



Publication : GQ	Subject : Vaping analytical story
Date of Publish : May 2018	Edition : National



VAPE NATION

If you haven't switched out your chemical- and tar-laced cigarette for an e-cig, you're already behind the curve. **Bhanuj Kappal** tumbles down the rabbit hole of vape culture in India – a colourful world of Lego mods and hibiscus juices – to discover a nascent community that's under siege in the face of a potential national vaping ban →

PHOTOGRAPHED BY **ABHISHEK BALI**



Anubhav Khurana, of Vapresso India trick team, is one of the country's best vape trickers.

“Every vaper feels like they’ve discovered fire for the first time, and like early cavemen we want to tell everyone about it.”

Rustam Singh talks about vaping with the sort of religious fervour you usually see in Bible-thumping street preachers, or college kids fresh from their first LSD trip. The 27-year-old freelance journalist and editor of pro-atheism quarterly *Secular World* had been smoking for six years when he picked up an e-cigarette from his local paan shop. It was an off-brand, first-generation device (called cig-a-likes, because they emulate the shape and experience of a cigarette) that cost him only 500 bucks. Not the sort of device, as he himself will tell you, any self-respecting vaper would be caught dead with. But that “crappy little device”, bought out of pure curiosity, changed his life. Within a week, he’d kicked his pack-a-day cigarette habit for good.

There was no turning back. By the time I met him in Delhi this past March, he’d become a card-carrying member of the Vape Church. It doesn’t bother Singh that there’s a whole online cottage industry churning out articles about how dorky and “douche” vaping is (“At least I’m not killing people with my second-hand smoke, you know?”). Nor is he particularly concerned that sometimes people see him vaping on the street and assume he’s indulging in some weird, high-tech form of marijuana consumption (“They’re usually just curious, and I’m happy to explain”). Even the inevitable, low-intensity harassment by the Delhi police is only a minor irritant, with the occasional opportunity for payback when a curious cop demands a hit (“I just turn the heat up to maximum so he ends up coughing his lungs out. I don’t want your pig germs on my vape”). Singh is clearly a believer. He believes he’s a healthier man since he took up vaping. He believes – and can quote scientific studies to prove it – that vaping is a much safer alternative to smoking. And he believes, with the self-aware smugness of an early adopter, that vaping is the future.

“We’ve found tobacco plants in Egyptian tombs, which

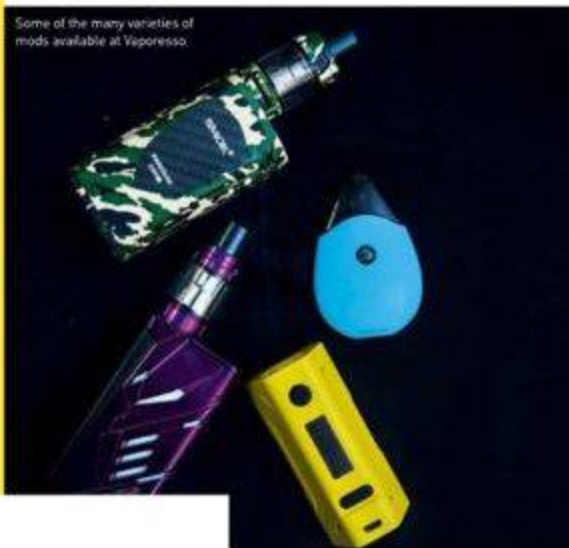
means man has been smoking tobacco since the beginning of civilisation,” he tells me, between exhaling plumes of vapour that would give industrial chimneys an inferiority complex. “For 3,000 years, we haven’t substantially changed the way we’ve smoked, we’ve just added a filter and made our paper more refined. And now, after thousands of years, we’ve revolutionised the way we consume nicotine. We’ve figured out a way to fulfil that craving without killing ourselves in the process.”

A quick low-down for the uninitiated: Vaping is the preferred nomenclature for the act of inhaling nicotine-infused vapour from an e-cigarette or vaporiser, aka vape. The basic mechanism is pretty simple – a heating element (usually a coil of wire) powered by batteries vaporises a mixture of vegetable glycerine, propylene glycol, flavour concentrates and nicotine (referred to as juice, e-juice or e-liquid). It’s widely believed – though not by everyone – that this is a safer way of consuming nicotine than cigarettes, since there’s no burning of plant matter, chemicals and tar involved. What kills you with cigarettes isn’t the nicotine, but the hundreds of carcinogens produced by the process of combustion. Beyond that, it gets pretty complicated pretty fast.

