



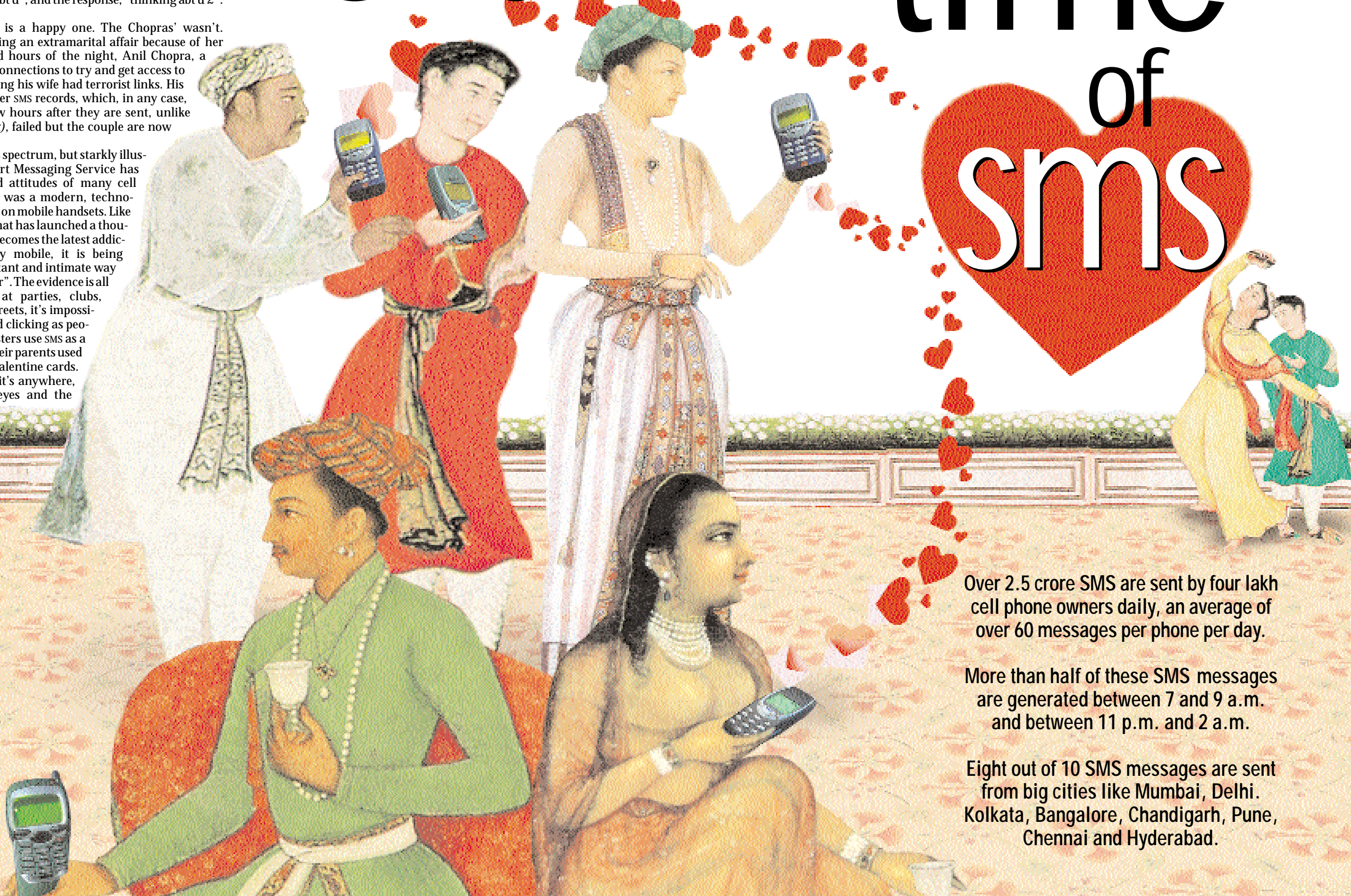
by Shefalee VASUDEV; Illustrations by Nilanjan DAS

SURESH KUMAR, 27, A MUMBAI-BASED SOFTWARE ENGINEER noticed a fellow executive who seemed upset over something. Instead of walking across to her cubicle, he sent her an SMS Smiley "emoticon". She smiled, cheered up, and sent back a "tk u" response. Now they are constantly in touch on SMS even though they work in the same building. Their messages generally go like this, "Hey, thinking abt u", and the response, "thinking abt u 2". They plan to marry soon.

