

Book Review: A Village Goes Mobile—Telephony, Mediation, and Social Change in Rural India by Sirpa Tenhunen

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Tenhunen, Sirpa, *A Village Goes Mobile—Telephony, Mediation, and Social Change in Rural India*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. ix + 200 pages. Hardcover, \$101.58; Paperback, \$30.56; Kindle, \$31.19.

This is ethnography well done on a suitable subject. Sirpa Tenhunen, an anthropologist, analyzes mobile telephony in Janta village in Bankura district in West Bengal State, India, proceeding from none to saturation. The book fits in the larger study of diffusion of mobile telephony. It significantly contributes to existing and on-going research, which has mainly focused on Western countries, neglecting the Global South. Helpfully, context and comparative examples are drawn from countries in the Global South, which includes most of the world—Asia (except Japan, Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan), Central America, South America, Mexico, Africa, and the Middle East (except Israel). Other exceptions are Australia and New Zealand which are south of the Equator but *not* Global South. Tenhunen is fluent in Bengali. She found Janta to be middling class, but infrastructurally behind most of large, federal, diverse India in education and medical care. When she initially went there doing ethnography, she did not know Janta village was on the verge of anything. When she returned, state internet had come. She found herself committed to fourteen years of observing, journaling, interviewing, filming. Hence, this book.

Tenhunen uses “poor” and “western” sparingly but jargon frequently—e.g., “socialities” or “intersectionalities” mark exceptional definitions. “Socialities” has tautologous definitions. An added twist to “intersectionalities” for India is the cultural persistence of castes overlaying and interpenetrating family names, class, economics, education, and earned credentials. Ideological policies, government programs, and technological factors interact with inherited mores on identities and associated rites in India. Another exceptional definition relates to

media—as in mediating, remediating, and mediatization. Tenhunen defines and differentiates it for Communication, unlike any usages in Law.

Chaptering, contents, subtitles, notes, cross-references, references, and an index make this a useful, navigable, superbly crafted volume. Unfortunately, the index lacks an entry for secret, subversive uses of mobile telephony—addressed in text, and intensely interesting to professors, parents, and police.

Tenhunen lived among her subjects before they knew aught of cell phones, before they were accustomed to telephones at all, and during the span of 1999-2013 while they got internet and simple cell phones, then eventually became saturated with cheap smart phones made in China, and appropriated mobile telephony for their lives. Her ethnographical methods implicitly support the McLuhanism that “the media is the message.” The medium is mobile telephony, and the media are radio, television, including postal service, posters, signage, newspapers, magazines, and such for the literate. Even the illiterate adopted mobile telephony enthusiastically for entertainment. Among all the “polymedia,” mobile telephony became ubiquitous.

This focus on mobile telephony in developing countries contributes to existing knowledge and advances research, helping to understand and analyze commonalities and differences in cultural and social aspects of phone use. The effects are different than would have been predicted. This makes the book intriguing.

Surprisingly, mobile telephony increases the costs of development without substantially increasing the financial advantages, and reinforces accumulated cultural preferences, inherited ancestral traditions, and stratification without significantly altering them. Historians, political scientists, sociologists, economists, and policy wonks will find their standard assumptions

challenged in every chapter. *Subtle* is the word associated with changes and reforms. *Subtle* is the word used by the subjects themselves, especially women.

Most women have no independent income nor do they own personal phones. Their ability to use phones usually requires support from a husband, father, or brother, who can afford them. Economic standing of the household matters as well as a woman's standing in the family. Increasing use of phones and mobile phones gives women access to the public sphere, predominantly a men's world, particularly economically. Home and family remain the main venue for pursuing women's rights in rural West Bengal. Within the household, the mother-in-law is in charge. Rural West Bengal is exceptional in India in that young brides may maintain natal ties, such as home visits, during the first year of marriage. Elsewhere, mobile telephony might be the only contact and support for a young bride in cases of an overbearing mother-in-law. A husband who funds his wife's telephony strengthens their marital relationship and loosens the grip on them of the joint family. Elsewhere, such as working-class Delhi, conflict commonly results from long visits by the wife with her natal family. Demographers report a shortage of girls, hence brides, traceable to preferences for male offspring playing out over time. The majority of the populace have little or no firsthand knowledge of results, so they do what works for them. It is similar with college or white-collar jobs for women. It requires interdisciplinary work in statistics and social sciences to support correlations that hold and to refute popular platitudes that do not. Mobile phones have become worthy gifts, typically from men to wives or sisters.

When asked about concrete manifestations of changes, most women say that they have experienced *subtle* things in family life. They are enabled to be a good family person, to live happily as part of a small family where women can express their opinions, concerns, and wishes.

Their husbands can take them to movies, shopping, picnicking. They attribute this to rising prosperity in the general standard of living.

Instead of rejecting the traditional gender and kinship code of conduct, women were seeking to reform it. They intend to provide their daughters better education, less hard work, more job options, marriage at a more mature age than before to well-chosen families. What poor women overwhelmingly regret in the mobile phone era is their inability to do financial calculations and to read important documents, street signs, and bus numbers.

Rural West Bengal was an ideal situation in which to discern effects of mobile telephony. The book is rich with evidence gleaned by Tenhunen and enhanced by comparative information from her network of associates.

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