The idea dates back to at least 1963, when amateur American inventor Herbert A Gilbert filed a patent for the first “smokeless non-tobacco cigarette”. Unfortunately for Gilbert, this was the Sixties, when Big Tobacco was still pretending that cigarettes were not only OK, but probably good for you. His prototype never made it into production. There were a few other attempts to make e-cigarettes over the years, but the idea never really gained traction, until 2003. That was the year that Chinese pharmacist Hon Lik – a smoker who’d recently lost his father to lung cancer – patented his own version of the electronic cigarette, the direct precursor to the modern cig-a-likes, like the one Singh picked up.

By 2007, e-cigarettes started showing up on American and European shores. These early models were pretty

Some of the many varieties of mods available at Vapresso.





Rubin Sethi and his partner Vikas Chanana at the Vapresso Lab



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Whether you're a noob looking for a new vape, or a veteran looking for a modding component, someone on the forum will sort you out. The best resource for Indian vapers.

basic and not very good. But they caught the attention of a small group of health-conscious geeks and tinkerers, who didn't take long to start experimenting with different configurations to get better flavour and bigger clouds. Especially bigger clouds. These early mods, or "modified pieces" (some of the earliest were made from flashlights), were pretty crude, but they had a couple of advantages. They worked better than the cheap, underpowered cig-a-likes. And the endless possibilities of customisation that they offered meant your vape was now also a way for you to express your individuality. Suddenly, the e-cigarette wasn't just a niche product; it was the nucleus of a rapidly growing subculture of health-obsessed nerds messing around with complicated, futuristic tools. Much like computer culture in the Seventies, or more contemporary flashlight enthusiast communities, the emerging vape culture developed its own esoteric slang ("atties", "priming"), rituals and aesthetic (comic-con chic-meets-heavy metal-meets-Che Guevara rebel).

These days, vapes come in all sorts of shapes and sizes - from pod devices as small as a USB stick to vape pens that look like The Doctor's sonic screwdriver to bulky box mods modelled on pistol grips, complete with a battery compartment that pops out, just like an ammo clip. They're also much more advanced, offering a bewildering array of features that allow you to control every aspect of your vaping experience. And then there's the whole variety of flavours - from basic tobacco flavours to delicious sweet- and dessert-based flavours ("Orange Marmalade" or "Deluxe Pancake Man") to just plain weird ("Not Cho Cheese Fauxritos"?). In fact, there's a significant minority that vapes non-nicotine juices - they're in it for the clouds and the flavour. In just a few years, what started as a fringe health fad is now a lifestyle, a community, an anti-smoking advocacy movement (there's even a pro-vaping political party in the UK) and a \$5.5 billion industry.

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Okay, this one's called the tornado."

In January, I'd visited one of the many online Indian vape stores and dropped ₹15,000 on a fancy new vape. This wasn't my first. A couple of years ago, I'd spent six months braving my girlfriend's withering scorn, and odd looks from everyone else I knew, so that I could kick the butt. And I did. Until my vape broke down and I didn't have the money to replace it. This time was a little different. My girlfriend picked up vaping over a year ago, and is now completely smoke-free (and not at all repentant about poking so much fun at me for vaping). Several of my friends now vape too, while others at least know that I'm not just sucking smoke from a burning power bank. More importantly, this time I found myself getting sucked deep into the vape culture rabbit hole, indulging in long, drawn-out conversations on Facebook about variable wattage versus temperature control, mouth-to-lung draws versus direct-to-lung draws and VG/PG ratios. Which is how I found myself in a brightly lit room in north-west Delhi, watching a lanky, bearded 21-year-old give me a practical lesson in fluid dynamics and filamental vortex loops.

The young man takes a superhuman drag on his vape and →



"Mech God" Karan Chandra with his vaping collection, which includes rare and limited-edition mechanical mods, in his home basement.