Their SMS relationship is a happy one. The Chopras' wasn't. Suspecting his wife of having an extramarital affair because of her extensive SMS usage at odd hours of the night, Anil Chopra, a businessman, used all his connections to try and get access to her SMS records, even alleging his wife had terrorist links. His attempt to gain access to her SMS records, which, in any case, are only available for a few hours after they are sent, unlike mobile phone calls (see box), failed but the couple are now headed for a divorce.

Opposite ends of the SMS spectrum, but starkly illustrative of the way the Short Messaging Service has changed the lifestyles and attitudes of many cell phone users. If ever there was a modern, techno-Cupid, it is that small screen on mobile handsets. Like Helen of Troy, it's the face that has launched a thousand relationships. As SMS becomes the latest addiction among the upwardly mobile, it is being increasingly used as an instant and intimate way of saying "Let's Get Together". The evidence is all around us. Everywhere, at parties, clubs, restaurants, even on the streets, it's impossible to avoid the buzzing and clicking as people access their SMS. Youngsters use SMS as a courtship tool, much like their parents used love letters or poetry and Valentine cards. Except that SMS is instant, it's anywhere, it's hidden from prying eyes and the

Love in the time of sms



Over 2.5 crore SMS are sent by four lakh cell phone owners daily, an average of over 60 messages per phone per day.

More than half of these SMS messages are generated between 7 and 9 a.m. and between 11 p.m. and 2 a.m.

Eight out of 10 SMS messages are sent from big cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Bangalore, Chandigarh, Pune, Chennai and Hyderabad.



poetry and flirtatious messages are already part of your cell phone software or downloaded from the Net. And it's not just the younger generation which is using it to chat, fix dates and exchange love notes. All across urban India, SMS is being used by older people, whether single or married, to carry on an electronic courtship, a harmless flirtation or, in quite a few cases, a serious extramarital affair.

Harathi Reddy, stage actor and communications manager of The Leela Palace, Bangalore, is hooked on SMS. "I find SMS one of the easiest and most discreet ways to be in touch. It is so private that it is just between you two." Adds S. Akanksha, 22, software engineer at Bangalore-based Zetek Software Solutions:

My most erogenous zones are a cocktail of sensory & tactile: a brush of lips over long, wet folds, deep probing fantasies & silences.

"In the age of wireless communication, flirting has gone mobile via SMS. People say things they

don't normally say over the phone and especially in person. I think you're less inhibited."

In most cases, hi-tech flirting—often punctuated with smileys and winking "emoticons"—is a private display of affection. You can hear them in pubs, meetings, seminars, fashion shows, sit-down dinners, drawing rooms, even in bedrooms. The buzz of the SMS has become an omnipresent, everyday rhythm, sometimes the secretive smiles giving away the frenzied exchanges between couples even as they sit in the same room watching a fashion show or attending a corporate conference. Some users confess that they spend a good part of the night making SMS love.

The amazing thing is the way SMS has charmed the number and variety of people. From celebrities and corporate barons to politicians and professionals, SMS has made mushy idiots out of many. It is indicative of a paradigm shift in personal communication among Indians, for many of whom explicit talk about love and sex is restrained by conscious cultural reminders, but continues to simmer inside. Sample this: "Personal communication through SMS is much better than a voice mail and sure, one cannot rule out its fun component," says Rajiv Pratap Rudy, Union minister of state for commerce. And this from Chandan Mitra, editor-in-chief of *The Pioneer*: "It can be great fun and surely enhances intimacy."

