

# Mobile Phone Intimacies and Moral Panics in India

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The rapid proliferation of mobile phones in India has brought along several new cultures to the country's young users of mobile phones. The culture of mobile phone intimacies that young Indians are seeking through the integration of mobile phone functionalities in their everyday lives requires scholarly attention within the framework of new media modernity. The latter engenders new cultures of intimacies. It also induces moral panics over these new cultures of intimacies.

This study demonstrates that the primary and secondary definers of moral panics are gradually scrutinizing the so-called new cultures of young Indians. It further shows that the primary location of the moral panic agent is the family. This is where mobile phones and their users encounter the domesticated dimension of cultural politics of mobile phone intimacies.

Finally, this study demonstrates that both the moral panic agents and the young users of mobile phones (a.k.a. "folk devils") use simplistic and stereotypical prisms to address their concerns.

**Keywords:** *New Media Modernity, mobile phones, intimacies, moral panics, 'folk devils' and cultural politics*

## Introduction

Recently, India has been witnessing an explosive growth in the use of mobile phone communication. The Indian mobile phone market has emerged as one of the two fastest-growing markets in the world. India's mobile phone connections have reached 584 million in May 2010. Every month, more than 20 million mobile phone subscribers join the swelling mobile phone users' population in India (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, 2010).

Such a massive proliferation has several implications for the interface of new media and society. One of these relates to the big number of moral panics that the proliferation of mobile phones and their uses has produced.

Not surprisingly, Indian media are awash with stories of the "misuse" of mobile phone technologies. Indian news channels miss no opportunity in blowing the moral panic whistle as they cover the new media. All sections of the Indian press seem to attach importance to the incidence of crimes when

they report on the “wrong” uses of mobile phones and the Internet. Some sections of the press have actually gone overboard in using isolated incidents of unlawful uses of mobile phones and the Internet as bases for reporting scare stories about the new media technologies.

One need not undertake an elaborate content analysis to perceive the signals that Indian media are sending to the public. Pertinent here are some cover stories from the Tamil language press: “Cell Phone Revolution: Satan in Palm” (Bharatithamizhan, 2006); “Tragedy Caused by Cell Phone: College Student Arrested for Killing Co-Student” (2007); “Seller of Cell Phone Memory Cards with Obscene Pictures Arrested” (2007); and “TADA (Terrorism and Disruptive Activities [Prevention] Act 1987) for Jeans...POTA (Prevention of Terrorism Act 2002) for Cell Phone! The Plight of Colleges under Excessive Controls” (Gnanavel & Navaneethan, 2005).

Such stories are sufficient proof that it has become a daily routine for Indian media to associate mobile phones and the Internet with crimes. It is a media scenario where the word “cyber” is invariably pre-fixed with “crimes.” The same is true of the unseemly associations that Indian media evoke with words, such as, “digital,” “mobile,” “Internet” and “video.”

Indian media’s construction of mobile phone moral panics is only emblematic of what other agents of mobile phone moral panics, such as, the police, schools and universities, have been enacting since the first reported incident of a mobile phone scandal in India, namely, the Delhi Public School (DPS) and Multi-Media Message (MMS) scandal. This particular scandal started in November 2004, when a boy from the DPS shot a 2.37-minute video using his camera phone. The video shows the boy indulging in explicit sexual activities with a girl from the same school. The boy sold the video to his friends in school through MMS mode. The video eventually reached the local video piracy centers and the Internet site, [www.bazee.com](http://www.bazee.com), the Indian affiliate of eBay.

Invoking the provisions of IT Act 2000, the police arrested the chief of [www.bazee.com](http://www.bazee.com). Within a few weeks, the DPS-MMS scandal hit the headlines, and the Anna University in Chennai issued a ban on mobile phones and camera phones in the campus. The connection between the DPS-MMS scandal and the quick reaction of Anna University, in the form of a blanket ban on the students’ use of mobile phones and camera phones, represents a typical case of the emergence of moral panics involving mobile phones in India (Ravindran, 2009).

One has to locate such cases in the specific conditions that new media modernity engenders in the Indian context. These specific conditions are different from the conditions in which the earlier cases of traditional media, such as cinema, radio and television, have arisen in India. The differences in

conditions are due to the discrepancy between the *projects of modernity* and *new media modernity*.

Key scholars in the field (Kaviraj, 1997; Nandy, 1997; and Chatterjee, 1997) sought to locate the Indian notion of modernity, firstly, as political and, secondly, as the axis of modern nation-building. Such a notion assumes that modernity in India arrived only after the country became independent in 1947. The advent of modernity also fostered the emergence of conventional media structures and content to aid the goals of a modern nation.

There were no major detractors to the agenda of modernity held by radio, television (government-owned) and films (private) and the agenda of modernity constructed by the policy makers and governments till the late 1980s.

