

The 1949 super-hit Hindi film *Patanga* has a popular song sung by Shamshad Begum which carved a place for itself in the minds and hearts of many Indians. *Mere piya gaye Rangoon, kiya hai waban se teliphoon* shows a couple crooning to each other on a long distance telephone line from Dehradun to Burma. The familiar black Bakelite telephone receiver features prominently throughout the song, with the lead characters holding it to their ears while singing, prancing and pirouetting to the simple melody. The song reminds us of the place the telephone once occupied in the popular imagination — a technology which millions of Indians take for granted today after mobile phones stormed the post-liberalisation economy.

Two years before the release of this film, when India became independent, it had about 100,000 telephones for 340 million people: one for every 3,400. Today, more than 900 million mobile phone subscribers enjoy the access to information, the ability to communicate, as well as the convenience, privacy and entertainment afforded by their very own cell phone. Correcting for double-counting, and considering that mobile phones are used far more by urban and rich people, the statistics still indicate that one in every two Indians owns a phone. How did this overarching and mindboggling transformation come about? Who are the people who control, install, maintain, repair and consume this ubiquitous technology? And crucially, how has it impacted life in the country? Robin Jeffrey and Assa Doron explore these important questions in their delightful and engrossing chronicle *Cell Phone Nation: How mobile phones have revolutionized business, politics and ordinary life in India*.

For Doron and Jeffrey, the “rocket-like” take-up of cell phones in India from 2004 raised questions about “how they worked, how and where they were made, and who made money from them and how”. The duo aimed to write an accessible book, both sound in scholarship and engaging for their readers. They point out that the contribution of the book is to “paint a whole picture”, which might be imperfect and incomplete, but whole, of the wide spectrum of people across boundaries, each of whom has been affected by the disruptive mobile.

In the Introduction, they proffer their thesis in articulate prose:

In the industrialising, urbanising world, individual merit, individual mobility and individual expression have been steadily celebrated for the past 200 years. Pressure of ideas and economics has nudged India in similar directions; but even in the twenty first century structures of authority—gender, caste, class and family—impose limitations on many people’s ability to imagine or conduct themselves independently of such frameworks. This is where the disruptive potential of the mobile phone becomes significant: the new tool affords the possibility of escaping existing structures. People, of course, must already have the imagination to want to do things differently. ...

Mobile phones can both empower and disempower, and it would be a distraction to focus on questions of ‘good’ or ‘bad’. The technology

Upwordly mobile

Cell Phone Nation: How mobile phones have revolutionized business, politics and ordinary life in India

By Robin Jeffrey and Assa Doron

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exists;immenselypowerfuleconomic forces, augmented by widespread social acceptance, have disseminated it widely; and it will only go away if a major cataclysm befalls humanity. We live with mobile telephony, and most of us relish the benefits. India in this sense is no different from other places. But the disabling inequalities and the diversity of India mean that the disruptive potential of the cell phone is more profound than elsewhere and the possibilities for change more fundamental.

does not allow them the pleasures and intimacies of courtship and new-found love. In all these narratives, the mobile phone is a tool, of control, subversion, romance, comfort, rebellion. “As these transactions accumulated, like grains of sand on a wind-swept beach”, the authors write metaphorically, “the dunes of social practice began to shift. The shape they would take was unpredictable, but worth watching and studying.”

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Cell Phone Nation takes a nuanced position on the impact of mobiles on business, politics and ordinary life in the country. The authors do not romanticise or exaggerate the positive impact of mobile technology. For instance, in the chapter on business, while discussing the impact of mobile phones on the livelihoods of fishermen in Kerala who now had the opportunity to negotiate with potential buyers before landing their catch, the authors perceptively write: “The mobile phones improved some conditions; it did not reorder society”

