

Book Review

Cell Phone Nation: Twinning History and Anthropology to Talk About the Everyday Phone in India

Nimmi Rangaswamy

Indian Institute of Technology, Hyderabad, India

Robin Jeffrey and Assa Doron, *Cell Phone Nation*, New Delhi, India: Hachette, 2013, 293 pp., Rs499 (hard-cover). ISBN: 9789350093542.

Cell Phone Nation is a pioneering study of the diffusion of cell phones among a spectrum of users from different socioeconomic backgrounds in India. Authors Robin Jeffrey and Assa Doron use history and anthropology to breathe life into the story of this remarkable device that gives India a “communicable mobility” (p. 2), or the ability to call anyone, anytime, from anywhere, bringing previously unconnected people into a new interactive world. At its core, the book attempts to further debate about whether—and how—cell phone usage is rapidly equalizing social relations in a stratified society, or if this is simply another example of slow democratic change in India. It argues that the two are concurrent processes, rather than diametrically opposed paths toward social change in India. The authors focus on the social and geographical histories of the introduction of the cell phone while also examining meta-level issues of mobile communications.

There have been excellent academic studies that have mapped the spread of cell phones in India, such as Sunil Mani’s work focusing on growth performance, Subhashish Gupta’s (2012) research on policy, and Deepali Sharma’s (2012) recent doctoral research on the organizational evolution of the industry. While there is extremely insightful research from Miller, Horst, and Doron (among others) on the anthropology and socioemotional dynamics of the cell phone in other parts of the world, studies on the “everyday” practices/engagements/interactions of the cell phone in India are lacking. In this sense, *Cell Phone Nation* is monumental in its ambition. The book is a vigorous and across-the-board portrayal of the history of telecom policy and the resulting powerful transformations and disruptions to traditional communication ecologies in India.

The book provides an excellent chronicle of cell phone history in post-independence India, presenting examples of how the dramatic spread of cell phones has changed the everyday lives of citizens. Part 1 describes the transformational aspects of mobility for the country. It points to the liberation of India’s telecom policy from a socialist hangover, crony bureaucracy, and rampant state corruption as key reasons for the rapid penetration of cell phones. In the 66 years since India achieved independence, telecom services have grown from 100,000 telephones to a billion-plus cell phones. The authors rightly surmise that Indian capitalist forces and liberal political impulses altered telecom services, licensing structures, and laissez-faire business policies. With this rapid growth came first-time access for millions of bottom-of-the-pyramid users, rendering the phone as “constant like the blue sky above them” (p. 61).

Part 2 of the book meticulously details the spread of the cell phone and the “missionaries” who took it to the people. The book takes a macro view from a business-historical perspective and examines rich socio-technical interactional patterns. These missionaries of mobile phones were part of a chain that included both urban advertisers connecting and interpreting international marketing to suit India’s vast diversity and retail networks in towns and villages. The drop in the per-minute rates from Rs16 in 1995 to less than Rs2 in 2003, along with the prepay revolution that swept through the nation, eventually freed clients to choose from a variety of products and services for budgeting talk time. The selling of talk time spawned a network incorporating

To cite this paper: Rangaswamy, N. (2014). *Cell phone nation: Twinning history and anthropology to talk about the everyday phone in India. Information Technologies & International Development, 10(1), 27–29, Spring 2014.*

© 2014 USC Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism. Published under Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license. All rights not granted thereunder to the public are reserved to the publisher and may not be exercised without its express written permission.

