MOBILE MEDIA, GENDER, AND POWER IN RURAL INDIA

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Abstract: *This article traces the diffuse connections between mobility and power by exploring how mobile phone use contributed to gendered power relations in rural India. It is based on ethnographic fieldwork on the use of mobile phones, conducted periodically between 2005 and 2013 in the village of Janta in West Bengal, India, and compared to earlier fieldwork in Janta, before the village had any phone system. Analysis of the increased mobility reveals how mobile phone use emerges within interconnected, changing fields of power. The political sphere earlier perceived as predominantly local was replaced by translocal political practices characterized by increasing mobility. Although new political practices eroded women's political participation in the village, mobile phone use made possible new forms of agency for women. The article contributes to the understanding of the unanticipated ways mobility and new media contribute to power and politics.*

Keywords: *mobility, mobile telephony, power, gender, India, politics.*

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INTRODUCTION

If mobility serves as a prime metaphor for the contemporary world, the ubiquity of mobile phones symbolizes this trope. Mobile communication is associated with a mobile lifestyle characterized by temporal and spatial autonomy (Katz & Aakhus, 2002). In this article, I analyze how mobile phone use has contributed to mobility and gendered power relations in rural India. I examine how mobile phone use has helped to create new political practices characterized by mobility and how the new mobilities have played a role for changes in gendered power relationships and women's agency. Theoretically, the article develops the understanding of how mobilities emerge from various fields of power, thus enabling interrelated power relationships and forms of agency.

A mobility turn in the social sciences emerged in the 1990s to understand the importance of movement on individuals and society (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 208). The paradigm underscored how social life, civil society, and political participation are performed through mobilities (Adey, Bissell, Hannam, Merriman, & Sheller, 2013). In addition to physical traveling, mobility can be regarded as the movement of objects, imaginative mobility (e.g., the movement of images and ideas through mass media), virtual mobility over the Internet, and person-to-person communication through letters and digital media (Urry, 2007). I use this definition of mobility. Although mobility often is celebrated as a progressive force, the ability to move is not spread equally because the same factors that produce movement and global linkages can also promote friction, immobility, exclusion, and disconnection (Alvarez, 1995; Cresswell, 2014; Tsing, 2005). Moreover, not all movements are equally meaningful and life-shaping for the people on the move (Salazar & Smart, 2011). In other words, mobility cannot be equated with power and agency even though it relates to power relationships.

Mobile phones have become such a key indicator of mobility that mobilities are analyzed based on mobile phone generated data both in the natural and social sciences (e.g., Csájiab et al., 2013; Palmer et al., 2013). Ethnographic studies on mobile phone use have both problematized and developed the understanding of the relationship between mobile telephony and mobility. Wallis (2013) and Archambault (2012, 2017) questioned the seemingly self-evident connection between mobile phones and mobility. Archambault (2012) argued that, although helping bridge distances in significant ways, mobile phone communication nonetheless also betrayed young men's mobility in Mozambique. She illustrated ways in which young men harnessed communication to express and address experiences of constrained physical and social mobility. However, their mobile phone communication simply expressed rather than resolved their exclusion. Indeed, rather than promoting physical mobility, mobile phones often open up a space for the enactment of imagined global identities (Archambault, 2012; McIntosh, 2010, p. 344). Wallis (2013) found that disciplinary regimes, as well as gendered job hierarchies in China, produced young migrant women as particularly gendered, classed, aged, and placed working subjects who remained relatively immobile in their work spheres despite their use of mobile phones. She argued, therefore, that the mobile phone enables "immobile mobility," which she defined as a sociotechno means of surpassing spatial, temporal, physical, and structural boundaries. Immobile mobility allowed migrant women inclusion in the expanded and enriched social networks, which in turn reinforced their identity as migrants and not Beijing people. Wallis' observations exemplify that analyzing mobility requires attention to the contexts of mobility and communication. Tacchi, Kitner, and Crawford (2012) explored mobility within everyday uses of mobiles and their social settings in

rural South India. They coined the term "meaningful mobility" to explain how the mobile phone emerged as a contributing agent to how women could bolster their social positions.

In this article,[1] I explore the meaning of mobile telephony-enabled mobilities for gendered power relationships. As noted by Goggin (2006) and Kinnunen, Suopajärvi, and Ylipulli (2011), power has remained a rarely explicated concept in research into mobile phone use, although most studies on new media have addressed power-related issues in some ways. Power issues are at the heart of the scholarly debate on digital divides (Castells, 2001; Green & Haddon, 2009; Loader, 1998; Mansell & Steinmueller, 2000; Tsatsou 2011), studies on intersectionality of mobile media use (Tenhunen, 2018; Wallis, 2013), and the study of the use of digital media for political action (Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qiu, & Sey, 2007; Fortunati, 2002; Gergen, 2008; Ibahrine, 2008; Liu, 2017; Rafael, 2003; Rheingold, 2002; Tenhunen, 2011). Additionally, the research on the gender aspect mobile phone use has been focused implicitly on power. Lim (2014) summed up much of the research on women's use of mobile media in her review article, concluding that even as the technological landscape of mobile media changes, the social settings within which women appropriate mobile media tend to remain fundamentally unaltered. For instance, Dobashi's (2005) research on Japanese housewives and Wajcman, Bittman, and Brown's (2008) study of Australian women demonstrated that women used mobile media mainly to fulfill their familial obligations. Yet, as Fortunati (2009) pointed out, women tend to be more vulnerable than men to the pressure of "double work"—the challenges of balancing obligations in both the home and the workplace. Consequently, women have availed mobile media in many geographic locations to manage their double workload rather than using phones to induce radical changes in gender relationships. Moreover, much of the anthropological research on the uses of new technologies share an emphasis on the tendency of technology use to reinforce existing structures and, especially, adherence to kinship patterns (Archambault, 2010; Barendregt, 2008; Horst & Miller, 2006). However, a few studies on women's mobile phone use in the Global South have indicated the potential for change. For instance, Chib and Hsueh-Hua Chen (2011) demonstrated how female mobile phone users in Indonesia maneuver through their social constraints to reap benefits from ICT use. Oreglia (2014) described how older women in rural China pursue their goals of maintaining relationships and accessing online entertainment after receiving training from their children and through collaboration and knowledge sharing with their peers.