So intimate details of love, restricted by bashful inhibitions earlier, are now tumbling out of a gigantic washing machine—fresh and awash with brazen outspokenness. As communications expert Rita Marathe explains, "Culturally, Indians find verbal expression difficult. SMS is perfect. It is direct but avoids face to face contact. However, people wrongly perceive intensity in passion as depth in a relationship." But SMS is not just about straight, sweet love talk. It sweeps over a

variety of realities: infidelity, promiscuity, half-lies, manipulation in relationships, libidinal urges, and of course, intense involvement.

It is also symbolic of the fast pace of growth that relationships need these days. Who has the time to linger and languish? The heady effect of direct, unabashed expression minus the slow waltz of an evolving relationship works as a potent aphrodisiac. Flings, flirtation, foreplay, fights... everything happens on SMS. "I believe it is a very 'powerfully silent' communication tool, very personalised and almost akin to human touch," confesses Delhi-based adman Suhel Seth. "I use it for three things primarily: work, play and foreplay. On the foreplay front, it is great for mind games," he adds.

The electronic embrace of SMS seems to be the new turn on. "The ultimate four-letter word is 'talk'," says India's best-known sexologist Dr Prakash Kothari. "Talk is a potent foreplay and unfortunately it doesn't happen much in Indian bedrooms," he adds, saying that there is no doubt that if a man and woman exchange 50 SMS messages in an hour's time, it has more to do with sexual

To get an SMS icon

- ❑ Go to a service provider site
- ❑ Dial code of the picture message you want and send it to cell phone service provider
- ❑ Service provider then sends you the picture message as an SMS
- ❑ Service provider charges you for the SMS icon sent to you

Service providers

www.onmymob.com
www.in.mobile.yahoo.com
www.funsms.net
www.gsmexpert.biz
www.smsflirt.com

Can you SNOOP?

The Government has asked cell phone operators to put in place SMS interception technology to facilitate monitoring. But this can be done only on the directive of the home secretary (or an officer designated by him) or a state's chief secretary. Once an alert is issued, the operator can keep records of all messages sent and received on a number. Ordinarily, operators do not keep contents of an SMS once it is sent. Only the number to which the message is sent is recorded.

Is SMS a Legal DOCUMENT?

The Information Technology Act, 2000, makes any record sent in electronic form admissible evidence in a court of law. Electronic record is defined as "data, record or data generated, image or sound stored, received or sent in an electronic form or microfilm or computer-generated microfiche". Electronic form is defined as "any information generated, sent, received or stored in media, magnetic, optical, computer memory, microfilm, computer generated microfiche or similar device. An SMS sent from a mobile is accepted as "electronic record" transmitted in "electronic form". Whether it is authentic or not will be subject to the usual tests under the general rules of evidence.

intent than just flirtation.

No wonder some say that SMS stands for "some more sex"! Many "texters" admit to having sent a declaration of love and many more admit to using SMS to flirt with people they would like to know better. Gayatri Khosla, a radio and TV producer, even got a marriage proposal on SMS. Actor Sandhya Mridul says that for her, text messaging has become a life-threatening disease. "I have put myself in the most embarrassing positions because of SMS," she says.

Look at the possibilities that SMS opens up—direct, but in absentia. Explicit, yet discreet. Expression that is unmonitored, erotic and urgent, without the possibility of face-to-face rejection. TV actor Neena Gupta agrees that SMS is a great thing to have happened. "Letters are outdated and phone calls can be very boring, but SMS is exciting because of its directness," she says. Kolkata-based actor Rupa Ganguly, an SMS fan, says, "It is natural for many to write what they're hesitant to say. Now technology enables us to do just that in relationships where you can't speak much." Another SMS freak, actor Parveen Dabas of *Monsoon Wedding* fame, says he uses SMS as a follow-up after he has met someone. "SMS takes away the awkward blushes of picking up the phone and not knowing what to say," he says.

In India, an estimated 2.5 crore SMS messages criss-cross the airwaves every day, one of the highest in the world, and this when only four lakh of the eight million mobile users in India use SMS. Interestingly, most SMS messages are sent during leisure hours and on holi-

days, not while work is on. Operators say the unobtrusive and private nature of SMS is what has really driven a surge in messaging. Hutchison records 30 lakh SMS messages a day in Mumbai followed by three lakh a day in both Delhi and Gujarat and two lakh a day in Kolkata. Bharti's AirTel, which launched in Mumbai two months ago offering free SMS, now records 15 lakh messages a day. In Delhi, it records 13 lakh SMS messages a day.