Modders will spend hundreds of hours and thousands of rupees building unique, quirky and downright hilarious mods out of Lego pieces, coke cans or nerf guns

then leans down until his face is just above the glass tabletop. He lets a massive cloud of vapour slowly spill from his mouth. The effect is not unlike standing on the coastline and watching a fog bank roll in over the sea. Then, with a deft flick of his wrist, he sends a conical plume of vapour shooting up towards the ceiling in a furious, roiling miniature tornado.

For an encore, he shows me the Jellyfish. First, he coughs up a thick, milky O ring (aka a filamental vortex loop) that hangs in the air like a numerical poltergeist, slowly expanding until it's about half a foot in diameter. Then he takes another drag, and gently aims a plume of vapour through the ring, simultaneously pushing the ring forward with a gentle push of his hands. The new plume dissipates and flows back over the ring, looking eerily like a particularly ethereal jellyfish. It's lit.

The young man is college student Anubhav Khurana, one of India's best vape trickers. In the US and Europe, where vaping has gone mainstream, tricking – and its counterpart, cloud-chasing, which is exactly what it sounds like – is a big deal. Most vape bars and cafés host regular cloud-chasing and tricking competitions. The pros end up competing for hundreds of thousands of dollars in prize money at bigger vape expos and conventions. Many are social media celebs with huge followings, and they spend a significant chunk of their time just making and uploading videos tagged #vapetricks, #vapetricklfe, #vapetricksandchill. A few months ago, Drake posted a video of 21-year-old Austin Lawrence aka Vape God – arguably the most famous vape tricker in the world – on his own Instagram account. When Lawrence DMed him, he not only replied, but actually asked Lawrence

to hook him up with a vape. And if that wasn't enough, he flew Vape God down for a hang sesh in his LA mansion.

In India's tiny vaping scene, of course, becoming a professional vape tricker is still something of a pipe dream. Lawrence's videos get hundreds of thousands of likes on Instagram. Khurana, meanwhile, has to make do with low hundreds. "Over here, we're just getting started," he says, readily admitting that he has a long way to go before he has the skills to go toe-to-toe with the pros. "But I think tricking will be the next big thing. International companies are starting to pay attention and reach out to Indian vapers, so it's just beginning to get organised."

Tricking and cloud-chasing are only two of the ways in which vapers can channel their obsession. Others take the ability to tweak your vape and juice, and elevate it to an art form. Modders will spend hundreds of hours and thousands of rupees building unique, quirky and downright hilarious mods out of Lego pieces, coke cans or nerf guns. And DIY juice-makers like Rustam Singh are the experimental mixologists of the vape scene, mixing and matching concentrates and flavour profiles to create exciting and delicious new blends that they share with the wider vaping community. "It's like a food thing, you know," he says. "Sure, I could get a brilliant sandwich outside. But making it on my own, knowing exactly what I put in my system, is so much better."

Then there are the coil artists, who experiment with different materials for their coils and wrap them together in intricate interlocking patterns to make beautiful, functional works of art, which they then post on Instagram with the hashtag #coilporn. The best coil art doesn't just look amazing, it also lights up in an iridescent rainbow when you heat it. One of the things you quickly realise is that for many vapers, the whole DIY spirit of vaping is just as important – and as addictive – as the nicotine fix. Perhaps it's why vaping seems to be a more effective way of quitting cigarettes than using nicotine gum or patches.

"I think vaping takes you back to your childhood, there's that excitement of getting hands-on with something, whether it's installing a coil or wicking the cotton," explains Karan Chandra, a popular vaper whose impressive collection of rare and limited-edition mechanical mods has earned him the moniker "Mech God". A 22-year-old art buyer and investor with a penchant for business suits, Chandra spends a lot of his

spare time building coils, mixing his own e-juices and doing Facebook Live videos where he shows off tricks and takes questions from newbie vapers.

Non-vapers tend to largely focus on the whole Wild Wild West-meets-mad scientist aspect of vape culture. But they tend to miss the glue that holds it all together. Because whether you're a highly sought-after modder or a celebrity cloud-chaser or just a newbie with a plug-and-play pod system who can't tell an atty from a carto, a major part of why you're invested is because you've seen the benefits of vaping – no more tar, no more smell, no more coughing up wet, black chunks of lung every morning – first-hand. And, much like with vegans or anyone on a Keto diet, it's not enough to have found something that works for you. You need everyone else to join you in your crusade. And again, like with vegans – but not with those goddamn Keto zealots – it's because you care.

