
Fireside Chat: The Code Beneath the Vault

Host: Sudarssan N

Panelists: Parul Ghosh, Shishir Mishra, Abhishek Bhushan, Bala Mahalingham, Shruti Hansoge Ramesh

Part 1: The Introduction

Host: "Good evening, everyone. Welcome. We're here to talk about innovation in banking and finance. Now, how many of you have heard that before? We're constantly told that banks need to be more like tech companies. That AI is going to change everything. That culture is key.

But let's be honest. It often feels like we're just hearing the same talking points on a loop. There's a reality distortion field around corporate innovation.

Today, we're going to try and switch that field off.

Inspired by the kind of conversations that make you go, 'Wait, what?'—we want to get past the polished press releases and into the messy, complicated, and fascinating reality of what it actually takes to drive real change. We're here to talk about the code, the culture, and the courage it takes to build the future of finance from within the vault.

Our conversation will circle three core questions:

1. How do we build an **engineering culture** that aims for fundamental change, not just safe, incremental updates?
2. How do you foster **true innovation** in an industry wrapped in decades of regulation and complexity?
3. And how do you achieve **speed at scale**? How do you empower developers to be fast and brilliant without breaking things?

To help us dissect these questions, we have five incredible leaders who have been in the trenches, building, and sometimes, even breaking things. Let me introduce them."

Part 2: Introducing the Panelists

Host:

"First, we have Parul Ghosh. My notes describe her as 'the round peg in the square hole.' While everyone was focused on the bottom line, she was exploring voice analysis to improve employee mental health and bootstrapping initiatives to teach girls how to code. She's here to challenge our assumptions about where true value comes from."

"Next, **Shishir Mishra**. Shishir works in the high-stakes world of unsecured lending. My notes on him contain a fascinating contradiction: 'AI can save the banking industry \$1 Trillion by 2030,' followed by, 'chatbots are 50% of that.' Shishir is our AI realist, here to tell us about the other 50% that nobody seems to be talking about."

"Then, we have **Abhishek Bhushan**. Abhishek's journey is remarkable—from a degree in Metallurgy at NIT Rourkela to deep expertise in telephony and customer servicing in personal lending. He lives by the motto, 'Whether you think you can or you can't, you're right.' He represents the bridge between old-school infrastructure and new-world customer expectations."

"Beside him is **Bala Mahalingham**. With over 25 years in the game, Bala has seen it all—consumer payments, mortgages, and massive enterprise tech. The most intriguing note I have for him is about a 3-year, 50-million-dollar middleware project. He knows what it's like to bet big, and he has the scars and successes to prove it. We're going to talk about what a \$50 million lesson feels like."

"And finally, **Shruti Hansoge Ramesh**. While others architect the vision, Shruti is the one who makes it a reality. A development manager with 15 years of experience, she also hails from NIT Rourkela with a Chemical Engineering degree. Her philosophy is that 'every employee is talent.' She's on the front lines, tasked with turning brilliant ideas into functional, scalable code and fostering a culture of excellence amidst relentless deadlines."

(Host turns to the panel)

Part 3: The Conversation (Thematic & Provocative Questions)

Theme 1: Engineering-Focused Culture

Host: "Let's start with culture. We all want an 'engineering-focused' culture. But it often gets translated into free snacks and better laptops. Let's get real. Shruti, I want to start with you. You believe 'every employee is talent,' but in a high-pressure environment, how do you balance fostering that talent with the relentless demand for developer productivity and speed? How do you prevent 'fostering' from becoming a bottleneck when you need to ship code *now*?"

Host (to Abhishek & Shruti): "Shruti, Abhishek, you both came to software from different engineering disciplines at NIT Rourkela—Chemical and Metallurgy. How does that non-computer science background change how you view building a software culture? Do you see something your peers, who have only ever known code, might be missing?"

Host (to Parul): "Parul, you championed a project on employee mental health using voice analysis. That's not a typical engineering project. In a corporate world that prizes 'toughness,' how did you even start that conversation? Tell us about the 'whitepaper moment'—the point where people stopped seeing it as a 'soft' idea and started taking it seriously as a tech initiative."

Theme 2: Fostering True Innovation

Host: "This brings us to innovation. In banking, it feels like we're caught between 'move fast and break things' and 'move slow and don't get fined.' Shishir, let's jump to that note about AI. A trillion-dollar promise, but chatbots are a fraction of it. What are the potential areas for innovation that are being completely overlooked right now? What is the *real* 50%?"

Host (to Bala): "Bala, let's talk about the opposite of overlooked—the big, ambitious bet. My notes have a very direct question for you: 'What big thing did you win & lose while you built that Global Enterprise Middleware?' Three years, fifty million dollars. What was the highest high, and what was the moment you realized something had gone fundamentally wrong? What was the lesson that cost \$50 million to learn?"

Host (circulating the idea): "Bala, you managed a massive, long-term project. Parul, your notes mention a preference for 'small, iterative ideas.' In your experience, which is the true engine of innovation inside a bank? The big, strategic bet or the constant, small-scale evolution? Parul, could your mental health app have ever started if it had needed a \$50 million budget upfront?"

Theme 3: Developer Productivity (Speed at Scale)

Host: "Ultimately, all of this comes down to execution. Speed. Abhishek, you have deep expertise in telephony and credit card call centers—systems that have to be robust and are often resistant to change. The note here says you live by 'Whether you think you can or can't, you're right.' How do you apply that mindset to inject fundamental engineering speed into a legacy system without bringing the whole thing down?"

Host (connecting panelists): "Let's create a scenario. Shishir, your team comes up with a brilliant new LLM-based lending assistant. It has the potential to be part of that 'other 50%'. Shruti, you have to get your teams to build, test, and deploy it. What is the biggest disconnect you two see between the promise of an AI model and the practical reality of making it a stable, scalable, and productive tool for your developers and your business?"

Host (Final round-robin question): "I want to end with a question for each of you, based on what we've discussed. Looking forward, what is the one 'unpopular' or 'heretical' belief you hold about the future of banking technology that you think others are too afraid to say out loud?"

Part 4: Closing Remarks

Host:

"Thank you all. What I'm taking away from this is a series of powerful tensions: the clash between legacy and ambition with Abhishek, the choice between iterative change and big bets with Parul and Bala, and the gap between AI's promise and its practical deployment with Shishir and Shruti.

It's clear that building the future of finance isn't about having all the answers. It's about having the courage to ask the right, often difficult, questions. It's about understanding that innovation isn't a department; it's a debate. It's a fight.

My final thought for everyone here tonight is this: What is the one assumption we hold sacred in our own teams that we should be challenging tomorrow morning?

Thank you to our incredible panel. Thank you all for coming."