the right to prevent the unauthorized fixation, reproduction, and broadcasting of their live performances. Furthermore, Article 14(5) permits member nations to extend the protection period for up to 50 years from the date of the performance.

Unlike earlier conventions, TRIPS has a strong enforcement mechanism, as it binds member countries through the WTO's dispute resolution system. This feature ensures that violations of performer rights or failures in implementation can be addressed through international legal processes. Thus, TRIPS bridges the gap between intellectual property and international trade, establishing celebrity and performer rights as economically significant assets deserving of protection.⁷

(c) WIPO Performances and Phonograms Treaty (WPPT), 1996: The WIPO Performances and Phonograms Treaty (WPPT) was designed to adapt existing legal frameworks the realities of the digital era, where performances can be easily recorded, copied, and distributed online.

This treaty grants performers both economic and moral rights.

Article 5 ensures that performers have the right to be identified as the performer of their work and to object to any modification or distortion that might harm their reputation.

⁶ Tabrez Ahmad and Satya Ranjan Swain "Celebrity Rights: protection under IP laws" available athttp://docs.manupatra.in/newsline/articles/Upload/78DD5FE8-5C07-4075-934D-6917CD6BE868.pdf

⁷ Article 14 – Trade Related Aspect of Intellectual Property Rights Agreement

Articles 6–10 provide for a wide range of economic rights, including the rights of reproduction, distribution, rental, and the right to make performances available to the public.

The WPPT marks a shift from mere protection against unauthorized use (as seen in the Rome Convention) to providing exclusive authorization rights, reflecting a modern, performer-centric approach. By recognizing digital reproduction and dissemination, it equips performers and celebrities with the legal tools necessary to protect their image and performances in online spaces.

3.2 Protection in Other Jurisdictions

(a) United States of America

The United States has developed the most comprehensive framework for protecting celebrity identity through the right of publicity. This right, though rooted in the right to privacy, has evolved into an independent and commercially valuable legal concept.

A landmark case, Roberson v. Rochester Folding Box Co. (1902), ⁸ first raised public concern about unauthorized use of an individual's image when Abigail Roberson's portrait was used on flour packaging without consent. Although the court initially denied relief, the incident prompted the enactment of New York's privacy statute, which formally recognized personal image protection.

Over time, numerous states have enacted statutory or common-law rights of publicity, allowing individuals to control and profit from their name, likeness, and other distinctive traits. Some states, such as California, Tennessee, and Indiana, even provide posthumous publicity rights, ensuring continued protection of a celebrity's legacy after death. These laws reflect the United States' view that a celebrity's persona is a valuable form of property.

(b) United Kingdom

The United Kingdom, guided by common law principles, has traditionally resisted recognizing an independent right of publicity. Instead, the UK protects celebrity identity indirectly through actions in passing off, defamation, and breach of confidence.

However, with the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)—particularly Article 8 (right to privacy) and Article 10 (freedom of expression)—British courts have gradually expanded privacy protection. Cases involving unauthorized photography, false endorsements, or misuse of personal images have been decided in favour of celebrities under the broader principles of privacy and reputation. Although there is still no statutory "celebrity rights" regime, the UK's evolving case law demonstrates increasing recognition that public figures deserve protection against exploitation of their identity for commercial gain.

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^{8 (1902) 171} N.Y. 538; 64 N.E. 442; N.Y. LEXIS 881

⁹ Tabrez Ahmad and Satya Ranjan Swain "Celebrity Rights: protection under IP laws" available athttp://docs.manupatra.in/newsline/articles/Upload/78DD5FE8-5C07-4075-934D-6917CD6BE868.pdf

(c) Canada

In Canada, the recognition of celebrity or personality rights has developed through judicial interpretation. The case Krouse v. Chrysler Canada Ltd. (1973) ¹⁰was among the first to acknowledge that individuals possess a marketable value in their image and that its unauthorized commercial use may constitute misappropriation.

Later, in Athans v. Canadian Adventure Camps Ltd. (1977), ¹¹the court expanded this protection, holding that a celebrity's name and likeness are both integral aspects of their identity. Together, these cases established a foundation for the common law right of personality in Canada.

While there is no unified federal statute governing celebrity rights, various provinces provide privacy protections that can be invoked in cases of image misuse or false endorsement.