Similarly to the studies discussed above, most studies on mobile telephony in South Asia have focused on the question of whether mobile telephony contributes to the strengthening of pre-existing social practices or whether it induces changes. Jeffrey and Doron (2012) argued that mobile telephony has great potential to disrupt the inequalities in India. They (Jeffrey & Doron, 2013) explored mobile telephony in India in its totality, drawing mainly on secondary sources, but also on ethnographic research in Varanasi (a city in Eastern India), which included policies, industries, and businesses. Doron (2012) noted the destabilizing nature of mobile phones for social relationships in Varanasi but maintained that phones were incorporated into households in ways that reaffirm dominant norms and practices so that young women's phone use is restricted. In his study on rural Tamil Nadu in South India, Jouhki (2013) found men to be more active, dominant, and technologically literate users of mobile telephony than women. He argued that young men enjoyed more freedom and agency in the sphere of mobile telephony than women.

My approach differs from the above-discussed studies in that, like Rai (2019), who analyzed subaltern strategies of smartphone use in urban North India, I focus explicitly on power relationships. Moreover, I analyze how increased mobility can simultaneously influence power

relationships in contradictory ways, whereas the studies I discussed above have tended to emphasize either the positive or negative aspects of mobility for power relationships. Mobile telephony has helped women in Janta to negotiate kinship relationships and broaden their home sphere; however, at the same time, the reshaping of political activities resulting from the uptake of mobile phones has reduced women's role in politics. I use Bourdieu's (1998) notion of the field by which he refers to a relatively autonomous domain of activity that responds to rules of functioning and institutions that are specific to it and that define the relations among the agents. In other words, the concept of field denotes to how a society can be analyzed as subdivided into multiple settings that determine social positions and create possibilities for agency. My analysis of the contradictory effects of mobility for gendered power relationships reveals diverse fields and meanings of power, which are influenced differently by the increased mobility. My starting point is to understand power as diffused and extending beyond the formal political sphere; consequently, I relate the use of mobile phones for constructing new types of political practices to other phone-enabled mobilities. I regard agency as the active reproduction of social and cultural formations through social action and discursive means. Furthermore, I use Wrong's (1988, p. ix) idea that the key to understanding power disparities lies in assessing power through the presence of effects rather than the origins of action in choice. In other words, agency and power provide means with which to focus on different aspects of social action: The concept of agency reveals the origins of action and the notion of power exposes the actors' differing abilities to reach their goals. To sum up, I explore how mobile phone use contributes to mobility and, in turn, how new mobile practices relate to gendered power relationships. I focus on two areas of power relationships where villagers availed themselves of mobile telephony: political practices and gender and kinship. The choice of these spheres corresponds with my interest in exploring power as extending beyond the sphere of politics. By juxtaposing mobile phone use within two different fields, each of which entails different forms of power and agency, I sought to uncover and analyze the contradictory nature of mobility for gendered power relationships, particularly as they relate to local politics and changes in women's gender and kinship relationships.

ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK AND RESEARCH DATA

My primary fieldwork site, Janta, is a multicaste village in the eastern state of West Bengal. The village contains approximately 2,500 inhabitants, the majority of whom earned their livelihoods from paddy cultivation and vegetable farming. This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork—interviews, participant observation, and survey data—on the use of mobile phones in 2005, 2007–2008, 2010, and 2012–2013 (see Tenhunen, 2008, 2011, 2018). I also draw on my earlier fieldwork in Janta in 1999–2000 and 2003–2004, a period when no phone system was available in the village (see Tenhunen, 2003, 2009). I collected both quantitative and qualitative data; however, as ethnographic methods are particularly well suited for exploring the interlocutors' understandings and practices, I draw mainly from the qualitative data. My analytical approach is interpretive, and I have analyzed systematically all the research data, including the transcribed interviews and fieldwork notes, by identifying, categorizing, and analyzing the emerging themes and key issues by using qualitative textual analysis software (i.e., Alpha and ATLAS.ti).

I began my research on mobile telephony in 2005 by interviewing the first 10 mobile phone owners of the village. My initial interview questions delved into the phone owners' motivations

for buying the phone, patterns of phone use, and the perceived benefits and possible disadvantages of the phones. I kept my interview questions loosely structured in order to explore unanticipated aspects of emerging phone use. I retained the questions I formulated for my first interviews as part of the subsequent interviews, but I did add new questions on such themes as phone use for political action, gender relationships, and economic activities, as well as the use of smartphone applications in the course of observing new facets of phone use.

In 2007–2008, I again interviewed all phone owners of the village. The distribution of interviews reflected how the mobile phone ownership in the village was clustered in the Tili (upper caste) neighborhood at the time of the interviews: Of the 72 interviews, 60 took place in the Tili caste neighborhood. In addition, I interviewed two Tati, two Chasa, six Brahmin and, two Bagdi caste persons.[2] Most of the people I interviewed were men because men usually were considered the primary phone owners of the households. However, during each interview, I asked questions about other family members' phone use. When I returned to the village in 2012, phone ownership had become ubiquitous, which, for the first time, made it possible to interview several women and Scheduled Caste[3] phone owners. During my fieldwork in 2012–2013, I interviewed 25 women and 39 men who owned personal phones; 45 of this interview group belonged to the higher caste and 19 to scheduled castes. In addition, I interviewed 32 political activists about political phone use. To sum up, over the years, I have interviewed 178 persons from the Janta village about their mobile phone use.

However, I gained some of the greatest insights into the role of mobile phone use by interacting and chatting with the villagers and by writing down these observations in my fieldwork diary. I did not merely observe phone conversations but also discussed these calls with the callers. Often I was able to listen to both parties of the phone calls because these people commonly used the speakers on their phones so that they could share their calls with those present. Phone use that turned into a tacit part of everyday life underlined the importance of observation as a research method, and this article draws more from my observations and interactions than from the interviews.