On the face of it, it appears to be an excessive use of a value-added mobile-phone service which is cheaper than a phone call. So while spiritual leaders send SMS to their disciples to call them for discourses or people are booking tickets to pop concerts, dance shows and movies on SMS, the real revolution is its use for love and romance. Love has a new language, that of abbreviated, sexy, electronic intercourse, brief and hence potent, passionate and powerful.

Madness is how some skeptics describe it. A recent survey by UK-based TV station The Dating Channel found that some people would rather give up chocolate and TV than lose the SMS facility. Texting provided a lifeline, with 75 per cent of people using the technology to flirt and 25 per cent claiming it made them feel more confident and witty. SMS works as a tool for verbal foreplay because it can be graphic and imaginative. Moreover there are no rules to this infectious

If I tell u tht u hv a beutful bdy, wl u hld it agnst me? Thr r so mny rsons to yearn for u. Luv is jst 1 of thm.





evolving language of phonetic abbreviations. Also, texting is an anywhere activity. Model Nethra Raghuraman, 26, finds herself SMSing from everywhere. An SMS junkie, she says she doesn't even have to look at her mobile phone now to know where the keys are.

ONE of the interesting observations many eager texters make is that the mini-missives that SMS facilitates has more women in its grip than men. Women "do it" more than men, allowing plenty of indecent proposals to slip out into the airwaves and beep on the phones of the men they want to date and mate with. "It really is a woman's medium," says Vir Sanghvi, editor-in-chief of *The Hindustan Times* who feels that SMS has empowered a lot of women to be original when sending text about love and romance, something they would be otherwise shy of. Writer Anil Dharker echoes a similar observation. "Dirty jokes used to be such a male thing," he says. "But dirty SMS jokes as a form of women's empowerment will make a minor footnote in the history of the women's liberation movement." Statistics support this observation. A study done by the International Data Corporation in India found that women use SMS more frequently than men.

Lst nite dnces b4 my eys.
Whn cn we tango agn?
I wnt 2 awkn desirs tht u
dnt knw exst.

What started as a simple value-added service has set the stage for many relationships that thrive on the silent but consistent erotic exchanges away from prying eyes. A fantasy seems to have come true for many who tap out explicit love messages to their sweethearts while their wives are sitting next to them. "Husband and wife sending SMS messages to different people is commonplace now. Culturally, we have been pretty guarded about wearing love on the sleeve but SMS has opened a private, confidential channel where two individuals can express their feelings and stay connected all the time," says compulsive SMS user Madhurima Bhatia, manager, corporate communications at market-



research agency NFO-MBL.

While some say it works like a full-time harmless turn on because they use it as an undercover erotic component of their workday, others think that SMS foreplay can lead to real rendezvous where actions speak louder than SMS messages. Chennai-based Hari Madhavan, 35, who flirts with his girlfriends without letting his wife find out, recalls a hot erotic exchange with a female friend. "I asked her if she would care to join me for a swim and she replied that she didn't know swimming but would not mind clinging on to me. That drove me crazy."

Ovrwhlmd by desirs,
immrstd in yr luv. cn't u jst
drp evrythin & bcome mine?
M in offic. U r evrywhr.

Sometimes, of course, indecent proposals can come from the stalkers as well. Actor Suman Ranganathan was stalked through the SMS. "He would send me sweet and romantic poetry but never told me who he was. The worst part was that my messaging service could not tell me who he was either. I didn't talk to him... But I do wish I could have known who he was." Since sexual jokes, images, orgasmic indications with punctuation marks are all part of SMS, it has made this little screen

the forgivable "dirty domain" for jokes which in normal situations could be offensive.