3.3 Global Perspective and Future Challenges

Across the world, legal systems are gradually converging toward the recognition of a celebrity's persona as intellectual property. The idea that fame, identity, and public image carry economic and moral value has become widely accepted. However, the scope and enforcement of these rights remain inconsistent among jurisdictions.

Countries like the United States offer explicit statutory protection, while others, including India and the United Kingdom, rely primarily on judicial innovation and interpretation. In the digital era, where content spreads globally in seconds and technologies such as deepfakes, AI-generated likenesses, and virtual influencers blur the boundaries of identity, international cooperation has become essential.

There is a pressing need for a harmonized international framework—potentially an expanded WIPO treaty—to clearly define and enforce celebrity rights across borders. Such an instrument would ensure that celebrities retain control over their image, voice, and digital identity worldwide, while balancing freedom of expression and public interest.

CHAPTER 4: INDIAN JUDICIAL VIEW ON CELEBRITY RIGHTS

The Indian judiciary has been instrumental in shaping the concept and scope of celebrity rights in the absence of specific legislation. Over time, courts have drawn from constitutional principles, intellectual property laws, and common law doctrines to safeguard the identities of public figures. Through landmark judgments, the judiciary has recognized that a celebrity's name, image, and persona hold not only personal but also commercial value, warranting legal protection against unauthorized exploitation.

The following cases illustrate how Indian courts have progressively expanded the understanding and enforcement of celebrity rights.

¹⁰(1971), 5 C P R (2d) 30

¹¹ (1977), 17 O.R. (2d) 425

(a) Sourav Ganguly v. Tata Tea Ltd.

One of the earliest instances of judicial recognition of personality rights in India arose in 1997, when cricketer Sourav Ganguly returned from his historic century at Lord's. Shortly thereafter, Tata Tea Ltd. launched a marketing campaign that offered customers an opportunity to send congratulatory postcards to the player, included in one-kilogram tea packets.

Although the campaign appeared harmless, it capitalized on Ganguly's recent success and public popularity without his consent. The court ruled in favour of Sourav Ganguly, holding that his reputation, fame, and identity constituted his intellectual property and could not be exploited for commercial gain without authorization. This case marked a significant milestone by recognizing that celebrities possess a proprietary right in their persona, similar to property rights in tangible assets.¹²

(b) Sonu Nigam v. Amrik Singh (Mika Singh) & Another

In this case, two well-known singers—Sonu Nigam and Mika Singh—attended a radio event where photographs of various celebrities were taken for promotional purposes. Without obtaining proper consent, Mika Singh used these photographs in a poster promoting himself, featuring his image more prominently than others.

The Bombay High Court found this act misleading and damaging to the reputations of the other celebrities featured, particularly Sonu Nigam. The court restrained the defendants from further use of the posters and directed that damages of ₹10 lakh be paid to charity. The judgment emphasized that misrepresentation of prominence or status in promotional material constitutes an unfair exploitation of celebrity identity.

This case reinforced the notion that a celebrity's image carries distinct commercial value, and any unauthorized manipulation or exaggeration of that image violates both ethical and legal standards.¹³

(c) Shilpa S. Shetty v. Magna Publications Co. Ltd. & Others¹⁴

In 2000, actress Shilpa Shetty gave an interview discussing her personal life and recent breakup. Subsequently, a magazine published multiple articles based on that interview, along with additional stories she claimed were defamatory and invasive. Shetty filed for an injunction against further publication of such content, arguing that it distorted her public image and intruded upon her privacy.

The Bombay High Court, and later the Division Bench, upheld the injunction, agreeing that the repeated publication of speculative or defamatory material could irreparably damage her reputation. The case eventually reached the Supreme Court, which declined to interfere with the decision.

This case reaffirmed that even public figures are entitled to protection against media intrusion and that freedom of the press does not extend to violating an individual's dignity or privacy.

