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**“Express yourself” / “Stay together”: Tensions surrounding mobile
communication in the middle-class Indian family**

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Abstract

This chapter evaluates the mobile phone's dual position as change agent and reflection of existing tensions in Indian middle class families. It also offers a snapshot of the aspirational consumption that is characteristic of the new middle class in India. Three case studies are reported here relating to mobiles and family financial decisions, romantic relationships, and domestic space. The studies show that, whereas elements of autonomy and individuation do arise from mobile phone use, the adoption of mobiles as a family process better reflects its diffusion in middle-class India. This culturally specific spread of mobiles symbolizes broader socioeconomic phenomena in India.

**“Express yourself” / “Stay together”: Tensions surrounding mobile communication
in the middle-class Indian family**

Introduction

Across millions of households in India, amidst normal conversations about finances, education, dating, the home, and relatives, a new topic is emerging about the proper role of the mobile phone in the family. Mobile use is rapidly growing in India: subscriptions grew 73% between March 2005 and March 2006 alone (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, 2006). Though overall penetration is still a modest 90 million lines (8.2% of the population), much of the current growth is driven by the flourishing Indian middle class. Some families are purchasing their first mobile, others are adding a second line for the spouse, and still others add lines as their children reach certain milestones. The handsets might be new, but the conversations about the mobiles are not. Instead, the questions about when to purchase them (or not) and how to use them (or not) are closely related to all the “traditional” conversations mentioned above. When Indian families talk about mobiles, they are also talking about money, about dating, about the home, and so on.

Drawing on three related studies of middle-class Indian families, this chapter considers how the mobile phone re-shapes and reflects existing tensions within families. A wide body of research exists of how personal and mediated communication technologies affect and reflect family dynamics. However, this chapter breaks new ground by viewing these processes in the context of urban family structures that are being re-negotiated in response to rapidly changing social and economic conditions. Thus we argue that mobile use is central to our understanding of the tensions facing the new and expanding Indian middle class; it is not only a symbol of middle-class consumption but also a lens on the family dynamic itself.

Mobiles and Families

The complex dynamic around family adoption and use of mobile telephones (like landlines ([Betteridge, 1997](#)), televisions ([Simpson, 1987](#)), and PCs ([Lindlof, 1992](#)) before

them) has fascinated researchers. Following Haddon (2003), we draw particularly on the domestication concept ([Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992](#); [Silverstone & Mansell, 1996](#)). As Haddon explains, domestication does not reduce the phenomenon of use to a single moment of adoption or rejection by individuals. Rather, adoption is better understood as an ongoing process involving multiple members in a family, where symbolic and family tensions are played out in and around functional uses in the physical domain of the home.

Other researchers have focused on particular elements of mobile use within families. For example, [Chesley \(2005\)](#) found that over time, mobile use tended to blur the internal/external boundaries at home, eroding family satisfaction. [Ling \(1998; , 1999a\)](#) has explored gender differences in mobile use within families, observing how “fathers own, and mothers loan” mobiles. Others have looked at how mobile use has forced re-negotiations of the relationships between children and parents. These negotiations can result in new family rules and norms dictating appropriate mobile use ([Ling & Yttri, 2005](#)), new strains in the discussions around managing money and finances ([Haddon & Vincent, 2005](#)), or altered strategies for intra-family communication in terms of what is said, via what channel, and at what time ([Ling, 2006](#)).

Similar questions are being asked about family mobile use among non-Western households. For example, [Bell \(2003\)](#) identifies ways in which the relative importance of strong familial bonds over individual autonomy in many Asian contexts might increase the importance of the home as a place where ICT use is determined. [Dobashi \(2005\)](#) has explored “Housewives with Keitai” in Japan, observing how use of mobiles in an environment of multiple tasks and spatially absent fathers has aligned with existing Japanese expectations of gender roles, particularly those of housewife and mother. [de Gournay and Smoreda \(2005\)](#) also examine keitai use by Japanese women, finding that their extensive use of the mobile was not directly connected to mobility nor to a need to move within the city. The women in both the Japanese studies possessed their own, individual mobiles as opposed to sharing their husbands’ mobiles as observed in India ([Thomas, 2005](#)).