I speak the Bengali language fluently and lived in the village during 1999–2000; consequently, I was not considered an outsider there during my subsequent fieldwork trips. Initially, the mobility required by my fieldwork quickly revealed gendered power structures. Some men of the neighborhood where I lived in the village objected to my visits specifically to lower caste neighborhoods. I was able to get their approval by arranging a local assistant to accompany me during these visits. However, no one expressed any concerns about my mobility during my subsequent fieldwork visits: The villagers had developed a shared understanding of what my fieldwork entailed. Through my long history with my interlocutors, I gradually became able to develop relationships of trust that helped me to interact with people from different caste groups and classes.

Life in rural West Bengal was not stationary before the introduction of mobile telephony (Tenhunen, 2008). Because women usually married outside their natal village, kinship networks crisscrossed the region, and kinship relationships were maintained through visits. Several villagers commuted to nearby towns for work or study, and some people had emigrated to other regions in India. People also were used to commuting occasionally to rural towns to visit markets, governmental offices, and health practitioners. Nevertheless, mobility before access to mobile media was of a much more limited nature than after the appropriation of mobile phones. Women, for instance, were often not able to obtain the news of a serious illness or even the death of a

close natal relative in time to view the body before the cremation and to participate in the death rituals. When mobile phones first became available, women often mentioned their new ability to participate in the death rituals of their natal relatives as the phones' most significant benefit.

As Horst and Taylor (2014) pointed out, the mobile phone is just one among many recent tools that humans have adopted to overcome the restrictions of space and time. In Janta, mobile phones followed and strengthened the use of motor vehicles as objects of mobility. The first group of mobile phone buyers were car and tractor drivers, as well as small-scale entrepreneurs, who used phones for staying in touch with customers and calling for help if they experienced problems on the road.[4] However, when the phone density[5] was low, mobile phones were largely used as house phones, and phone use impacted mobility mainly in the sense that they reduced the need to travel. As the informants related, a short phone call could save time and money, that is, eliminating the need to travel by bus to deliver important news. Nevertheless, as the phone density rose, mobile phone use became more portable, enabling physical movement. People often could be seen talking on their phones while walking around the neighborhood, working in the fields, bathing by the river, and tending their vegetable gardens. Women could carry out chores, such as cooking and sweeping the floor, holding their phones in anticipation of calls from family members who lived elsewhere. Young men were using their phones to find work opportunities outside the village—and for facilitating a move out of the village.

ANALYZING MOBILE PHONE USE AND POWER RELATIONSHIPS

In the analysis of my ethnographic data below, I start by describing how mobile phone use influenced political practices. I illustrate that the development of new political practices enabled by mobile phones had unintended consequences for women's political roles. I then describe how the emerging mobile political practices eroded women's political participation while simultaneously creating other new possibilities for agency within the family and kin. So my ethnographic analysis is presented within three subsections, each addressing a separate context of the appropriation of mobile phones: village politics, women's participation in village politics, and women's agency. The interconnection among these three focuses helps demonstrate how mobile phone use relates to gendered power relationships in rural West Bengal in India.

Transformation of the Village Political Sphere

Political activists emerged as the heaviest mobile phone users in Janta, and I describe here how their mobile phone use helped change political practices. I carried out my fieldwork on political activists' phone use before smartphones became common. Consequently, my focus is on the phones' calling and texting functions, which differ from the affordances of Internet-based communication: Whereas calling and texting are based on prior relationships of the parties who communicate, Internet usage enables anonymity. Udupa (2017) demonstrated how online anonymity deepens the conditions of ambiguity necessary for online abuse and insult exchange among the middle class in urban India. Political groups in India, and especially the right-wing party BJP (the Hindu Nationalist Party[6]) that came to power in the national elections in 2014 and renewed its electoral victory in 2019, utilize the social media in multiple ways, including trolling, as discussed by Udupa (2017).

The top regional politicians in West Bengal have long used Facebook pages. Some of my Facebook friends from West Bengal have showed their support for the current ruling party, the All India Trinamool Congress party (a breakaway party from the Indian National Congress), by liking the posts and pages of the top politicians in the region, but so far I have not been able to detect Facebook posts criticizing the ruling party still holding power in West Bengal. Miller et al. (2016, p. 146) found in both South India and Brazil a genuine fear of direct negative consequences for oneself and one's family should members of rival parties feel antagonized. One of the crucial political affordances of the mobiles' calling function was that people in West Bengal could discreetly contact the opposition leaders, whereas Facebook could be experienced as too public for expressing rebellious views, especially in times of conflict.

India recently has experienced a proliferation of smartphones and Internet use, from 100 million Internet users in 2010 to 462 million in 2017, primarily due to the growing competition between the service providers (Agrawal, 2018). However, even after the onset of smartphones, only a minority of villagers used them to browse the Internet. The pre-paid system that has made the mobile telephony and its calling functions affordable for low-income people has not encouraged continual Internet connectivity in the Global South. As Donner (2015, p. 124–125) pointed out, when every click on the Internet costs money, users are likely to conserve airtime and assess their data bundles' balance carefully. Instead of surfing and browsing the Internet, the hundreds of millions of new Internet users are, in Donner's words, likely to dip and sip the Internet. Rangaswamy and Arora (2016) provided an example of such mobile Internet use in the Hyderabad and Chennai slum communities, where it required enormous dexterity from young users to build Facebook identities when every minute of access cost money. Additionally, in rural West Bengal, low levels of literacy prevented people from using the Internet, which is largely based on textual information. Consequently, the smartphones' calling and texting functions became important for most of the villagers, although by 2012–2013 most families in the village possessed inexpensive smartphones. At this point, they used the Internet but indirectly. They bought music, videos, and pictures, but these were downloaded onto their phone's memory chip in shops. When I carried out fieldwork among the low-income people in rural and urban West Bengal (in the South 24 Parganas district and Kolkata) in 2018, I witnessed that most of users still did not avail Internet access directly with their smartphones. As reported by the International Telecommunication Union (2018), prices remain a barrier to ICT adoption in the Global South.[7]