There were moral panic agents at work during this period, too, but these agents saw “red” in the lifestyle changes being aped by youngsters. They believed that the youngsters had been influenced by their heroes in the tinsel and broadcast worlds. Unlike their present-day counterparts, these agents did not attempt to see “criminals” in youngsters who were merely swayed by their heroes in films.

The present scenario is likewise different because of the dimensions of the cultural politics involved in the enactment of moral panics over the mobile phone and Internet technologies. Cultural politics refers to the multi-sited interface between the *politics of culture* and the *culture of politics* in as many domains as there are possibilities. This paper uses the phrase, “cultural politics of mobile phones” in accordance with the parameters of the above definition. It includes sub-domains, such as, “cultural politics of mobile phone intimacies,” “cultural politics of mobile phone moral panics” and “cultural politics of camera phones.” In all these contexts, what becomes political about the mobile phone practices of young users are the reactions they evoke in the institutional *panopticons*, such as media, state, police, academia, universities, schools, clergy, families, and the social neighborhood, as well as the counter-reactions of the mobile phone users.

Furthermore, in all these contexts, what becomes cultural about the mobile phone practices of the young users are the negotiations that mobile phones make possible in the everyday lives of users. The domains of cultural politics of mobile phones become attractive planes of scholarly inquiry when they are juxtaposed with the plane of new media modernity.

What is new media modernity? New media modernity has to be conceptualized as yet another progression of the project of modernity that is defined more by the conditions that are, in turn, defined by the interface of new media technologies and society.

New media modernity is not simply another project of modernity, or a peculiar trajectory of modernity, that is solely new-media driven. It has to be conceptualized, particularly in countries like India, as a progression defined by the simultaneity of diverging interfaces of conventional media, new media and traditional media. It is a progression where whatever has so far been associated with modernity in terms of risks, reflexivities, panics, etc., has only been redefined in the terms defined by new media.

New media modernity also marks a new trajectory because of the new discourse of cultural politics that it engenders. This (cultural politics) is peculiar as it is largely driven by the premise that new media and their users are the new “folk devils.” The term “folk devils” entered academic vocabulary when British sociologist Stanley Cohen first published his book, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and the Rockers* in 1972.

In Cohen’s scheme of the formation of moral panics, the latter’s agents portray “folk devils” as threats to society. In the time and context of Cohen’s study (1960s, United Kingdom), “folk devils” did not have the advantage of mobile phones and Internet technologies. The new “folk devils” are seen as potentially different because of the technologies they use in setting up new cultures of intimacies and, consequently, new threats of cultural degeneration.

The cultural politics discourse in India straddles a vast canvas that packs a motley collection of ongoing discourses involving a range of cultural crises caused by things new and strange. In fact, it would be right to call the current crop of cultural politics as the politics against the “new.” It is not just the mobile phones and Internet technologies which have been pictured as the new intruders, but something as innocent as a greeting card or a story involving lesbians in a film can also throw up burning issues before the actors in the nation’s cultural politics.

One of the implications of new media modernity is the emergence of new cultures of intimacies such as mobile phone intimacies. The present paper examines the cultural politics of mobile phone intimacies in the contexts of the following premises, to wit:

- a. The cultural politics of mobile phone intimacies in India is best studied through the application of the concept of moral panics, as advanced by Stanley Cohen (1980);
- b. New media modernity in India engenders unique conditions that foster the creation of new cultures of intimacies, new “folk devils” and new moral panic agents;
- c. Families are where the cultural politics of new media intimacies gets

- shaped, and
- d. Both the moral panic agents and their targets, the “folk devils,” use simplistic and stereotypical discourses to deal with the cultural politics of mobile phone intimacies.

### Theoretical Dimensions

Stanley Cohen’s work on the moral panics of the media coverage of *mods and rockers* during the 1960s is undoubtedly a bible on studies seeking to examine the manufacturing of social crises by media and other agents. According to Cohen (1980: 9):

...a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible.

In Cohen’s scheme of things, moral panics proceed in stages. Moral panics begin with a perceived threat to social values; the threat gets simplified and amplified by the media; the threat arouses heightened concern and response from other social agents, like lawmakers and police, and the threat gets either blown away or leads to social change.

The concept of moral panics, as advanced by Stanley Cohen, has its detractors as well as supporters. In its applications in settings as diverse as India, USA and UK, the concept of moral panics proved its scope well, notwithstanding the demerits of Stanley Cohen’s thesis.

Stuart Hall et al.’s *Policing the Crisis* (1978) takes Cohen’s notion to a non-sociological plane and pictures moral panics as instruments of state control. Using the concepts of ideology and hegemony, Hall et al. examine the role of the state in spreading moral panics about blacks in the UK. By associating acts of mugging and its associated criminality with blacks, the state and its police are seeking to see black immigrants as a threat to society at large. In his work, Hall et al. (1978) distinguish the acts of police as primary definers, and label the media as secondary definers of moral panics.