A Changing Middle Class

It is against this backdrop of increased interest in ICT use by non-Western families that we turn to a brief discussion of the Indian middle class. The notion of class itself is symbolically charged and locally contested. In India, class competes with caste and with a simpler rich/poor dichotomy for salience ([Dickey, 2000](#)), but in the last decade, as India has liberalized and become more prosperous, the middle class has become more seductive. Fernandes (2000) explains:

Advertising and media images have contributed to the creation of an image of a “new” Indian middle class, one that has left behind its dependence on austerity and state protection and has embraced an open India that is at ease with broader processes of globalization. In this image, the newness of the middle class rests on its embrace of the social practices of taste and commodity consumption that market a new cultural standard that is specifically associated with liberalization and the opening of the Indian market to the global economy. Images of mobility associated with newly available commodities such as cell phones and automobiles, for instance, serve to create a standard, which the urban middle classes can and should aspire to. (p. 90)

Combined, the idealized “new” middle class (of IT professionals and multinationals) and the struggling “old” middle class (of state banks and bureaucracies) include between 55 and 250 million people, depending on how broad a definition of middle class one wants to make ([Sridharan, 2004](#)). Families in the Indian middle class draw their incomes from non-manual labor, a definition particularly significant in a society that, despite all its rapid economic growth to date, remains numerically rural, agrarian, and poor ([Sridharan, 2004](#)). Thus, to [Dickey \(2000\)](#), the Indian middle class can not be distilled to vocation or income. Instead, it is a symbolic, dynamic construct, in which consumption markers play important role.

Research Questions

Even this brief discussion of family communication and the middle class illustrates how the mobile phone now plays a doubly important symbolic role. Echoing Fernandes, others have noted how, for users in the developing world, the mobile is a powerful symbol of macro-level trends in globalization and consumer consumption ([Donner, 2004](#);

[Özcan & Koçak, 2003](#); [Varbanov, 2002](#); [Wei & Kolko, 2005](#)). At the same time, it is a symbol of autonomy at the micro-level, afforded to kids, teens, husbands and wives as they “express themselves.” Indeed, Katz and Aakhus (2002) ask us to look beyond the symbolism of the devices, arguing instead that they embody an “Apparatgeist,” a universal quality that enables and compels users to express their autonomy.

In the studies below, we seek to balance the focus on what the mobile changes with what it amplifies and represents. The symbolic power and appeal of the flashy handset is undeniable. However, following domestication, our studies illustrate the ways in which families use mobiles in ways that are more familiar than new. In this sense, the chapter echoes Harper’s (2003; , 2005) argument that mobiles are not themselves a driving force of large-scale social change and answers Dholakia and Zwick’s (2004) call for mobile research that moves beyond the needs and behaviors of Western “road warriors.” Nevertheless, the patterns of use we observe, both actual and symbolic, reflect some of the tensions Indian middle-class families confront as they react to a rapidly changing social environment.

Three Cases: Family Finances, Courtship, and Domestic Space

This chapter draws on three projects at Microsoft Research India that examine how mediated communication reflects and shapes Indian middle-class family dynamics during this period of socioeconomic change. The family finances case is drawn from an ethnographic study of the domestication and management of a “communication repertoire” ([Haddon & Vincent, 2005](#)) among 56 lower-middle income households in Mumbai, Delhi, and Chennai. The courtship case is based on a study of how mobile phones are used to support romantic relationships among young professionals in Bangalore. This study involved 20 members of the “new” middle class, who are working in the IT and business sectors that are driving the economic growth in the region. The domestic space study, also in Bangalore, examines spatial modalities of individual and shared mobile phone use. It is based on 22 interviews with “old” middle class families—specifically young adults aged 20-24 and housewives—and 17 interviews with lower class families. In all three cases, respondents were recruited using a combination of personal invitations, announcements, and snowball (referral) approaches. These studies

were based on in-depth interviews, participant observation, and other qualitative methods.¹

Vignette: Mobile Phones in the Singh Household

Before discussing the three cases, we present a vignette from Rangaswamy’s fieldwork that reflects the range of tensions that exist in middle-class families surrounding mobile phones:

Paritosh Singh, a civil servant, lives in a typical government housing colony in South Delhi and has a daughter and son who have adopted unconventional careers and aspirations. His wife, Parvati, works part time in a nearby school. She says this money “helps with the extra jam, over and above the bread and butter.” They have spent a lot of money, taking loans much beyond their means, to educate their children. Their daughter is a design graduate and is now married and living in Mumbai. She was the first in the family to get a mobile, as soon as she got her first work assignment. Their son, Navneet, lives at home. He has a management master’s degree with a bachelor’s degree in information technology.