Even if the direct Internet access afforded by smartphones has not played a major role in rural West Bengal politics, mobile telephony and the phones' calling functions did contribute significantly to the rise of the opposition in West Bengal,[8] where the Communist Party of India (Marxist), known as CPI(M), had been in power from 1977 until 2011—when the Trinamool party gained power. West Bengal is the only state in India where the CPI(M) was in power continuously between 1977–2011. The state government boosted the development of new industries by creating special economic zones for which it acquired land through the Land Acquisition Act. In 2007, West Bengal was forced to reverse its plans to set up a chemical hub in Nandigram (located about 150 kilometers from Janta) due to local farmers' resistance and ensuing violence (Chakraborti, 2007; "Red-hand Buddha," 2007). Rural people's resistance to government initiatives is by no means unusual in India or West Bengal. Since India's independence, *gheraos* (encirclements)—the surrounding of politicians or buildings until the protestors' demands are met—and strikes have been common choice for protest, especially in West Bengal. Moreover, this 2007 event was not the first violent conflict between the police and the rural people in West Bengal. The conflict in

Nandigram differed from earlier ones, however, and not only because forcing people to give up their land was considered more unjust than many prior police atrocities. First, the villagers could effectively remain informed of the police contingent's movements with the help of mobile phones. And secondly, 24-hour news stations broadcasted vivid reports of the conflict, whereas such events would only have merited a brief newspaper report before the liberation of television broadcasting. Following the violent conflict between police and farmers unwilling to give up their land, the ruling CPI(M) suffered its greatest electoral defeat in decades. A sizeable number of citizens voted silently against the Communist Party in the *panchayat* (local governing body) elections in 2008, even though communist party cadres used intimidation to prevent them from doing so in many regions. Mamata Banerjee's (party leader and the current chief minister of West Bengal) Trinamool Congress won the state elections in the spring of 2011 and renewed its electoral victory in 2016.

I found the villagers of rural Bankura (located about 150 kilometers from Nandigram) much less vocal about politics when I visited them after Nandigram events than before—the party cadres' violence against the opposition in Nandigram had made people cautious (Tenhunen, 2018). Whereas the villagers previously could criticize openly the ruling party, the CPI(M), I was advised to stop asking direct questions about the violence in Nandigram. I was told that fear had caused people to fall silent. The apparent silencing of the opposition (i.e., Trinamool) did not, however, stop its growth. An opposition supporter I met in Janta reflected the silent growth of the opposition. He carefully avoided commenting on politics during our discussion but mentioned that he carries the local opposition leaders' numbers in his phone. Other opposition activists explicitly stated that mobile phones helped them secretly mobilize against the ruling party. Before the state elections in 2011, the regional Trinamool office in the nearby town of Vishnupur buzzed with excitement—and phone calls.

In order to demonstrate the changes in political practices, I first briefly describe here the nature of village politics before mobile telephony. My understanding of politics resembles studies that have addressed political practices in their cultural form, such as Davis' (1983) and Hansen's (1999) studies, but differs from these in that I do not proceed from a general definition of politics. Instead, I analyze the local meanings of politics while also taking into account how local meanings are influenced by translocal[9] relationships and political organization.

In 1999, villagers maintained that it was impossible to live in their community without the protection of one of the two main parties—the CPI(M) and BJP. The parties' power was largely derived from their role as arbitrators of disputes: Any person who felt that he or she has suffered an injustice could call a village meeting, led by village leaders, during which a solution would be negotiated between the disputing persons (Tenhunen, 2003, 2009). The discussions in the meeting aimed at finding a consensus thereby lessening the possibility of resistance against the solution. The CPI(M) party's power also was based on their elected representatives who served in the local decision-making bodies—*panchayat*s—which authorize the distribution of local public finances. However, the villagers did not so much judge the parties by their ideological programs as by their morals. The understanding of politics as morality was in line with the literal meaning of the Bengali term *rajniti* (politics), which is a compound word consisting of the words *raj* (king, ruler, state, or government) and *niti* (morality, principle). Voters gave the party their support and, in return, expected assistance when they face hardships. The CPI(M), for instance, assisted small-scale farmers by distributing crop seeds. Party leaders acted as conciliators in family conflicts, tried to help gamblers and alcoholics overcome their addictions, mediated in divorce proceedings and concomitant property disputes, and helped with the registration of property. Because the local

public health centers did not have sufficient resources to treat patients with serious illnesses and the poor cannot afford private doctors, indigent villagers' only hope was that their party would arrange the required treatment for such patients. Party members formed a kind of kinship community, calling one another by kinship terms such as sister, brother, aunt or uncle. Kinship provided the metaphor for political parties and their activities so that kinship-based party membership was differentiated from other types of relatives, who were defined on the basis of indigenous ideas of blood relations, code of conduct, sentiment, and spatial aspects. Kinship ties meant having certain expectations of solidarity. Serious disagreements about these solidarities could lead to the splitting of the joint family or the termination of certain interactions among kin.

The ruling party's approval was frequently needed in various spheres of life: One had to turn to the CPI(M) in rural Bankura if one needed help to report a case to the police or to obtain a job in the government or the new industries (Tenhunen, 2003, 2009). The local leaders of the West Bengal CPI(M) belonged to the upper classes of the region, thus political work resembled the patron–client relationships that prevailed before the land reforms, when the landless had to turn to the big landlords for work and protection (Ruud, 2003; Tenhunen, 2003, 2009). Several studies have made similar observations regarding how the CPI(M) party mediated all spheres of activity in various regions of rural West Bengal (Majumdar, 2009; Roy, 2007, 2008, 2013; Ruud, 2003). These political practices had the backing of the ruling party, which had built its support through such patronage. Clearly, these practices cannot be characterized as informal and distinct from formal politics.

The following comment[10] by one of the top leaders of the former opposition party, Trinamool, to my question illustrates how mobile phones contributed to new political practices that were characterized by increased mobility.

