

Debabratee Dhar writes about a global GenZ trend

Rise of a Miaowtocracy

In the recently released Bengali film *Phool Pishi O Edward*, Edward is a cat. Zinia Sen, who is the screenplay writer, tells *The Telegraph*, "It was important to have a cat in the story. Cats slink into houses and escape like shadows. There is an element of mystery about them and that is central to the story." Even more mysterious, perhaps, is GenZ's fascination with cats.

The millennials too had a cat fascination but that was mostly virtual, driven by mobile apps and video games. Karan Gaikwad, who is a game developer, says, "In Japanese culture, cats have always been adored, and they wield great influence over pop culture. Since the gaming industry is also largely influenced by Japanese culture, the feline craze bleeds in."

GenZ is different in that their cat love extends to the living creature. India too is very much part of this global trend. In Calcutta, in the pet-friendly cafes, the pet in the majority is definitely the cat. In printed frocks or collars studded with faux gems, they sit smug on table tops next to tall glasses of bubble tea and whatnot. There was a time when having a pedigree dog on a leash was considered a status symbol; now that is ancient history.

Rishi Sen, a master's student, likes to sport his cat scars — basically claw marks on the skin — like medals. He says, "You cannot just pick up your cat and cuddle it whenever you want. But if you are lucky, sometimes your cat will want to cuddle and then it will come to you. Be patient, or else you will get scratches like mine."

It may not sound like an endearing trait to everyone but GenZ is smitten. Here's what some of the others whom *The Telegraph* interviewed, most of them between 19 and 25, listed as the many virtues of cats — "self-sufficient", "not needy", "clean", "intuitive", "low-maintenance", "proud". Anoushka M. Marak, a 25-year-old teacher, said, "I see bits of myself in my cats."



JERRYMANDERING: (Clockwise from above) A title from The Meow Library; the Chief Mouser at 10 Downing Street, Larry; and a feline guest at Wilson's Cafe in Calcutta.

Photos sourced by The Telegraph

One might say that those have been the reasons proffered by cat-lovers down the ages and one would be right. It is not new that there should be movements woven around whatever the cat connotes either. Sabo-Tabby was the symbol of the radical labour movement of the early 20th century. The anti-Suffragists used the cat to mock women, while years later, the feminists adopted cat symbolism to provide a counter.

What is new is how the cat seems to connect GenZ across the world. And so you have climbing cat adoption rates, videos, reels and art circulating on social media — Monkey Cat Luna has 2.1 million followers on Instagram and close to 4.5 million on TikTok. There are cat prod-

ucts selling like hotcakes online — cat trees, teaser toys, scratch pads. And then there are celebrity cat parents — Taylor Swift appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine with her cat Benjamin Button — as well as celebrity cats such as Chief Mouser Larry of 10 Downing Street, amplifying the trend.

GenZ is fluent in the miaow or meow, which is the language of cats. There is something called The Meow Library that publishes "highbrow literature for cats". It has been founded by

Sam Austen who calls himself a feline linguist. From Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* to Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, from Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, classics now have a cat translation. The books, selling at anything between ₹1,400 and ₹3,175, may be unreadable to humans — they are just a string of miaows —

but if you read between the lines you might find something. Many popular songs now have their cat version; basically the tune remains the same only the lyrics are replaced with miaows.

Sunirmal Das, who is an assistant professor of philosophy at Jadavpur University, won't hazard a guess as to what drives this cat love but he will have you take note of cats as philosophical creatures who cannot be easily influenced. He says, "If you want to move a cat from its loaf, you cannot scold it or coax it. You actually have to convince it with food or something else. You will also never find cats moving in a group. They are individualistic and can think for themselves; all of these are great traits for a philosopher."

Cats may or may not have a philosopher in them, but philosophers had cats for pets — Camus had Cigarette; Derrida had Logos; and Foucault, Insanity.

Scholar and Internet activist Ethan Zuckerman put forward his Cute Cat Theory of Digital Activism in 2008. The point of it is this: most people use the Internet to post "banal content" such as pictures of "cute cats". But there will always be a smaller fraction who will use the same platforms for political activism. When any autocratic government clamps down on the Internet to suppress the second group, the cat feed is interrupted. This makes the regular person a dissident. The Arab Spring is a case in point.

Political parties in India might not take note of such trends yet, but in the last US elections, data firms analysed pet demographics. The takeaway — while dog owners clearly favoured Donald Trump, cat lovers were equally divided between Trump and Kamala Harris.

In the meantime, right here, right now, we have the elusive Edward showing Pishi the way.