Parvati persuaded her husband to get a mobile: “He will go out to places. He will fill up forms on the websites where they will ask for mobile numbers. And it won’t look nice that he does not have a number to fill in so we decided he could have one.” Paritosh says, “I finally got one. There is a landline in the house—that is for my wife. Mine is a prepaid connection, so I will receive incoming calls. Even my wife can receive calls on this if it is from her natal family. If I need to make calls, I can [top up the account]. If I need to call someone from home, I can use the landline. The good thing is that I can receive a call or a message even if I am out of the house. I like a simple phone but I chose this one with a color screen. I thought this looked good.” He adds, “In the long run, the only big expenditure you incur is that of the instrument. After that there is nothing. The landline will turn out to be more expensive when calling to mobiles.”

Navneet has a “poor man’s cell phone,” a basic Nokia costing Rs3,550 (about USD \$77), a gift from his sister. To him, mobiles are for receiving calls and sending messages and need no extra features. “My sister had a fancy phone. [but] I am careful with money....I call a cousin who sells SIM cards, and he gives me a card I recharge my phone with. He comes once in 2-3 months. Then I ask my dad to pay. It is logical thinking.” His mother feels it is their duty to fill his top-up. But she contradicts what her son had to say about his frugality with

¹ Thanks to Geeta Menon of Stree Jagruti Samiti in Bangalore, and to Sumita Nair, Gautam Prakash and Nimisha Verma for their assistance in recruiting and conducting interviews.

mobiles: “Now he has started misusing it a lot! He fills one card of Rs570, finishes it off in 10 days and then sits quietly! Not that he wants to refill it. He manages like that for the next 20 days. When his sister was around, he would happily use her phone, sometimes talk for a long time. Well, she would never allow others [outside the family] to borrow the phone. But she thinks it is natural to share with family.”

Paritosh wants his wife to get a mobile, too. “There will be some scheme for government servants—we can make use of that. Then we will not need the landline at all at home. If all three of us put Rs300 card each, i.e., Rs900 total, then what is the need for the landline?”

Mobile Phones and Family Financial Decisions

The Singh family illustrates many of the complexities surrounding use of mobiles in the home. One theme is family finances: who pays for telecom, and how much use is appropriate? At a functional level, the trend is towards complexity: affordable personal communication devices augment and sometimes displace traditional landlines, thus allowing a mixed media environment in homes. Hence, our study follows Haddon and Vincent (2005), exploring how families manage their communications repertoire.

The appeal of the flashy handset is undeniable. Many families we spoke to had redistributed financial priorities in order to purchase more expensive, feature-rich handsets. So too is the desire to just keep on talking: despite having “a poor man’s” cell phone, Navneet let his spending on calls race ahead of his means. And yet, desire is balanced by patience. Another girl explains why she is content without a camera phone: “It’s a big thing that my father got me this handset. I don’t have those big aspirations....He is a single earning member of the family. And he has managed so much....If I were earning, yes [I would have shifted to a camera phone].”

Virtually all the families we spoke to paid careful attention to selecting and using the new range of telecommunication options in the most cost-effective way. Clearly, Paritosh does not intend to spend money on many outgoing mobile calls. Nor are other family members free to spend as they wish, as each family member evaluates the spending habits of the others. Navneet’s case is illustrative: he earns his own money and owns a handset, but in his family—as in others in our sample—the responsibility for minimizing the household’s overall household expenditures is shared even when there was no formal budget, individual family members kept their overall spending in check.

Often, this translates into sharing devices, even if the bills and handsets are “owned” by individuals with the family. As Navneet’s mother says, “It is normal to share within a family.”