> *R: How do you benefit from your phone for your political work?*
>
> *Before the mobile telephony, political leaders like me had to sit at home and receive visitors. Sometimes people from faraway places would come to meet me when I was not at home. Now I can travel and set up meetings with supporters. I can call the nearest political worker and communicate to all necessary places at once if there is an incident. This is the reason why every party activist needs a phone. Information about any type of action can be delivered in a fraction of a second. (A male Trinamool party leader)*

Mobile phones have freed leaders to visit their constituency without having to neglect their other duties, which contributes to an increase in translocal political contacts. Whereas political disputes used to be settled in local village meetings, by 2010 even an informal meeting could be translocal. For instance, a young Bagdi man from Janta made phone calls to CPI(M) leaders after someone had stolen paddy from his field. To address the complaint, the CPI(M) leaders from Janta, along with leaders from adjacent villages, held several meetings arranged at a bus stand near the junction of the two major roads connecting the adjacent villages.

As the above examples illustrate, CPI(M) rule has not been based solely on violence, but coercive means repeatedly have been crucial for its electoral success (Gupta, 2010). Since overt support for the opposition ran the risk of provoking CPI(M) intimidation, phones offered the opposition a covert way of communication. As the CPI(M) sought to overpower the opposition through violent means, Trinamool organized protection through phones, sending party activists to protect its supporters even if an attack was merely anticipated. Workers of the Trinamool party office in Vishnupur frequently made calls to express support for their party members. A

Vishnupur Trinamool leader emphasized that, without the protection offered through phones, they would not have been able to increase their constituency:

> *R: How do you benefit from your phone for your political work?*
>
> *Thanks to the phone, the work that used to take 24 hours takes only 20 minutes. I can access a larger area and more people than before. If I did not have the phone, I could not communicate with so many people. Today, rural people understand that the CPI(M) is destroying their opportunities. That is why we need development, to make progress. People have come forward, protested, and started a movement. When the CPI(M) has seen this movement, they have started a wave of terror. If some person gets in touch with a Trinamool leader, the CPI(M) becomes violent towards that person. They burn houses and poison ponds. They cut paddy from the field. Whenever people hear them plan this, they call us over mobile phones. They call us immediately if they get to hear about an attack. We can send our cadres; we go by ourselves or call the police. We inform the administration and immediately reach the place. So, they are not able to torture people. If we did not have phones, it would be very difficult. We now have the courage to support people. We could not have progressed this much without phones. (A male Trinamool party leader from Vishnupur)*

Mobile phones provided the opposition with new means to defend their supporters from the intimidation of the ruling party. Opposition activists also used phones for spontaneous activities, such as organizing wildcat strikes and reporting the ruling party's misdeeds. Indeed the opposition used the mobile phone capabilities more often than the ruling party, whereas the CPI(M) continued to send information through letters. In contrast to the hierarchical flows of information and decision making of the CPI(M) party, the Trinamool Congress party used phones to construct new political contexts thereby introducing changes in how political hierarchies are imagined and practiced. After the Trinamool party gained power in West Bengal, general village meetings lost their power; since 2011, they were no longer arranged.

While the CPI(M) was a predominantly hierarchical structure with higher units encompassing lower ones and with information and decision-making flowing mainly from the top (Gupta, 2010, p. 26), the Trinamool party used phones to connect top leaders with grassroots activities and across regional units. For instance, Mamata Banerjee, the former opposition leader and current chief minister of West Bengal, maximized her reachability by having several assistants making and receiving calls for her on several phones registered in her name. She frequently connected with individuals at the various party levels and made unexpected appearances at crisis scenes (Roy, personal communication, May 2010). Banerjee's campaigning exemplified a new manner of leadership that Nielsen (2018) labeled the "activist style," which is characterized by public spectacles and maximizing publicity.

Mobile phones made it possible for the opposition activists to react to conflicts and arrange protection, while 24-hour news stations broadcasted vivid reports of any major conflicts (Tenhunen, 2018). As Lahiri (2014) pointed out, the critical views of the Left Front government (an alliance of left-wing political parties in West Bengal which held power in West Bengal during 1977–2011) that the newspapers in West Bengal regularly expressed did not have significant repercussions because most people did not read them due to their low levels of education and literacy, as well as their poverty. However, since 2000, broadcast news media have crucially expanded their scope in West Bengal thanks to the influx of private television networks with 24-hour news channels. Mobile technology fed the direct newscasts because reporters at the conflict scenes could transmit news, photos, and film to the television stations and newspapers by means

of mobile phones, although political parties have tried to restrict over-the-phone reporting in the troubled regions that is critical of their views.

The activist style of leadership contributed and strengthened the public sphere at the expense of village politics. The local political sphere merged increasingly into translocal politics and the public sphere at the expense of local political hierarchies, which had been co-constructed by the CPI(M) party and through village social relationships. Local people gained in that they no longer had to predominantly rely on local leaders and because phones offered an additional medium for the articulation of critical and alternative discourses. At the same time, the increase in the mobility of political activities decreased the influence and power of village-level leadership and especially the locally constructed political sphere that had helped create a legitimate political sphere of action for women.

In the next subsection, I illustrate how women's political participation was influenced by the above discussed changes in political practices. I start by briefly describing women's political participation before the phones.

Women's Political Participation

Village women were selected as *panchayat* representatives for the first time following the national women's quotas in the 1990s. During the same period, women of all castes started regularly attending the women's committee meetings organized under the auspices of the CPI(M). Nevertheless, women were still excluded from the general village meetings where men discussed village disputes. Family disputes, along with women's demands, however, were readily understood as political because politics was not perceived in opposition to the women's domain of household and kinship, as has often been the case in societies where Western ideas of politics have evolved. My experiences are in line with the anthropological stream of the past few decades (e.g., Collier & Yanagisako, 1987; Rogers, 1975; Rosaldo & Lamphere, 1974; Strathern, 1988; Yanagisako, 1979) that has illustrated the need to question the preconceived notions of power and politics as public phenomena. Evans-Pritchard (1940) and Fortes (1945), pioneers in political anthropology, explicitly dichotomized the domestic domain in contrast with the politico-juridical domain. The same dichotomy is implicit in a later definition of politics as public, goal-oriented activity (Swartz, 1969, p. 1; Swartz, Turner, & Tuden, 1966, p. 7). Contemporary anthropological studies of democracy have largely moved beyond the juxtaposition of politics with such domains as kinship (e.g., Michelutti, 2008).