Every age has its share of risks. The age of modernity is the age of risks, according to Giddens (1991). Bauman (1994) describes the history of modernity

as tension-ridden. The age of modernity is also the age of moral panics, particularly in societies which are in several states of transition – from the age of tradition to modernity, from the state of closed economies to open economies, and from the state of native cultural matrix to global cultural matrix.

Among the various moral panics in circulation in such societies, the moral panics concerning new media technologies seem peculiar and widespread. They are peculiar because they are about things new and popular, hence morally threatening, at least in the eyes of the primary and secondary definers of such moral panics.

To relate to the mobile phone moral panics, one requires a good understanding of new media modernity. Similarly, to relate to new media modernity in India, one requires a good understanding of Indian conceptions of modernity. The moot question at this moment is: Are there any relevant clues that one can draw from the works of noted Indian scholars on modernity, such as, Kaviraj (1997), Nandy (1997) and Chatterjee (1997)?

Ravindran (2009: 68) opines:

Even a cursory look at the Indian writings on modernity reveals that we can not proceed solely on the basis of their conceptions of modernity. The academic conceptions of modernity in India so far have not gone beyond the sphere of post-colonial politics in general and the processes of modernization and liberalization.

The leading works on Indian modernity locate the attempts of the “modern politics” to displace the *caste-ist* and religious locations of Indian tradition as the causative factor of the rise of modernity in India. The dominant thread in the writings on Indian modernity is woven around the modernizing potential of post-colonial Indian state and politics. It is a case not of simple essentialism but an entrenched essentialism wherein the classic cause-and-effect model comes into play.

Modernization is seen as a precondition for invoking conditions of modernity, not against the pillars (caste and religion) of tradition, but for their re-articulation in tune with the conditions warranted by the acts of “modern politics.” In such a scheme, communalism would be seen as the assertion of tradition, and secularism would be seen as the expression of modernity.

Such conceptions ignore completely the significant roles of non-political sources of Indian modernity, such as media and non-media technologies, and their roles in popular culture and our everyday lives. Given the contentious character of the project of modernity, any attempt to locate the moral panics,

aroused by the uses/abuses of mobile phones in conditions of new media modernity, has to necessarily encounter contentious challenges, particularly when one regards new media over other contributing factors to what is emerging as a new modernity.

In our conceptualization of new media modernity, the first bone of contention may pertain to what we seek to use as a prefix (*new*). The second bone of contention may pertain to the nature of the prefix itself. The third bone of contention would be with regard to the notion of modernity as driven by media, new or otherwise.

A good example of new media modernity is provided by the deep inroads made by new media in our daily lives. Our daily lives seem to derive their meanings and purpose from what we do with our mobile phones, i-pods, e-mail accounts, chat rooms, search engines, satellite television, etc. The use of new media technologies has considerably redefined several dimensions of our everyday lives.

One of these dimensions relates to the mobile phone intimacies we seek to forge with our family members, relatives and friends. Mobile phone intimacies represent the most significant transformation of our personal encounters with members of our families and other social groups. Just as there are different kinds of intimacies, there are also different kinds of mobile phone intimacies.

What follows provides the theoretical locations of mobile phone intimacies of different kinds.

The dictionary meaning of the word “intimacy” relates to “something of a personal or private nature” (Merriam-Webster Online, 2009). To be intimate is to be close in terms of relationships in spatial and temporal contexts. The word “intimate” also harbors a strong sexual connotation in popular culture. Despite the widely prevalent sexual connotation of the meaning of the word in popular usage, there could be as many non-sexual contexts as there are sexual contexts for “something of a personal or private nature.”

In the field of mobile phone communication research, scholars have come to locate intimacies, made possible by mobile phones, largely as the consequences of the peculiar advantages that mobile communication technologies entail in establishing and extending human relationships. In his work on mobile phone cultures in the Philippines, Pertierra (2005: 23 -24) sees the locations of “discursive intimacy” in the exchanges of mobile phone users as the technology of texting affords them the “informality of oral communication and the reflexiveness of writing.”

Matsuda (2005) argues, in her studies of mobile phone users in Japan, that “full-time intimacy” is the implication of the growing reliance on mobile phones.

Vykoukalová's (2007) study of young Czech users of mobile phones refers to "attributed intimacies" as the implication of the ability of the users to creatively use the function of personalizing welcome messages. According to Vykoukalová (2007), such functions help the users to "internalize their relationship towards the mobile phone and create an emotional tie, (a) symbolic relationship to it, which can substitute for the presence of another person to a certain extent."