These patterns of owning and sharing are windows into broader family dynamics. In another family we spoke to, the only mobile was owned by the daughter attending college and living at home. While the father had given up his mobile for budgetary reasons, he gave his daughter a phone as a gift for scoring high marks in her high school exams. And according to the mother, they will soon give the younger son a handset of his own “to maintain equality between siblings.” Until then, he takes messages on his sister’s handset when she is home in the afternoon. We see the age-old parenting challenges of equity versus reward played out around the highly-coveted mobile handset.

Though these patterns of allocation, sharing, and mutual responsibility reflect exiting family dynamics, mobile and personal communication devices have significantly expanded the opportunity for children to act as technological innovators for the home. One of our respondents, a mother of two teenagers, mentioned that her children are so smart that they manage to stay within budget by chatting more when they receive calls “They don’t waste talk time to chat aimlessly with their friends— they make the friends call them up!” In another instance, the father refused to lend his mobile—the only phone in the household—to his children, disapproving of their wanton chatting. When his children’s friends called, he alerted his children, and they would go to a pay booth and converse. In addition, we see more adolescents actively and strategically engaged with family purchases, instructing parents on choices of plans and features, or, in the case of the Singhs, bringing the first handset into the household.

Mobiles for Maintaining Contact in Romantic Relationships

Besides provoking household discussions about finances, the mobile phone also ties together families and couples who are separated from one another. The study reported here is of young professionals, most of whom work at Microsoft’s Global Technical Support Center, an exemplar of the IT sector in Bangalore. Specifically, this case considers the maintenance of romantic relationships over distances imposed by the global economy and by cultural gaps between children and parents. Romantic

relationships are situated within a social network and may reveal disjunctures that exist in a family especially if the relationship moves towards marriage.

In this study, “family” refers to the individual and his or her parents even if they live in separate households. Most of the participants in this study had come to Bangalore specifically for career opportunities, leaving behind their “native places” to live on their own or with roommates. Yet, ICT such as mobile phones can tether the families together even if they are a world away: participants often communicate with their parents daily by phone, a facsimile of living with them. One woman “starts her day” by walking into the office and making a regular phone call to home at 7:30 p.m. before she starts the night shift. She comes from a “close-knit” family, and she worries that her parents are overly attached to her. The phone thus allows her parents to learn to cope without her, while at the same time keeping them in touch with each other.

Young professionals relocating to Bangalore sometimes must support, at least temporarily, long-distance relationships with significant others. And the gaps experienced by couples can also be more problematic than just space. One steady couple is co-located in Bangalore, but they do not see much of each other because the man’s parents live with him. His parents oppose marriage for them because they are of different caste and communities. This couple stays connected chiefly through phone calls and SMS and during occasional breaks at work. Whether we call it absent presence (Gergen, 2002), connected presence (Licoppe, 2004), or “Perpetual Contact” (Katz & Aakhus, 2002), these attachments over a distance are central to our understanding of mobile communication around the world. For young people suddenly on their own in urban India, these bonds are important indeed.

On the one hand, mobile phones are a boon because they facilitate communication and nurture relationships that might otherwise have been impossible, as illustrated by a newlywed couple’s arranged marriage. The man agreed to marry the woman because they had many close family ties: their fathers were long-time friends from the army, and they knew each other from schooldays. But he did not know anything about her as an adult, and they lived in different cities, so he gave her a mobile, and they talked on the phone five hours a day. This multiplex use of phones to support both familial and romantic love

recalls the various types of love supported by mobile phones in the Philippines ([Ellwood-Clayton, 2006](#)).

The mobile phone may also reinforce problems by acting as a bandage for the serious family issues that affect a distance relationship. The close, intimate, communication afforded by the mobile phone may strengthen these romantic relationships without addressing problems such as disagreements with parents. Couples might literally “stay together” longer than their parents would like. In the co-located relationship where the man’s parents disapproved of the girlfriend, the man was committed to winning over his parents. He said that it would not be possible to marry his girlfriend if the parents were against them because he would always have to be the intermediary between his parents and wife, an uncomfortable situation. For such a relationship to succeed, much negotiation will need to occur to achieve a happy resolution for all.