Volume 10, Number 1, Spring 2014, 27–29

CELL PHONE NATION

tens of thousands of small retail stores into the distribution network, creating an ecosystem for sales and services. From the emphasis and suggestions in this section of the book, the mobile phone sales and service network seems to have had, by far, the most stunning impact on “the cell phone nation.” Ethnographic research in Banaras and Allahabad illumine local purchasing practices and methods for setting up shop. For micro-entrepreneurs like Ravi Varma in Allahabad, it is a time of cheaper handsets, a flow of phones from China, competition among service providers, and retaining a loyal local customer base. For people like Sumit Churasia, the first from his family of laborers to own a tiny mobile store, the role of customer relations is vital, not only to communicate demand, but also because it is foundational to the entire sales enterprise of record keeping and data management. For the first time, capitalist practices and consumer relations in showroom chains, such as UniverCell in Chennai, initiated a well-oiled machine similar to Henry Ford’s model of standardizing industry practices. “What worked for Henry Ford [standardization] worked well for the growth of the cell phone industry in India” (pp. 76–77). The book alludes to another kind of sociological payoff, as the cell phone has supposedly trumped the barriers of caste/class, ushering a time of inclusion for caste groups hitherto excluded from new occupational spaces. As an example, Doron describes the *mistris*, or artisans, invisible in the formal mobile phone industry chain, who were refurbishing used handsets in every city and town in India. This, in what runs as an evocative comparison throughout the book, resembles the industrial economics of the post-war automobile industry, which spawned a network that ranges from dealers to service stations.

The final part of the book discusses the cell phone in business and politics, as well as among women and among terrorists, moving toward a fitting denouement. This section examines the capacity of the cell phone to help the poor work more profitably and effectively. In particular, the ethnographic studies of boatmen in Banaras come alive as these men adopt and develop modern data management practices by using their phones to contact and maintain clients. The boatmen with more limited resources neutralized the undue privileges taken by the more powerful boatmen through expanded networks, personal ties, and using their cell phones to coordinate relations with customers, thus equalizing traditional work relations of hierarchy and domination.

The introduction of the cell phone added a personal dimension to political mobilization. Citing the example of communication in the 2007 elections in Uttar Pradesh between the Bahujan Samajwadi party leadership and the cadre, “the more mobiles got into the hands of the underprivileged the more they wanted to be spoken to as individuals” (p. 149). The strength of the social payoffs—enhanced socioeconomic status and equality—resulting from the accessibility of mobile phones is a phenomena that warrants careful study by social scientists, particularly as it relates to people at the bottom of the social pyramid.

If the cell phone has improved on-the-ground realities, can it reorder society? Is the phone helping to shape a modern citizenship? Posing these questions raises the specific challenge of integrating socio-historical scholarship, the broad arc of technology consumption, and the documentary of business evolution into ICTD research while pushing the boundaries of what counts as development in specific contexts. Ethnographic details add flair and context to the historic journey of democratizing the phone in a land governed by social hierarchy and privilege. However, Jeffrey and Doron have opted out of providing a theoretical narrative to ground their ethnography. This might disappoint those who come to the book looking for an anthropological framing along the lines of Slater, Horst, and Burrell’s work within the space of ICTD. The insights, though specific to India, reveal broad trajectories of ICT dispersions and state policy co-evolving to provide the right impetus for the growth of mobile communication. This makes *Cell Phone Nation* an important reference point to build and bolster arguments, ideas, and theories across research disciplines. For the ICTD community, it infuses a much-needed chronology of sociohistorical trends in adoption practices of an ICT artifact. Many locally grounded and short-term ICTD studies can be inspired to take a long-term view of social change and the multiple forces intertwined in development. To an anthropologist like me, the book’s twinning of social history with local ethnographies that examine the impact of the cell phone delivers a creative and pioneering example of sociotechnical scholarship aimed at a wide audience. ■

Nimmi Rangaswamy, Adjunct Professor, Indian Institute of Technology Hyderabad, ODF Estate Yeddumailaram, Medak 50205, Andhra Pradesh, India. nimmi.rangaswamy@gmail.com

References

- Doron, A. (2012). Mobile persons: Cell phones, gender and the self in North India. *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 13(5), 414–433. doi:10.1080/14442213.2012.726253
- Gupta, S. (2011, December 8). *Cellular mobile in India: Competition and policy*, IIM Bangalore Research Paper No. 353. Retrieved from <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2117107> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2117107>
- Mani, S. (2012). The mobile communications services industry in India: Has it led to India becoming a manufacturing hub for telecommunication equipments? *Pacific Affairs*, 85(3), 511–530. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.5509/2012853511>
- Sharma, D. (2012). Evolution of the Indian mobile tele—Communications industry: Looking through the C-evolutionary lens (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore.