In Janta, women's committees defended women in family conflicts and fostered awareness among women regarding women's rights and work, which they called *jagaron* (awakening; Tenhunen, 2009). They also ran a microcredit program based on women's self-help groups, in which women, in addition to saving money, advised and helped each other in solving the problems of daily life, such as family conflicts or health concerns. The savings were lent in turns to members for undertaking productive activities such as buying cattle. Similar to the general village meetings, the women's committee meetings could solve disputes by fining a guilty party. If a woman had been mistreated by her family, the committee representatives could discuss the situation with the family in order to help the woman. The mere threat of the committee's involvement could motivate family members to refrain from mistreating a woman. As it was the village *panchayat* representative who had founded the women's committee in Janta, the *panchayat* programs for women had been closely associated with the women's committee. The

women's committee focused on raising women's consciousness about their rights; it also motivated women to participate in programs and influenced the *panchayat* to pay attention to women's concerns. Tapati Kundu, the first female *panchayat* representative from Janta, arranged income-earning opportunities, a female literacy program, and a nursery school in Janta. Women in need of assistance found it easier to approach the female representatives.

The idea of women's protest and self-expression fit the local political realm, which entailed a moral discourse on a ruler's morality to a certain extent (Tenhunen, 2009). Similar to Janta's party politics, Kundu's politics entailed helping poor people and settling disputes. She demanded help from the Block Development Office (a rural area administratively earmarked for development) for people in need: clothes, wheat, paddy, and monetary assistance. She settled disputes by punishing the guilty party with a fine, just as informal village meetings did. She says she always thought about women and discussed things separately from men with other women *panchayat* representatives, perceiving women's political action and interests as separate from men's. Her political action and thinking followed the local understanding of politics as the realm of kinship-related morality and patron–client relationships where women act separately from men. Some of Kundu's aims were truly radical and difficult to pursue in the village. Although she said she advocated women's right to divorce and the eradication of the dowry system, she never worked for these aims in Janta. She acknowledged the difficulty of putting any radical ideas into practice in the village and recommended that, in practice, women should try to behave properly as far as they can and persuade their husbands to behave well.

The women's awakening propagated by women's organizations had reached village women who described the desired course of development for women as the freedom and right to study, take salaried jobs, move about freely, and participate in politics. The following comments from several young (aged 25–35 years) housewives from small landowning households in Janta, whom I interviewed in their homes in 1999, illustrate well the emerging awareness among women:

> R. *What kind of change is necessary for women according to you?*
>
> *Women should grow up studying; they should participate in politics. Women should participate in politics just like men do. That is what I want. Men and women are the same.*
>
> R. *What kind of change have you seen in women's lives?*
>
> *I want my daughter to study before getting married.*
>
> R. *What other changes have you seen?*
>
> *Much has changed. Before women could not go out; they could not study. It would be regarded as dishonorable, but now women and men have the same rights. Previously wives could not move outside the house. Now if I tell my husband that I want to attend the women's committee and talk with a group of women and that we want to work together, he will say that I may go. But it was not like this before.*
>
> [And from another respondent] *It is, of course, different these days. Women are not scared. Previously women were afraid of their mothers-in-law and their husbands. Nowadays, women are not afraid of anyone. Everything happens as they want it to. Whatever they say happens.*
>
> R. *What kinds of freedom do women have these days?*
>
> *Women can arrange things as they want them. Previously they did not study much. Now they study and see the world outside and learn to understand what to do. These days,*

women have many fascinations: dress, education. Women have attained a new level in every respect. This is what we call modern. It was not like this earlier.

Women's involvement in politics under the CPI(M) rule also prepared the ground for Mamata Banerjee, the Trinamool party leader and the first female chief minister of the state, by helping to create an active female electorate motivated to give their votes to a woman candidate.

It was under the leadership of Banerjee that the CPI(M) was ousted from power in 2011. Mobile telephony, together with the private television news channels, helped create new political practices and leadership styles that were characterized by mobility. Villagers no longer relied on village political leaders because they were able to have constant contact with regional leaders who also were then able to travel and be reachable by their constituency. These mobile practices, in turn, served to erode the sphere of village politics, including women's political activities.

During the CPI(M) rule, women could organize politically within the village neighborhoods, that is, the locations associated with the female sphere and space. When political organization became more flexible, faster, and translocal, women's role in politics was reduced. A meeting with few women from a rural town of Vishnupur who were campaigning for the Trinamool party in various urban neighborhoods before the state election in 2011 exemplifies women's difficulties in adjusting to increasingly mobile political practices. The women political activists I observed were not moving in their comfort zone and had to deal with harassment even at their own party office. The public political sphere in India emerged as predominantly male during the colonial era (Chatterjee, 1993) and this gendered meaning of spheres has prevailed in new contexts. Women have been more successful in carving a political space in the village than as part of the general public and especially the digital sphere in India. As Udupa (2017) demonstrated, social media discussions in urban India often draw from the masculinist logic of shame.

Since the Trinamool party came into power in 2011, I no longer could witness women participating in politics in Janta. Despite the Trinamool party's initial plans to set up women's groups, women ceased to have political meetings in the village under the Trinamool rule, in line with the end of even general village meetings. While mobile telephony enabled and strengthened translocal political practices, it also decreased the village-based political practices, including women's political activities. My findings are similar to Wagner and Fernández-Ardèvol (2019), who found the choice of communication medium to be a political issue among a Guarani community in Greater Buenos Aires. In this community, the upsurge in mobile-mediated communication contributed to the decline of face-to-face deliberations that had earlier been the mainstay of communal sharing arrangements and held a central position in the understandings of Guaraní culture.