Mobiles and Domestic Space

Family harmony concerning children’s romantic relationships is more broadly reflected in its perception of household space and boundaries. The study informing this section examined the spatial modalities of mobile phone use in urban Bangalore. It examines categories of “inside” versus “outside,” which in urban India “form an enduring and gendered spatial polarity,” the contrast between which, “holds urban residents’ concepts of self and other and affects their movements through space” (Dickey, 2000, p. 470). For the middle and upper classes, the innermost space of the home encompasses the dichotomies of inside/outside, private/public, like/different, safe/unsafe (Dickey, 2000, p. 470). Establishing boundaries, the home is “the tool for reinstating difference—a difference that must continuously be maintained because it is assailable” (Dickey, 2000, p. 482).

The previous section illustrates how mobiles can breach the home boundary, by facilitating unapproved romantic relationships, yet mobile use also extends this innermost boundary, allowing family members to carry a piece of home with them when they leave the house. This is not only about emergencies and security (Ling & Yttri, 2002) as lower class interview subjects cited, but about “keeping in touch,” as nearly every middle class

interview subject stated. Children needed to reach their parents, husbands and wives to check in with each other. Parents needed to reach children not only for coordination, but for domestic reasons such as a housewife calling a messy daughter to ask where her notebook goes. The middle class interview subjects moved quickly toward an expressive, hyper-coordinating use of the mobile (Ling & Yttri, 2002). This expressive communication was not just between friends but also with family members: when participants spoke of keeping in touch, they specifically meant their families. Moreover, families made exceptions for expressive communication with relatives, even when they enforced rules around appropriate mobile use in contact with the family. For example, Ashita and Nimisha’s parents supported their calling a cousin shortly after midnight on his 26th birthday but forbade Ashita to talk to her unapproved boyfriend too late in the evening.

Rejection of the mobile phone, except when sharing with a husband or child, indicates another instance of domestic boundary and traditional gender role maintenance. (Dickey, 2000, p. 468) writes, "Modesty and chastity form the dominant cultural ideal for women of all religions, castes, and classes. Because avoiding public display of the self is a key sign of modesty, ideally women should not go outside the home more than necessary." This modesty, for some housewives we interviewed, meant not owning a mobile phone. Ling (1999b) describes mobile "rejecters" as a part of a broader model of mobile acquisition and gender. Here, mobile rejection is about maintaining the domestic fabric.

One traditionally dressed housewife (Lata, age 44) pointed out that she had two landlines and didn't need another mobile phone, though her daughters were "forcing" her to use technology (the computer), a word choice used by other male and female mobile rejecters across class lines. Another traditional housewife, whose husband got a mobile in the last month said, "I'll never get my own mobile" (Jyotisana, age 43). For both, it is as though affiliation with landlines is equivalent to representing the domestic boundary, not showing one's face outside. This preference for the place-to-place nature of the landline represents a spatial reinforcement of the traditionally domestic. Yet both women didn't even consider it be an act of sharing when they used their husbands' mobile phones.

Discussion

In these three case studies, we have seen how mobiles spark new discussions but reflect existing concerns in middle-class Indian families. The finances case illustrates how families are aggressively managing costs and behaviors against an increasingly diverse (and sometimes confusing) set of telecommunication options. They do this in an “Indian” way, where mobiles indicate upward mobility for the family unit, evident from multiple handset ownership as well as the attraction of a “fancy” phone over a basic handset for both parents and children. Mobiles are lent and loaned and bills are collectively paid, re-iterating the focus on the family and not the individual. Hence, mobile phone use has entered the balancing act of the family relational dynamic around finances.

The courtship case illustrates how mobile communication has entered into complex, long-standing family discussions and negotiations surrounding children’s marriages. Parents expect and exert considerable control over their children, even when they live far away. The mobile can tie together the family when they are geographically scattered, but it can also undermine parental influence by permitting romantic relationships to be conducted under the radar. In this case, the mobile represents and enables both freedom and continued sense of familial obligations that children may experience away from their parents.

The household spaces case shows how mobile communication represents a challenge to the notion of inside/outside and echoes the domestic space. This case illustrates how mobiles challenge, extend and protect the traditional Indian domestic boundary. It extends the reach of the domestic space for middle class family members by allowing a continual, mundane keeping-in-touch. In families following more strict customs, a housewife's rejection of mobile ownership reflects the traditional gender directive for modest women to stay close to the home.