Mobile operators have been quick to zero in on this



Technology

There are eight channels on each frequency band given to a mobile operator. Seven transmit voice while one is for SMS. With a sharp spurt in SMS usage, operators are struggling to upgrade capacity of this channel. Mobile operators have upgraded the SIM cards to a higher storage capacity which allows storing more than 100 messages (this is also dependent on the handset). There are also tool kits loaded on to the SIM card that enable a subscriber to access services like chatting and dating or downloading tunes and jokes from websites without punching in numbers. If you need to download a popular ring tone, you need to key in "top tune" (or whatever your operator has designated) and the tunes will be downloaded on to your phone. The latest is MMS, or Multimedia Service, which can send voice, text and pictures. —Vivek Law



BHASKAR PAUL

need to flirt. Almost all leading operators have dedicated chat and dating applications which are being swarmed by users through the night and well into the morning. BPL Mobile, for instance, launched miChat in February 2000 and two months later launched miDate. Initially, 5,000 people visited these chat rooms—predominantly romance and love rooms—every month, a number that has shot up to 30,000 now. Says Kunal Ramteke, marketing controller for BPL Mobile, "The traffic is highest at night between 11 and 12 midnight, although even at 6 a.m., you can find up to 60 people in the romance chat rooms." That's not all. BPL Mobile has now launched Multimedia Messaging Service (MMS) in Mumbai—only the third such service in Asia—which allows pictures and voice to be sent along with a message. A picture can be clicked by the mobile phone and sent as a message with text or voice to another phone. Of course, cell phones making love to each other need to be

technologically "compatible".

Bangalore graphologist Keith Rosario says the style of writing an SMS message is as revealing as handwriting. Different professionals write SMS differently. Actors and artists use abbreviations and slang. They download customised ring tones and freaky screen settings. Admen use puns the most. Teachers and emergency service workers use correct punctuation. Nurses, doctors, personal assistants use lower case and add smiley faces. They also tend to leave their phones on silent so that they do not disturb other people. Sociologists use big philosophical ideas in small messages. Defence personnel, lawyers and salespersons always use capitals, no abbreviations whatsoever. Editors and writers com-

because of the financial security they enjoy, the secret thrill of venturing into a forbidden area via your cell phone can be intoxicating.

HERE are, however, early warning signs of the possible social fallout. Friends of couples are reporting scenes of marital discord and, according to mobile service providers, husbands are increasingly coming to them demanding printouts of their wives' SMS records. As telecom lawyer Ramji Srinivasan says, "If a court asks for the reproduction of a text message, the mobile service providers will have to submit it." This is easier said than done. Unlike normal mobile calls, because of heavy



pulsively edit messages. Shashi Baliga, executive editor of *Filmfare*, says she reviewed the film *Devdas* on SMS. And some fashion designers also use SMS for measurements: Raghavendra Rathore used it once like this: "2sk ini drop lngt 11/2in (Skirt too short drop length by one and a half inch)".

Vocabulary apart, SMS flirting could lead to a sense of greater liberation and daring. People hooked on to SMS, specially women, say they "out-grow" relationships when they find a male who is better at SMS than their current partner. In today's mobile-driven world, SMS expertise seems to turn women on. It's the new language of love and, sometimes, lust. While most women who get involved in SMS-facilitated relationships are from the upper strata of society and married to successful men who they will never leave

SMS traffic and limited lines on the network, it is only possible to get records of messages sent a couple of hours earlier, apart from the legal provisions required. That hasn't stopped the frenzy of SMS and the "textual intercourse" it is being largely used for.

This new lexicon of lovemaking, the erotic ripples it brings about and the option to carry on, regardless of time, situation and company, is proving a powerful aphrodisiac, a wired Viagra underlining the fact that even subliminal sex can be thrilling. New generation mobiles with multi-media applications may soon replace SMS, perhaps making love on the cell phone even more potent and real. But till the current SMS honeymoon lasts, most lovers are not bothered about

what lies ahead. They are too busy messaging: B ther 4ever.

—with Vivek Law, Nidhi Taparia Rathi, Stephen David, Labonita Ghosh and Kavitha Muralidharan

yr ksses & caresses, envlp
me--frm nw 2 etrnity
wht a crzy cncnction. Sty
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