The authors map this possibility for change created by the mobile in the lives of ordinary Indians – fishermen in Kerala, boatmen in Banaras, sugarcane farmers in Maharashtra, Adivasis in Chhattisgarh, and women across the country – who now have access to information and the capability to communicate with one another. In a revealing chapter – perhaps the most interesting one in the book – on the impact of cell phones on gender equations and relationships between men and women and within households, Jeffrey and Doron narrate stories of young lovers, brides, wives and mothers-in-law for whom the cell phone takes on many different avatars. Young brides are forced to surrender their old cell phones at their natal homes before moving to their marital homes, so that their ties with networks developed before marriage are safely severed. Lovers use the mobile phone to pursue their relationship in the face of social odds. Soon-to-be-married couples converse surreptitiously on cell phones – in one instance, the woman’s brother lends her his cell phone to facilitate the private, romantic interludes – and subvert a social order which

politics and ordinary life in the country. The authors do not romanticise or exaggerate the positive impact of mobile technology. For instance, in the chapter on business, while discussing the impact of mobile phones on the livelihoods of fishermen in Kerala who now had the opportunity to negotiate with potential buyers before landing their catch, the authors perceptively write: “The mobile phones improved some conditions; it did not reorder society.” Similarly, in exploring the equations between boatmen on the ghats of Banaras, the authors believe that while the mobile phone did not eradicate differences, it put less powerful boatmen who could now communicate on their cell phones with potential customers “on a slightly more equal footing”. Also, they point to “patchy and inconsistent” effects of market price information obtained through cell phones on the bargaining power of small farmers, while wealthier farmers “could use cell phones to consolidate their positions”. Thus, mobile technology has potential as well as limitations, and lone citizens armed with a mobile can only go so far in what they can achieve without capable institutions.

In addition to detailing the impact of the cell phone on the lives of ordinary Indians, the book also has sections on the control of mobile technology and the mechanisms and people involved in its widespread dissemination. The authors recount the gripping story of the arrival and penetration of cell phones in India — a narrative of big capitalism, political intrigue and dirty business. A chapter titled “Celling India” unfolds the many twists and turns in this journey of the entry of the cell phone in India, in which the telecommunications bureaucracy lords over the telecommunications space, private corporations play dirty in vying for radio frequency spectrum and communications ministers land up in jail on corruption charges.

Another chapter demystifies the mobile phone tower, offers the reader a glimpse of the non-branded, flashy ‘China mobile’ economy and introduces her to the workings of the world of the mobile-*mistris* in the informal economy who repair and resell cell phones. Akin to the Hindustani classical pundits and *ustads* of a bygone era, these skilled repairers of cell phones “jealously guarded their knowledge, restricted access to their shops and barred others from viewing their work.” Also, in another parallel with Hindustani musicians, these mobile repairmen learn “by stealth as well as by sharing”. One trick in use is that the mobile mechanic marks several suspect components in the faulty device before sending it to another expert for repair, and when the expert returns the repaired mobile, the mechanic who sent it opens it up, in an attempt to identify the fault by figuring out which of the marked components had been tinkered with!

In celebrating the disruptive and democratising potential of the mobile, however, the authors fail to locate the technology within the larger context of corruption and crony capitalism which has been concomitant with its widespread diffusion, beyond a sketchy narrative of the many scandals along the way. Though there is no doubt that cell phones by themselves make conditions “more democratic”, as the authors demonstrate through the stories they tell, the political and economic structure of crony capitalism within which these cell phones have been made available to the *aam aadmi* is no alternative to the stifling, unproductive and corrupt apparatus of the license-permit raj state. From the days of the infamous Sukh Ram to the mindboggling numbers associated with the 2G scam, corruption is a doppelganger of the proliferation of cell phone technology across the country. If the growth and penetration of mobile telephony is a barometer of the transformation of Indian society since the opening up of the economy, so is the equally phenomenal growth of corruption and crony capitalism that has accompanied it which erodes the edifice of Indian democracy.

Cell Phone Nation tells the story of the many lives of the mobile with élan, craft and insight. Indeed, a mobile in hand means much more to the ordinary Indian than a mere phone. Jeffrey and Doron’s book, which paints this wider canvas of the impact of the mobile phone on the common man and woman, is both an important sociological document as well as an engaging narrative of life in an India on the move. ■