In each of these cases, the mobile plays instrumental and symbolic roles in the micro-environment of the Indian middle-class family. Yet, at the same time, the studies illustrate ways in which the broader context is changing as well. The finances case points to the prosperity and consumer choice enjoyed by the idealized “new middle class” but

also to the real pressure on Indian families to consume and adapt. Child autonomy in family decision-making and purchasing, symbolized by ownership of and aspirations surrounding mediated communication technologies, is afforded by the new work opportunities generated by the IT-driven economic boom in India. The information-based work is not only entrenching ICTs but also lifestyles that reflect global trends. Unconventional career choices and the desire to acquire personal technologies among young persons are reflective of these trends; they involve and intervene in the process of family decision-making towards these choices.

The courtship case points to a shifting demographic environment where children are not uniformly living at home until marriage, in part because of participation in offshoring or business process outsourcing (BPO) where Indian offices support overseas partners and customers. This work is typically 24/7 and is clustered in a few cities such as New Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore. Although young people can now make good salaries working for prestigious international companies, they are under pressure to work non-traditional hours and to relocate. A recurring theme in publications about BPO work is the havoc that overnight hours can play on workers' health and personal relationships ([Taylor & Bain, 2005](#)). The mobility emblematic of and supported by the new ICTs both necessitates and supports romantic relationships carried out over distances.

The domestic spaces case suggests that the mobile phone will help define and extend the boundaries of the home. It will be a locus of gender role definition and young people's building of identity. It will continue to serve as a point of individuation, with families adding one mobile, multiple mobiles, or losing their landlines altogether. Yet unlike Japan, where the mobile is an individual object (Thomas, 2005), it will be a frequently collective, shared object in India. In the middle class, informal mobile sharing with family and close friends does not only serve an explicitly financial need. This welcomed, collective use of the mobile will extend the way the household operates, keeping the family in touch in a variety of expressive ways.

Conclusion

“Express yourself” and “stay together” are slogans from two Indian mobile providers' advertising campaigns. The phrases represent the complex, sometimes

contradictory, meanings that the mobile may hold for Indian families. A mobile handset simultaneously signifies individuality and autonomy as well as family security and cohesiveness. This symbolic tension surrounding mobile phone use within middle-class Indian families can contribute to a broader understanding of the role of mediated communication devices in society. At the same time, the mobile is a powerful tool that can offer a measure of autonomy to children as well as link together geographically dispersed families. Indian families are using mobiles in nuanced and sophisticated ways in order to go about their business of daily life while staying connected to one another.

Thus mobile use among middle class Indian families is theoretically challenging. It is not clear that mobile use is fragmenting the middle-class Indian family into autonomous individuals. In fact, the domestication theory has allowed us—like Bell (2003)—to see how mobile decisions may be made as a family rather than as individuals, and how families are able to adopt and adapt the mobile to coordinate themselves even when dispersed across distances. The mobile can support the goals of the family even if individuals may be simultaneously using it in ways that might undermine those family goals. The bridegroom talking on the mobile five hours a day to get to know his fiancée before their arranged marriage is an example of adopting the mobile phone in ways consistent with traditional constructs of the family's role in romantic relationships. We feel that domestication should be further pursued to better understand the family as a locus of global cultural changes.

The mobile's arrival in India roughly coincides with the broader effects of economic liberalization that have been felt by middle-class Indian families, increased prosperity (and diminishing job security), increased choice in lifestyles, and increased social fragmentation. This change is not entirely caused by the mobile, but its use certainly is an enabling and complementary factor. Nevertheless, as these brief dispatches from the field suggest, Indian middle-class families will elect to use mobiles in unique, culturally appropriate ways. Seen from the Indian living room, it seems certain that new middle-class users will take advantage of mobiles in ways that may at times be at variance with their families. However, there is also sure to be sharing of the mobile and “staying together.” The flexible and mobile 24/7 lifestyle afforded by ICTs will continue to create new opportunities for users while simultaneously providing mechanisms for

coping with these shifts. The new middle class behaviors enabled by the device will continue to look distinctively Indian.

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