Women's Agency as Mobile Phone Users

I now turn to describe how women availed the mobility offered by mobile phones in their daily lives. When I first moved in with a family in the Janta village in 1999, the situation of the young wife in this family puzzled me (Tenhunen, 2018). Like most married women in the region, she had moved from her natal village to live with her in-laws in Janta after her marriage. She had not visited her parents since her marriage about a year before. The villagers explained that young wives are not supposed to visit their natal families for a year after their marriage. No one supported my interpretation of her treatment as unnecessarily strict, and I never heard her demand

to be allowed to visit her natal home. But I could see that she missed her parents and was overwhelmed with happiness when her father visited her a few times during the year.

It used to be a well-accepted fact of village life that young wives do not visit and hardly communicate with their parents during their first year of marriage, and even the young wives seemed to approve of this custom. Fast-forward 13 years and I again witnessed a newlywed wife in the village. She had just arrived to live with her husband's family in Janta and was now completely preoccupied with her personal mobile phone with which she communicated daily with her parents. I was told that it is natural for young girls to want to stay in touch with their natal families. When I mentioned that things had changed, the older women—who had not been allowed to stay in touch with their natal families early in their marriages—looked surprised, as if they had not noticed the change.

The digital sphere constructed with the help of mobile telephony proved malleable—an environment that was initially considered as male-dominated in the sense that first phone owners were mainly young men has opened up for women. However, women's calling patterns emerged as distinct from men's (Tenhunen, 2018). Based on the phone diaries, 40% of the calls by men were to their friends, whereas only 1% of the women's calls entailed calling their female friends. Men's calls were more often about work or travel; women's calls mainly involved discussion of the general news or calling for no particular purpose other than to inquire how the other party is. Although these calls served no specific instrumental purpose, they deepened and strengthened relationships, which could help obtain both emotional and economic support when this is needed. Since women's calls were more limited to their close kin than men's calls, women were construed as more homebound than men even in digitally constructed spaces.

The few village women who attended college or had a service job outside the village always carried their personal phones (Tenhunen, 2018). They found that the ability to inform their family members at home about schedules and possible delays in commuting and to monitor the status of things at home helped them to move outside the home and into spheres not considered the ideal places for women. I did not hear women express that they felt calls from home as unwanted surveillance. Women value the possibility to call for help if they face problems, such as missing buses, accidents, break-downs of vehicles, traffic jams, and demonstrations on the roadway. A female college student who I interviewed in Janta in 2012 explained,

> R.: *How do you benefit from your mobile phone?*
>
> *I travel to college by bus, so people can call me to tell me if the bus is not going to come. And if the last bus does not come, I can call home. The ability to call gives me mental courage. If I face any inconvenience outside the home, they* [the family] *will come and get me.*

Women's sphere is associated with the home and the village, so women often use mobile phones to let them do the work of moving, that is staying in touch without leaving the home sphere. Mobile media support women staying in touch with their natal families even when they are quite distant. While kinship relationships have encouraged and motivated women's mobile phone use, phone use has, in turn, transformed relationships by helping to create new contexts for speech and action. Young women, for instance, can seek help from their parents, and mothers can advise their daughters over the phone even against the will of in-laws.

Similarly to television, translocal communication with the help of mobile phones has helped bring the outer world into the women's sphere. Because of access to mobile phones, women were better connected with their natal families, which, for most women, is a major source of support.

Just a decade ago, women could be facing food scarcity or were mistreated in their husband's house for years before the news reached their parents. The exchange of news over the phone by calling has become so intense that, for instance, news of loss to farming caused by a hailstorm reached a woman's parents within a few days, although she herself did not call her parents. The importance attached to relationships with in-laws has helped women gain access to phones. By calling their parents frequently, women have not adopted a completely new practice but have instead strengthened the relationships between kin groups, which were already valued as important. However, what is new is the greater communication density that phones enable, as well as the fact that women themselves could now initiate the contacts instead of their brothers and husbands.

Moreover, daughters-in-law often chose to call when their in-laws were not present, which signified that their calling was experienced as subversive (Tenhunen, 2018). Previously, opportunities for private conversations in the village were limited, but people did try to maneuver to avoid sharing all their discussions with the neighbors and the extended family. Mobile phones, however, offered the possibility to physically move away so that fewer people were within hearing distance, and phones were a novelty in rural West Bengal in the sense that the people could choose and reconstruct the context of their talk. Tacchi et al. (2012) similarly observed that women in rural Andhra Pradesh in Southern India valued their newly found ability to talk by phone without everyone in the household or vicinity hearing their conversations. A Janta woman who, over the phone, advised her daughter to disobey her mother-in-law is an example of how communication with natal relatives could include subversive elements. The daughter of the woman who gave the advice had married into a well-to-do household where the daughter was responsible for all the housework. The daughter was happily married in that she was well off, but her workload exhausted her. Usually, women shared tasks more equally than in this household, even though mothers-in-law tend to be in positions of power. The mother, over the phone, advised her daughter to simply refuse to do the excess work in her in-laws' house. She feared that if the daughter kept obeying, her workload would grow unbearable. Following her mother's advice, the daughter successfully refused extra chores.

Without a phone, the chances for this mother–daughter conversation would have been limited because the mother usually would have met her daughter only when surrounded by her in-laws. Therefore, mobile phones offered women a channel to express unconventional ideas and exert their will through networking by offering them a chance to speak to only one listener at a time if they so chose. Women had agency as phone users in that they were able to shape communicative contexts and pursue their goals of reforming the kinship-based code of conduct for women. Motivated by women's rights discourses and political activism, women used phones to realize their goals of widening the domestic sphere. At the same time, phones have helped introduce changes in women's relationships with each other: Phones facilitate young wives to challenge their mothers-in-law's authority and build closer relationships with their own mothers after marriage.

CONCLUSIONS

Mobile media represent objects of mobility: They have improved the possibility for people to travel while also providing the experience of mobility in lieu of physical movement. I have explored how mobile phone use has contributed to new political practices characterized by mobility and how the new practices influenced gendered power relationships and women's

agency. Mobile phones enabled new types of political practices that, in turn, influenced village social relations, including gender relations. At the same time, mobile phone use contributed to changes in gender and kinship relationships.