You can see this in online communities like the Indian Vaper Community and The Great Vaping Community of India (TGVC). two Facebook groups that are at the centre of Indian vaping. Both function like an online, nationwide Nicotine Addicts Anonymous, with vapers regularly sharing their struggles with the cancer stick and proudly proclaiming how long they've been "analog-free". You can see it in the way people go out of their way to give advice to and encourage complete strangers who want to quit smoking, or console a vaper who's fallen off the wagon. And you can see it in the countless stories of vendors – the vast majority of whom are just vapers with a little experience navigating the Indian customs bureaucracy, who go above and beyond to make sure a customer doesn't have to go back to cigarettes – whether it's hand-delivering liquids when they run out or sending their own vape equipment as a stop-gap if an order gets delayed.

"At the basic level, it's like this whole support group constantly just reminding each other not to smoke and to live a healthier life," says Singh. "These are people who could never imagine quitting smoking before they found vaping. So you're deluded by that experience, and now you're inhaling such a... delicious feeling."

“What do you vape?”

That's the first question Rubin Sethi asks me as I get into his car. It's a common question in vaping circles, though not everyone is so direct. Once I rattle off the names of my mod (the Voofoo Drag) and tank (Innokin Zenith), he relaxes. A 40-year-old man wearing a turban, white shirt and simple blue denim jeans, he doesn't exactly look like your garden-variety vape geek. A dropout from Purdue University where he studied mechanical engineering on a 90 per cent scholarship, Sethi didn't get into vaping to quit smoking. No, his particular vice was the hookah. Introduced to vaping by his friendly neighbourhood paanwallah sometime in 2009, Sethi picked up the habit as a safer, tobacco-free hookah alternative. Not long after, he started making his own flavours.

"My passion was always flavour and fragrances, I used to make perfumes as a hobby," he tells me, as we drive to his

office in Shalimar Bagh, Delhi. In 2016, Sethi and his friend Vikas Chanana decided to turn that passion into a business. The two co-founded Vapresso India, an Indian e-liquid start-up. Chanana handles the numbers and the marketing, leaving the autodidact Sethi free to play flavourmaster. Once we get to the office, Sethi talks about the art of making juices for over an hour, from the mixing and matching of different flavour molecules to which particular chemical compound comes closest to replicating a specific taste and mouthfeel. He's particularly proud of the fact that he's the only Indian juice-maker who extracts his own nicotine (everyone else uses imported extract from America), using a proprietary apparatus he devised himself after months of research and experimentation. "There are still thousands of flavours that most Indians don't even know," he tells me. "Elderflower, elderberry, hibiscus. I'm going to bring them all to India."

But even more fascinating than Sethi's devotion to flavours is the company's biggest innovation, and its biggest source of revenue: vape rental. More familiar with the hookah scene than India's small vape community, the two saw an opportunity to corner a portion of a big market when the Haryana government suddenly banned hookah bars. They reached out to bars and restaurants in Gurugram, offering handheld vapes filled with flavours concocted by Sethi to fill in the gap left by the ban. The plan wasn't particularly successful, in part because people had no idea what a vape was. "We realised that people want the feel of the hookah, with the pipe and the *gadgad paani*. So we developed a device called the Tornado, which fits on top of the hookah base in place of the chillum, but works like a vape. We came out with that in November 2017. Today we're supplying to some of the top restaurants and bars in Delhi and Gurugram, with plans to expand to Mumbai."

Innovators like Sethi are leading the charge to transform the Indian vaping scene into a legit industry by taking it out of its tiny online niche and making it mainstream. Others, like the Dampf Company's Angad Kandhari and KickAsh's Aalok Avasthi, are taking vaping into physical markets by opening up brick and mortar stores. "Physical stores also help us raise awareness among people who aren't in the community or don't spend their time online," says Kandhari, who recognises the need to boost vaping's image and make it accessible to the average aspirational Indian. "That's how vaping will grow. Today, we have customers ranging from 19 to 75 years old." →



Trick lemon sauce, anyone? Vapresso India offers several flavours of e-liquids



On April 7, 2016, a sessions court in Chandigarh made history when it sentenced the owner of a small crockery shop in Mohali to three years in prison, along with a fine of ₹1,00,000. His crime? Using and allegedly selling vapes. Two years earlier, a raid by a drug inspector unearthed a single e-cigarette and eight refill cartridges placed near the window of the shop. Parvesh Kumar, the 25-year-old shop owner, claimed he had the e-cigarette because he was trying to quit. Their decision made Kumar the first person to be handed a criminal conviction for a vape-related offence.

