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COVER STORY/ OPINION

A Bright, Inane Age

How the dumb, but devilishly fun, smartphone world took over my life

AN Airtel guy speaking in English seemingly learnt in a Hindi college called to say that the megabyte use on my smartphone exceeded my bill plan. I yelled at him for disrespecting customer time with sales calls. Look who is twittering about time, retorted Minnie Mouse from a juvenile corner of my brain. That's how my alter ego looks these days. Silly yellow pumps a size too big, an oversized red, polka-dotted bow with a matching crop top, beatific wonderment on the face and self-absorption that would send a sponge into an identity crisis. This Minnie Mouse, cartoonists please note, possesses a smartphone.

I have gone bananas, that's why I sound like a case of mashed apples. Rewind to November last year, when a close friend I have known since kindergarten suggested that I join a Whatsapp group. Class of 1985 from Modern School, Gandhidham, he persuaded softly, most of them our friends since the writing desks at school were taller than us. Till then, I had resisted turning into an 'I-tard'. No Twitter, no real interest in Facebook, no Instagram. I liked my old-fashioned cool, unblessed by digital smartness. But then I gave in and instilled life into the precocious green WhatsApp icon on my cheapish Android phone.

SAAHIL

I am not a typical Google head. I duck phone calls, ignore SMSes and prefer the swimming pool over internet surfing. Alas, now I am woefully addicted to my phone because of this WhatsApp group which we call the Badnaam Classroom, inspired by a debate on *Munni badnaam hui*. The group theme changes every day—from chillingly boring subjects like favourite cricketers, to views on extramarital affairs or creative spurs like suggesting a redesign for the Indian tricolour! Valentine's Day, Holi or the World Cup final, we magnify everything with tiring excitement. Some friends are talented singers; they post songs while the rest go into frenzied applause with cutesy emoticons, mostly the thumbs-up sign. It's an admiration society, good for the heart but not for the brain, which needs challenge and critical feedback.

Yours sincerely, in love with her phone voice and ideas, posts vain voice notes—from a chance gym encounter with former cricketer Imran Khan to insights gained from the Dalai Lama's Buddhist teachings. Ouch. Idiocy by any other name would still be as idiotic. Recently, when I re-heard my voice notes and saw the pictures I had posted, I realised how puerile I had become. My photo boasts ranged from one taken at a nunnery in Sikkim to others showing off yoga poses as well as one with me styled as a grungy pirate complete with a patch on one eye (so, I had an eye problem). Someone save me from myself, I cringed. Thankfully, self-aggrandisement has some painful symptoms.

The Badnaam Classroom is a dependable support group with some enlivening conversations, friendly fun and heady heterosexual flirtation (I play the sport earnestly). But like most groups, it is also an exhausting universe of mind-numbing forwards, unoriginal jokes, amateurish quizzes, Archieised birthday sentiments and shows a makeshift readiness to turn into a satsang venue bursting with spiritual-religious photographs and quotations. In an age of complex individualism where we must make our own beds (and dig our own graves), I feel I am misdirecting emphasis and energy to make a virtue out of normalcy. Great as a stress-buster used with discretion, but its daily pursuit has left me dopey.

Admittedly, I have traded precious reading and research time to keep up with the game by making silly academic observations and invested in various phone charging devices for home, my handbag and office lest I get 'disconnected'. It is laughable. The WhatsApp beep on my phone has always been silent but that never stopped me from looking at the green icon every few minutes, even in airport loos. I feel dumber, less clued in to current affairs and generally absent-minded. I take a week to read a book that should take me three days.

Distractedly, I keep misplacing keys, lipsticks and notebooks (never the cellphone) as my brain swims in an addictive sludge. I choose the exercycle in the gym so that my hands are free to fiddle with the phone. I tried reading *iBrain: Surviving the Technological Alteration of the Modern Mind* by American neuroscientist Gary Small, but dumped it quickly to continue sharing my idiomatic, artless daily memoir with my smartphone friends. My son rolls his eyes when he sees me 'online' while the husband finds my distraction a relief, saying he can finally appreciate the silence in the house.

Me? I feel good about life when I type 'Good Morning friends' with my first coffee. I feel almost happy. Then why do I feel so stupid? ◘

AMIT HARALKAR

adding to the growth too," says Nilotpal Chakravarti, associate vice-president, Internet and Mobile Association of India. So, for each group, there's a different way of being driven crazy by the same device we cannot do without. Ask Prof Nalin Pant, who teaches at IIT Delhi and is no Luddite. Once he chucked a student's mobile phone out of a fourth floor classroom window. "The real world is not a board exam where people can regurgitate facts they've downloaded. The real world is a problem you have to solve right now," he says.

By now, many smartphone users have realised that chat applications in particular reveal "a layer under people" that they might not have known existed. Internet junkie Arun Prabhudesai calls it "the dumbing down of adults". Everyone's 'received' and 'sent' some of this, for example, WhatsApp messages from 50-plus IAS officer acquaintances that feature teddy bears; or pictures of candles glowing over mawkish messages, such as "Friendship is ever-lasting". "Lewd jokes, facile pictures...yes, I do get them from people I would have thought had different interests. My take is that it was difficult to communicate this kind of stuff earlier. Now, it's easy," says Prof Shobhit Mahajan, professor, department of physics and astrophysics, University of Delhi.

What's going down, you may wonder, why are we all being foolish? Scientists peering into the inner workings of the human mind, psychologists, neurobiologists, experts on human cognition, they are all struggling to find answers, with psychologists the first to sound the alarm. Behind every expert conclusion lies a deeper, more fundamental, change in how the human brain works. Could reaching for smartphones turn grey matter into sentimental flotsam floating on a hyperspace jelly?

Dr Neeraj Jain of the National Brain Research Centre ventures a proposition: "I think the internet is like an extension of the brain's memory function. And a smartphone, which helps access the internet and apps, is probably becoming like a prosthetic limb," he says. The brain remembers by repetition—short-term memory becomes long-term if you've remembered something long enough. Memory, psychologically, is broader than retention. As Prof Visvanathan reminds you, "Human memory is not a record but a reinvention." A prosthetic limb, on the other hand, forces the brain to recalculate everything

"Smartphones are a necessary evil. IEC warning is an option but I won't suggest regulation at this point."

Nilotpal Chakravarti
Assistant vice-president, IAMAI

"These devices are seductive, even we end up hooked. Like personal hygiene, adopt device hygiene."

Dr Harish Shetty
Psychiatrist, Mumbai