My study concurs with the scholarship that has pinpointed that mobility is not self-evidently positive (Alvarez, 1995; Cresswell, 2014; Tsing, 2005) and that the meaning of mobility depends on the contexts of mobility and communication (Tacchi et al., 2012). I have demonstrated that understanding the role of mobility for power relationships requires attention to the interconnected fields of power as contexts of mobility. Mobilities emerge within different fields of power that enable diverse forms of agency.

My analyses of mobile phone-based mobilities revealed two fields of power and agency: one that was based more on local social ties and the other on translocal ties. The village-based political order drew from the local symbolic domains the meanings of which women were able to negotiate in their everyday lives. Before the onset of mobile telephony, women's political activities took place as part of the culturally constructed women's sphere in the village. The strengthening of the translocal political sphere, however, decreased the importance of the village-based political sphere to which women had gained access. At the same time, mobile telephony contributed to the creation of translocal publics that emerged as an assemblage of a variety of factors including the mass media and translocal political organizations. It highlights the gendered difference in meaning between these two fields of power, in how women's participation in village meetings was not questioned, whereas their participation in political activities outside the village appeared risky and difficult. Although face-to-face interaction as part of the village sociality had supported women's political discourse, the translocal public sphere did not offer a safe space for rural women activists' discourses.

Replacing the political sphere that was earlier perceived as predominantly local by translocal political activities reduced the village women's role in politics. However, mobile phone use also made possible a great variety of forms of mobility and agency for women that gained importance at the expense of their participation in politics. Women found it easier to travel outside the home when they carried mobile phones. Mobile phones made it possible to extend the idea of safety associated with the home to movement in the outside world. Mobile phones also gave callers new possibilities to choose the context for their speech and to engage in critical and unconventional discourses, which could help women make concrete changes in their everyday lives. New forms of social interaction enabled by mobile phones challenge gendered power relationships in subtle ways; nevertheless, these small changes could be paving a way for epochal changes that, in turn, could have political repercussions.

While this article has focused on a specific context—the use of mobile phones in rural India during 2003–2013, its theoretical framework can help understand how other forms of new media in other locations contribute to power and politics in unanticipated ways. To summarize, I argue that exploring mobility and power relationships reveals changing fields of power. Analyzing their interconnections and the way they are symbolically and socially assembled helps researchers understand the unexpected ways mobility and rapidly evolving new forms of media contribute to power and politics. Despite the many affordances mobile telephony offers for political activism, mobile phone use for political purposes is embedded in local contexts in ways that elude generalizations about mobile phones simply as tools for democratization and empowerment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND POLICY

Through my research, I have sought to understand how mobile phone use helps create new mobilities that relate to power in diffuse ways. By studying the appropriation of mobile phones within different fields of power and as enabling different forms of agency, the article builds a research approach that can be applied to studying how other forms of new media in other locations contribute to power and politics in unanticipated ways. In terms of policy issues, the article demonstrates that the choice of communication medium can be a political issue; consequently, one cannot rely on new media like mobile phones to self-evidently empower people without encouraging and supporting local face-to-face interaction.

ENDNOTES

1. Although this article avails the same ethnographic data I have used for some of my earlier publications (Tenhunen, 2008, 2011 & 2018), the focus on mobility and power is new.

2. The dominant caste, both numerically and in terms of land ownership in Janta, is the Tilis (50%). Other major caste groups are the Bagdis (15%) and Casas (16%). Caste and class have, to a large degree, overlapped in Janta: Most Tilis and Casas own land, while most Bagdis, who are classified as a Scheduled Caste, earn their livelihood by means of daily labor, mainly agricultural work or work in the brick factories. About 10 other small caste groups, each which forms 1–2 % of the population, also reside in Janta. The most significant of these are the Brahmins, who own land, hold office jobs, and do not participate in farm work like other landowning villagers do. Some castes continue their hereditary occupations (Tatis weaving, Kumars pottery, Napits barbering, and Cutas carpentry) but, with the exception of the carpenter caste, their hereditary occupations only supplement their income from farming.

3. The *Scheduled Castes* refer to people at the bottom of caste hierarchy who are officially designated as disadvantaged people in India and for whom the Constitution lays down the general principles of positive discrimination. The government has allocated quotas in government jobs and educational institutions for Scheduled Castes and Tribes,

4. Initially, villagers purchased mobile phones from a nearby town. By 2012, a mobile phone repair shop opened in the village and the owner also sold mobile phones and their equipment. He did not keep a stock of phones but acquired them according to clients' orders.

5. In the fall of 2003, there were four privately owned mobile phones in Janta, and when I returned to the village in 2005, there were 10 phones in Janta and its two small adjacent villages. By 2007, the number of phones had risen to 100 and the phone density rose to four phones per 100 persons. By the spring of 2010, only four households of the 158 households surveyed in Janta did not have a phone. In India, tele-density increased from less than one per 100 persons to 82 from 1991–2015 (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, 2012; Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, 2016).

6. The Bharatiya Janata Party is one of the two major political parties in India. It is the largest political party of India in terms of representation in the national parliament. Ideologically, it is a right-wing party that represents Hindu nationalist positions. BJP had not been able to become a major party in West Bengal until recently. It is now the largest opposition party in West Bengal, which is still one of the few states in India not ruled by the BJP. The All India Trinamool Congress party has held the majority in the State Legislative Assembly since 2011 when it ended the long Communist party rule in the state.

7. In developed countries, four of five people were online at the end of 2018. In developing countries, however, 45% of the population were using the Internet. At that time in the world's 47 least-developed countries, four of five individuals (80%) did not yet have Internet access (International Telecommunication Union, 2018).

8. In India, legislative, administrative, and executive powers are divided between the central government and the states. West Bengal is one of the 29 states of India.

9. *Translocal* refers to the interconnectedness between the local and the global.

10. I conducted all of the research in the Bengali language and I have translated the data quotations into English for this research report.

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