Kumar's conviction is the most public salvo in a behind-the-scenes battle that's been going on since 2014, when the Punjab government announced its ban on the sale of e-cigarettes. Since then, five other state governments have followed suit, including Maharashtra, Karnataka and Bihar. Then, in December 2017, Union Health Minister JP Nadda announced that the central government was looking into a national ban, an intention it reaffirmed in a statement to the Delhi High Court early last month.

So why is a country with 120 million smokers, 900,000 of whom die every year, so intent on banning vaping when so many vapers will swear blind by its benefits?

The government's stand is clear. It believes that e-cigarettes are just as harmful as cigarettes, that nicotine causes cancer, and that vaping acts as a gateway drug to smoking. From that perspective, the ban makes sense.

Unfortunately, none of the above statements are entirely, or even substantially, true. The science on the health effects of vaping isn't entirely settled yet, but the latest research – including comprehensive studies by Public Health England and the American National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine – say that e-cigarettes are definitely safer than cigarettes, 95 per cent less harmful, in fact, according to the PHE report. The idea that nicotine by itself causes cancer – oft repeated by anti-vaping advocates – is also unsupported by current science. And as for the gateway drug theory, it hardly makes sense to ban the gateway drug but keep the “destination drug” legal. There is one caveat: We don't have enough research yet on the long-term effects of

vaping. But we already know that cigarettes kill 900,000 people in India annually. The question is, do we stick with the known killer, or do we roll the dice and see if vaping can help?

“We talk about harm reduction in every aspect of life, even the government does,” says former journalist Samrat Chowdhery, one of the founding members of consumer advocacy group Association of Vapers in India (AVI). Formed after the Karnataka vaping ban in 2016, AVI has been trying to organise vapers and educate the government about the health benefits of vaping. “But when it comes to tobacco, the concept of harm reduction goes out the window in favour of this moralistic anti-tobacco stance. In short, the government is saying quit or die.”

For the last couple of years, AVI has devoted its efforts to sensitising the government. It's collected thousands of pages of scientific research, plugged into global vaping advocacy networks and reached out to ministers from the Union Health Ministry, all in an effort to build a case for sensible regulation rather than an outright ban. Everyone I spoke to for this piece agreed that a certain amount of regulation was not just acceptable, but desirable, especially in the context of under-age vaping and quality control.

“There's already a certain degree of self-regulation in the market. And if



the government comes in with reasonable regulations, we'll be very happy to comply,” says Chowdhery. “But the government likes to ignore this position. They think we're calling for this anarchist rule where ‘kuch bhi chalega’.”

With a ban now all but certain, AVI is busy preparing for a legal challenge in court. But with limited numbers and funding, there's only so much it can do. And it's not just the government that it's up against. The WHO, which pumps billions of dollars into public healthcare in countries like India, has been pushing a hardline stance against vaping in Asian countries. Add in the significant influence of the tobacco and pharma lobbies – the latter has spent billions of dollars researching and marketing their own smoking cessation aids – and it's easy to see that this isn't going to be a fair fight. Like David vs Goliath, but this time Goliath brought his friends along for the showdown.

The next few months will be make or break for Indian vapers, and they know it. The possibility of a ban hung over every conversation I had like the proverbial Damocles sword. So far, they remain. Indian vapers may be outnumbered and outgunned, but they're not going to give in just yet. Most importantly, like Rustam Singh, they still believe that vaping is the wave of the future. “A ban will drive vaping underground but they can't stop it from spreading,” says Chowdhery. “Because it's not someone luring people into vaping. People are driven to vaping, and that won't change. So even if they [put a] ban [in place], 10 years from now there will still be 10 times more vapers in the country than there are now.”