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¹² CS NO. 361 OF 1997

¹³ CS 372/2013 (Bombay High Court)

(d) Arun Jaitley v. Network Solutions Pvt. Ltd. & Others

In this case, senior advocate and politician Arun Jaitley sought a permanent injunction against the misuse of his name in the domain "arunjaitley.com", which had been registered by a third party. Jaitley argued that such unauthorized registration constituted cybersquatting and could mislead the public into associating the domain with him.¹⁵

The Delhi High Court granted an injunction restraining the defendants from transferring, selling, or offering the domain to any third party. The judgment recognized that a person's name—particularly that of a well-known public figure—has distinct value and goodwill, and its misuse in digital spaces amounts to infringement of personality and reputation.

This decision underscored the growing importance of protecting celebrity identity in the online domain, especially in the era of digital branding and social media.

CHAPTER 5: SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Suggestions

While Indian courts have played a commendable role in recognizing and protecting celebrity rights, the absence of specific legislation continues to leave gaps and inconsistencies in enforcement. The following recommendations aim to strengthen the legal framework and ensure holistic protection of celebrity identity in India:

- 1. Enactment of a Dedicated Statute on Celebrity and Personality Rights: India urgently requires a comprehensive law exclusively addressing celebrity rights. Such legislation should clearly define "celebrity," outline the scope of personality, publicity, and privacy rights, and provide civil as well as criminal remedies against infringement.
- 2. Integration with Existing Intellectual Property Laws: Provisions relating to celebrity identity should be harmonized with the Copyright Act, 1957, and the Trade Marks Act, 1999, ensuring that names, images, signatures, voices, and performances are recognized as protectable forms of intellectual property. This integration would prevent overlap and simplify legal recourse.
- 3. Recognition of Digital and Internet-Based Rights: With the rapid expansion of social media, digital marketing, and artificial intelligence, celebrities are increasingly vulnerable to deep fakes, impersonation, and online misrepresentation. A modern legal framework must recognize and regulate digital identity theft, unauthorized online endorsements, and use of likeness in virtual or AI-generated content.
- 4. Mandatory Registration of Domain Names and Online Identifiers: Domain names linked to celebrities should be treated as part of their intellectual property and be automatically reserved or verified to prevent

¹⁵ CS (OS) 1745/2009

cybersquatting. The law should mandate that domain registrars verify celebrity-related names before allocation, protecting public figures from digital impersonation.

- 5. Stronger Role of Regulatory and Industry Bodies: The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), broadcasting regulators, and film associations should actively monitor and penalize misleading endorsements, deceptive advertisements, or unauthorized commercial associations involving celebrities.
- 6. Media Responsibility and Ethical Journalism: Media organizations must follow ethical norms when reporting on the personal lives of public figures. The press should distinguish between matters of public interest and private curiosity, ensuring that coverage does not infringe upon the celebrity's dignity or privacy.
- 7. Awareness and Education for Celebrities: Celebrities should be educated about their legal entitlements and the means to safeguard their intellectual and personality rights. Legal awareness can empower them to prevent misuse before it occurs rather than relying solely on post-violation remedies.

5.2 Conclusion

We live in an age where fame itself has become a form of property. A celebrity's image, name, or even voice can command immense commercial value and influence millions. Yet, the same fame exposes them to unprecedented vulnerabilities—ranging from privacy breaches to unauthorized endorsements and digital impersonation.

Over the years, Indian jurisprudence has evolved remarkably through judicial innovation, filling the legislative vacuum surrounding celebrity rights. Courts have consistently affirmed that celebrities are entitled to protect their identity, reputation, and persona under the broader umbrellas of Articles 19 and 21 of the Constitution and the principles of intellectual property law.

However, in an era driven by technology and media globalization, judicial interpretation alone cannot provide complete protection. The need for a codified legal framework has become pressing—one that clearly defines the rights, liabilities, and remedies related to celebrity identity in physical, commercial, and digital domains.

Protecting celebrity rights is not merely about safeguarding fame—it is about upholding human dignity, creative integrity, and fair economic recognition. As the title of this paper, "The Star Drill," implies, celebrities often find themselves constantly navigating scrutiny, imitation, and commercial pressures. The law must therefore evolve to ensure that the very individuals who inspire society are equally protected from exploitation and misuse.

To conclude with the words of Noel Gallagher:

"I loved being famous. It was all great, up until when it wasn't."

In the spirit of this statement, the future of celebrity rights in India must be built on the foundation of balance—between publicity and privacy, admiration and accountability, fame and fairness.