According to Raiti (2007) "Mobile intimacy," the ability to be intimate across distances of time and space is a global phenomenon. Understanding the nature of the Indian encounters of mobile phone intimacies calls for the accommodation of the above dimensions, even as it warrants a native lens to see the mutations of such dimensions in India.

### **Research Objectives and Methods**

The present work's primary objective is to locate the cultural politics of mobile phone intimacies in the context of new media modernity in India, with special reference to the roles and activities of the primary and secondary definers of mobile phone moral panics and the "folk devils." The study uses qualitative research methods, such as focus group and virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000) sessions to meet the aforesaid objective. The works of leading researchers in Asia like Pertierra et al. (2002) and Hjorth (2008) have amply demonstrated the relevance and advantages of using qualitative research methods in mobile phone communication research.

The study draws sustenance from three sets of qualitative data obtained from two modified focus group sessions and one virtual ethnographic session of an online discussion forum from September 2006 to March 2008. The three-year study period affords opportunities to delineate changes, if any, in the cultural politics of mobile phone intimacies because of the lapse of time and the attendant social changes. The study uses virtual ethnographic observation by adopting Christine Hine's (2000) notion of "adaptive ethnography," a method that renders all the failings and advantages of the conventional ethnography method in virtual settings.

It is essential to have both modified focus group sessions and virtual ethnographic observation session to relate to the conditions and responses of "folk devils" in both the online and offline contexts of new media modernity. In September 2006 in the southern Tamil Nadu City of Tirunelveli, the study conducted the first focus group session with non-student participants belonging to different strata of society. The researcher moderated the session involving 20 participants in two sub-groups. In March 2007 in the same city, the researcher conducted the second focus group session involving



20 students in two sub-groups drawn from the Manonmaniam Sundaranar University.

The researcher created the sub-groups in both sessions to provide more nuanced and varied responses on the cultural politics of mobile phone intimacies. Both sessions had almost equal representation of male and female informants. The researcher chose the City of Tirunelveli over other places in Tamil Nadu as it has the characteristics of both rural and urban conditions in one geographical location.

The researcher conducted the virtual ethnography of the mobile phone users' responses to moral panics using the discussion thread on camera phones at [www.rimweb.com](http://www.rimweb.com), the portal of one of India's largest mobile phone service providers, Reliance Communications. The online group in the virtual ethnography session had the obvious advantages of representing varied sections of the mobile users in diverse geographical locations. The online group also reflected its unique locale wherein the technological contexts of their online behaviour were mediating members even as they were dealing with the technological mediation of mobile phones in their everyday lives.

The researcher analyzed – in three sections – the responses from the focus group and virtual ethnographic sessions. The first section focuses on the domesticating processes that underpin the cultural politics of mobile phone intimacies and uses the responses from the focus group session conducted in 2006 with the non-student population.

The second section examines the responses from the second focus group session conducted in March 2007 with university students. Post-session reflections on the dominant threads of discussions supplemented the conventional focus group format.

The key discussion threads of the focus group were driven by questions such as: a) "Are we justified in our fears of camera phones?"; b) "Who is driving the moral panics?"; c) "What's the way out?"; and d) "How is the cultural politics of mobile phones affecting the daily lives of students?"

The third section focuses on the role of the moral panic agents in the lives of the "folk devils." It examines the significant responses from the virtual ethnographic observation of the online discussion forum of Reliance Communications at [www.rimweb.com](http://www.rimweb.com).

### **Domesticating Mobile Phone Intimacies**

This study argues that mobile phone moral panics are emblematic of the cultural politics of new media modernity. The cultural politics of mobile phones bears the imprints of a different kind of disciplinary society where the institutional

panopticons (media, police, colleges, universities, family and social neighborhoods, etc.) are pitted against the individual panopticons (young camera-phone users).

The present section examines the site of family, and that of social neighborhoods, to reveal the working of one important determinant of the cultural politics of mobile phones – the domesticated processes of mobile phone intimacies. This section protects the identities of informants by assigning to them codes, such as I-1, I-2, etc., meaning Informant-1, Informant-2, and so on.

The informants of the first focus group session amply demonstrate through their varied narrations the challenges posed by the domestication processes that underpin mobile phone uses. For instance, what **I-1** has said (below) captures well the challenges posed by the domestication of mobile phones and the intimacies their uses entail for young Indians:

Parents think that because I talk long, I must be talking to only girls and flirting. They may not know with whom I am talking, boy or girl. I talk softly even with my male friends but that also raises their suspicions.

Whenever I get calls on mobiles, my father gets tense, guessing about many things. After the call ends, he might ask about the caller. When I refuse to tell, he tells my mother about my non-cooperation.

But I think my parents have given me the freedom to use mobiles. During our fathers' time, they never used to spend time outside and used to return home early. But I leave home in the morning and return only at 10 evening. My father used to scold me for that. He expects me to come home early. What can I do at home if I get back at 4 in the morning?

Many say boys should not stay at home and girls should not stay outside. If boys stay at home, they would be spoiled. Somehow parents catch us through mobiles and ask us to come home early. "Where are you? Come home immediately," they say.

When I am at home I can only be idle, watching TV. When I am outside, I can be active, visiting friends, talking about business and visiting others' shops. People at home do not care about this. They only expect me to be at home. Their culture is not suitable to me.

**I-9's** response further attests to the role of the domesticated mobile phone users:

I do not give my number to my parents. They know that I have mobile. My mother knows and my father does not. When my work gets over at 7:30 in the evening, I would be reaching home around 8:30. If I give my number, they would create a big issue by the time I reach home and would ask me to quit such a job. It is better not to inform them about my mobile number.

In this regard, I-4's response is no different as he says:

When I get calls at night, my friends talk for a long time. Because of generation gap, my father scolds me to cut my mobile use. When my father got me a mobile, he asked, "Why do you want to use mobiles? As a student, you may become corrupt."

Maybe, he was right. Mobiles can spoil some. But if we have control, we cannot go wrong. Parents...when they use, it is cultural. And they talk more, and that is seen as right.

What the social neighborhood, as another institutional panopticon, does to watch and discipline erring members of families through something as innocent as neighborhood gossip also impacts greatly the social space of the family. Neighborhood gossip effectively extends the disciplinary project of parents of young mobile users. I-1 captures vividly (as shown below) the power of the neighborhood gossip in the domesticated processes of mobile phone intimacies.

In my father's time there was a distance when boys and girls moved. In our generation, we are very close. Our culture has changed completely compared to theirs. If they expect us to be like them, it is wrong.

When I was texting yesterday, my mother was suspecting I was sending it to some girls. She said she would take the mobile from me. I am used to playing games on mobiles. Not interested in watching television serials.

What elders think of us, I do not care. It is easy to convince our parents, but not our relatives. They would have seen us somewhere with some girl. They would make a big issue of it. Parents in such cases would only worry about their honor and family honor. Even if we do not make

any mistakes, because of neighborhood gossip, things can go wrong for us.

Such responses stand as testimony to the power of the gossip and rumor mills of social neighborhoods. It is also evident that domesticating mobile phone intimacies is jointly engineered by the family and social neighborhoods and by the technological options young mobile phone users wield to attract and deflect the disciplinary roles of their parents.

### **Mobile Phone Intimacies: The Gender Trouble?**

The second set of significant responses in the first focus group session reveals the nature of gender trouble that young mobile users in rural areas are facing. The feudal and patriarchal social order, particularly in rural India, strives to keep the gender divide alive through several mechanisms. The more widespread and effective mechanism is the creation of social taboos concerning unacceptable gender relations. Such a social scenario forbids physical intimacies with strangers of the opposite sex in face-to-face interactions. While certain factors, such as a co-educational school system, are said to provide a breather, the gender trouble as regards mobile phone intimacies persists.

To attest to the above, **I-4** avers:

After co-education, things have changed. And now after texting, there is (sic) more friendships. Now, when I am talking with a girl, my father may think differently but I have no guilt feelings. I am broad-minded in these matters. We are embracing modernity, unlike our parents.

The above response also reveals that the age of tradition denies what the age of new media modernity offers to young mobile users. Across the board, majority of the informants echoed each other's ideas when they touched upon the issue of gender trouble.

For instance, **I-17** argues:

One madam always sends me good messages like, "Always smile," while another friend (male) would send messages in colloquial language. We can relate to their identities through their messages. Probably, the madam wants to keep a distance and sound respectable while the male friend wants to convey his ordinary identity.

This supports the experience of **I-15**, to wit:

We are not able to talk comfortably over mobiles with the opposite sex. We have a certain fear, whether they are younger or older than us. We normally do not utter what we decided to talk (about) in such conversations.

When I talk to my wife, I am natural and slow. But with others, whether in family or office, there is a certain reluctance. I think it is a problem of the self, mind, or culture or out of the need to respect.

The above responses of the first focus group informants prove that mobile phone intimacies in India are constrained by the agents of cultural politics ranging from parents to friends and even strangers. These agents of cultural politics are also working on behalf of the feudal and patriarchal order that is still going strong, but increasingly pitted against the forces of modernity and new media modernity.

Mobile phone intimacies, as Raiti (2007) argues, are a global phenomenon. They are also as much local, familial and feudal, in terms of the cultural politics they evoke in their emergence, sustenance and circulation.

The data from the informants also point to a strong evidence of the process of domestication of mobile phone intimacies. It is apparent that the process of domestication is made possible by the agents of local, familial and feudal elements. Their acts collapse as one in seeking to control the mobile phone intimacies of young Indians.

The site of a typical Indian home is a discursive socio-cultural space where what has been referred to as the local, familial and feudal, in effect shares the traits of a social space in transition. It is traditional, even as it seeks to be modern in all aspects of its conflated state. It is feudal, as it is patriarchal. It is deeply familial, even as the threats to the ideal state of an Indian family work hard in breaking the resilience of the Indian family system.

In such contexts, there is a need to conceptualize mobile phone intimacies as “domesticated intimacies,” as the process of domestication by the social-cultural space of the Indian family/household is made visible in diverse modes.

The approach that the present paper takes with regard to domestication of mobile phone intimacies is akin to the notions of domestication research tradition pioneered by Silverstone (1994), Morley (2003) and Hirsch (1992). These researchers view domestication as a process where uses of media technologies are determined not by the technologies themselves, but by the contexts of the domestic and private spaces of family and household.

Silverstone (1994: 98), for instance, sees domestication as a process that “involve(s) bringing objects in from the wild: from the public places. The transition, which is also the translation, of objects across the boundary that separates the public and private spaces is at the heart of what I mean by domestication.”

The tradition of domestication research in recent times is encountering interesting revisions in the general Information Communication Technology (ICT) research domain as well as in mobile phone communication research. Helle-Valle and Slette-meas (2008: 45 - 46) argue the need for the “dislocation of the ‘domestication’ from the domestic and the private.” They seek “to retain the meaning and use of the term to acts of domesticating, i.e. processes of ‘taming the wild.’ ”

Hjorth (2007) takes a different approach from that of Helle-Valle and Slette-meas when she views mobile media as still tied to the sites of home and place. Says Hjorth (2007: 369): “As a domestic technology that has literally left the physical confines of the home, mobile media is still very much affected by the user’s notion of home and place.”

The present paper sees both the original tradition and the revisions as necessary possibilities in relating to the encounters of mobile users in the socio-cultural space of the Indian family. It is apparent that, while there are tendencies of mobile phone intimacies to emerge as “full time intimacies” as Matsuda (2005) finds in Japan, there are also serious odds against such tendencies as mobile users seek to romanticize the intimacies that went missing with the passing away of close familial relations in the face-to-face mode.

This is made evident by the following statements from the informants, such as:

We have been witnessing cultural degeneration in our daily lives. Mobile phones are responsible for this. We can give a number of examples for this.

When we meet with friends or relatives, we tend to chat over the mobile phones with others who are not present rather than talking with those present. Even in houses where funeral ceremonies are going on, people tend to chat happily on their mobile phones.

As we tend to spend more time with mobile phones, our values concerning hospitality have also been diminishing. We gather around dining tables in our homes not just to eat, but to converse with each

other while eating. But people have started to spoil the dinner time also by using their mobile phones when they are eating.

The first section of the analysis reveals that the cultural politics of mobile phones begins at home, where the parents as institutional panopticons seek to battle it out with their wards, the individual panopticons. In positing such a location for the parents, this paper seeks to diverge from the traditional notions of primary and secondary definers of moral panics. The traditional notions have wrongly assumed that the moral panics are the works of social institutions other than families.

The first section amply demonstrates that they have their primary locations in the families where mobile phones and their users encounter their domesticated dimension of cultural politics of mobile phone intimacies. It is apparent from the above that domestication of mobile phone uses is a social process that draws from the feudal and patriarchal norms of behavior as well as their antithetical norms as facilitated by conditions of new media modernity.

### **Mobile Phone Intimacies, or Full-Time Intimacies?**

The second section of the analysis uses the salient responses of the focus group session held in March 2007. The responses gathered there reveal that the interlocutors of mobile phone intimacies have their primary location in the socio-cultural space of the family/household.

However, the responses examined in that section reveal that “domesticated intimacies” do harbor the traits of other categories of intimacies such as “full-time intimacies” and “discursive intimacies.” The responses also show that the growing reliance on mobile phones, in particular, texting, in comparison with face-to-face relationships, is pointing to the possibility of “full-time intimacies” (Matsuda 2005).

Although the levels of dependency on the mobile phone-mediated relationships may not be as high as what Matsuda (2005) seeks to convey in her work, there is proof in statements, such as:

- a. To begin with, I thought my mobile was useful to keep in touch with my parents. I also thought that I would put it to only minimal use. But within a few days, I became a slave to my mobile.
- b. If students are staying away from their homes and using hostels, they should ensure that they do not end up as slaves of their mobiles. As I myself and my friends are mobile users, the time available for us to

chat has been reduced. The love and closeness of our relationships have suffered as a result; and

- c. I have been addicted to this little Satan box, I could not come out of it. Sometimes, I think of stopping to use it, but it has become impossible. In the hostel, as I use the mobile for a long time, I could not spend time with my friends. The time for chatting and sharing among my friends has been reduced to a great extent as we all friends sit in each corner and send messages and attend to calls. We never find time to move freely and share our feelings.

While these may serve as proof of the emerging trends of “full-time intimacies,” they also signify the loss entailed in terms of face-to-face communication and the intimacies that such communication fosters.

This throws up another point for reflection. If the growing influence of mobile phones on users does not show positive results in fostering relationships with close family members and friends, as the above two statements claim, then what else do the engagements by the mobile users entail in terms of intimacies? Are these users forging intimacies outside their primary familial and social contacts?

Putting the blame on those who misuse mobile phone technologies and on the moral panic agents, one informant claims:

Media are responsible for taking the misconceptions about camera phones to the public. Because of the ways in which camera phones have been used by some and the simplified technology available in camera phones to take pictures, people are relating to camera phones with reluctance and fear.

Other informants argue:

Through the camera phone, the nude pictures of the girl student spread to her friends’ mobiles. This is because of the crime committed by the girl student’s friend.

This problem was not because of technology. It is not correct to ban the use of camera phones because of this incident. Except the media and the vice-chancellor of Anna University, no one is scared of camera phones to this extent.

Some of my relatives have purchased camera phones. None of them are taking this moral panic seriously.



Another informant has cited lack of understanding on the part of the moral panic agents on the fears concerning camera phones. According to him:

Getting frightened by new media first and then idolizing them and later throwing them away are not new. Mobile phones are now in for such a treatment.

Media, which operate in our society, portray the new media only as sources of moral panics. Media have contributed enormously to making people suspicious of even innocent mobile users in public places.

In the responses above, one can easily relate to both Cohen's (1980) conception of moral panics and Hall et al.'s (1978) distinction between primary and secondary definers. But there are other actors also who are missing in Cohen's (1980) and Hall et al.'s (1978) conceptions. They are not as institutionalized as the media and the authorities, such as the police, legislators and the executive, but they do exist within the institutions of patriarchal social orders where the process of domestication of mobile phone intimacies runs its course.

The domestication processes that Indian families set in motion reveal that the family holds the potential to exist as primary and secondary definers simultaneously. This is because the social space of family is where the messages of the primary and secondary definers meet their point of confluence and peak of resonance.

As parents and their wards work hard to influence each other even as they are getting influenced by external sources, the young mobile phone users only see suspicious parents getting more suspicious, and parents enacting the roles of primary and secondary definers. The following responses support the same.

- a. I come from a village. When I use my mobile phone, people at home get suspicious about my act as I start talking only after 10 p.m. I talk after 10 p.m. because of low charges. But my people question me, why are you talking during late hours?
- b. I think they are worried probably because somebody would have told them that I would turn into a bad boy because of my mobile use. People at home are in the habit of watching television series and they are worried that their sons would also become like the characters in such series. This baseless fear still lurks in my parents' minds; and
- c. When I asked my parents to get me a mobile, my parents pointed to this wrong potential of mobiles only. When an educated person like me has misconceptions about mobile phones, my parents cannot be any

better. Only the media are cultivating the moral panic about mobile phones in a big way.

Such a domestication process sometimes extends itself discreetly in the spaces of non-familial encounters as well as in the case of the informant who alleges:

For the people who cannot relate to something with the required understanding, the moral panics concerning camera phones are of the same kind. In this context, I would like to mention here the experience of my friend with camera phones just to provide more clarity to the above mentioned:

When he is chatting with his girl friends, or if any call comes on his camera phone, and when he attempts to answer the call, his girl friends become quickly conscious of their dresses and posture. My friend may not have even thought about misusing his camera phone to click them without their knowledge, but his girl friends are quick to get suspicious about him despite being friends for many years.

These responses clearly establish the conditions in which the ongoing cultural politics of moral panics and mobile phone intimacies is running its course in India.

### **Camera Phones and Moral Panics**

This section seeks to demonstrate, through the application of Stanley Cohen's concept of moral panics and "folk devils," another important dimension of the cultural politics of new media modernity and camera phone moral panics. Moral panics concerning mobile phones first hit India in December 2004 when the infamous Delhi DPS-MMS case drew the attention of the primary and secondary definers of moral panics.

As mentioned before, no time was lost by the primary and secondary definers of camera phone moral panics thereafter in distorting and stigmatizing the role of camera phones in the lives of young Indians. Colleges and universities across the country smelled sulphur in the camera-phone-carrying hands of students and slapped bans in the wake of the first ever ban against camera phones inside campuses by the Anna University in Chennai in January 2005.

This section uses the significant responses culled from the virtual ethnographic observation of the online discussion forum of Reliance Communications at [www.rimweb.com](http://www.rimweb.com). The moves by the media and authorities

to raise the bar against young users of mobile phones elicited sharp reactions in the discursive spaces of blogs and discussion forums. The blogs of students were racy and packed with innuendos against the administrators of their institutions (Alaphia, 2006).

The present study chooses to examine a discussion thread, instead of blogs, as the discussion threads do not suffer from the disadvantage of any one individual claiming it as his/her personal territory and direct/misdirect responses accordingly. The study examines a thread, which was started by a user, Deepu, in [www.rimweb.in](http://www.rimweb.in) on August 30, 2005, with a question, "Should camera phones be barred?" in the wake of moves by Ms. Vanga Geetha, M.P. (Member of Parliament), through her private member bill in the House of Elders of Indian Parliament, to seek a ban on camera phones in public places.

As in the responses of the focus group discussions, here also the responses clearly see the location of the mobile technologies as invincible, and the roles of the media as futile. For instance, Ashoksoft, contends,

But guys... think rationally, ban a mobile cam... we will have digicams...  
ban a digicam... we still have that old cam which runs with the reel...  
and a scanner... so stopping mobi-cams is not a real choice... as many  
others pointed out... it is here to stay, come what may!

He also feels that the camera phone is only one kind of miniature device. This can be banned easily. But banning other invisible and embedded image-capturing devices cannot be banned that easily. Says he:

I have a watch cam... and well, I have taken some FINE snaps with that ...  
at places where cameras and mobiles are not allowed! Well, technology  
is a good master but a bad slave... using it is left open to the end user...  
if that MLA feels that a cam-phone ban is gonna help, God bless her... a  
cam-watch is way cheaper! (Now ban that also! We will have something  
way better!)

Others, such as Tanveer, have similar viewpoints:

Technology will have angels and demons in its kitty always. The  
important thing is for the people to be responsible and understand  
what should be done and what not. Freedom with responsibility is all  
that is required.

Other informants ask:

Do you know that small cams and spy cams sell for as low as 1000 rs. (rupees). So a kinky student will still make a movie without ever getting anyone to know.

Will banning the phones help in such a case? Banning has never been successful. More so in India. Be it alcohol, smoking, pornography, just about everything. On the contrary there may be a rebound increase and some may try unlawful things to procure things they are deprived of.

The previously mentioned struggle between the institutionalized panopticons and the individual panopticons comes to the fore in the response of Ramchi, who said:

I do not agree with bans. Probably, they can try this ban on camera phones in certain places like offices, schools, colleges etc...but use of camera phones in public places should be allowed. If this is the case then all vigilance cameras and even use of cameras needs to be curtailed as well. In many places, these vigilance cameras operate without your knowledge.

In fact, we are seeing office vigilance cameras capturing sexual activities of Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) workers! Corrupt people are always afraid of getting caught in the camera, be it mobile or otherwise. No wonder this is discussed in Rajya Sabha! People must behave properly in public places and they cannot blame technology for their inappropriate behaviors.

According to Cohen (1980), moral panics are generated by the primary and secondary definers by positing a simplistic and stereotypical relationship between the socio-cultural threats and the “folk devils” that cause them. In the Indian case, the same is made apparent. But what is interesting to note is, like the moral panic agents, the informants are also using simplistic and stereotypical prisms to relate to the interlocutors of mobile phone moral panics.

As mentioned earlier, moral panic exercises by both the antagonists and protagonists are also to be seen as blame-games where each group sees the other as a serious threat to its definition of righteousness with regard to the

issues at hand. As Cohen (1980) posits on the role of moral panic agents, it is interestingly becoming true in the case of the “folk devils” also.

The responses of the participants of the online discussion forum also seek to forge a simplistic and stereotypical relationship with their detractors. Their understanding of their relationship with the mobile phone technologies also seems stereotypical and simplistic when they say that they are almost invincible. Compare this with the simplistic and stereotypical rendering of mobile technologies by the primary and secondary definers of mobile phone moral panics when they seek to dub camera phones as “dangerous.”

The nature and beauty of any cultural politics is the simplistic rendering of the complex relationships between visible/invisible cause and effect by the protagonists and antagonists of issues at hand. The case of the cultural politics of mobile phone intimacies and moral panics seems no different, going by the above.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the cultural politics of mobile intimacies in India proceeds along the moral panic trajectory theorized by Stanley Cohen several decades ago. The simplistic and stereotypical renderings of the blame games by both the protagonists and antagonists of mobile intimacies effectively mask the seemingly complex socio-cultural and technological factors at play in the construction of mobile phone moral panics. On the other hand, the conflict between the institutionalized panopticons and individual panopticons ought to be seen as a more visible plane of competitive social surveillance in countries like India.

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