

**THE BAN ON MOBILE PHONES IN THE SCHOOLS IN
INDIA: A PROBE TO AUGMENT EFFICACY IN POLICY
EXECUTION**

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ABSTRACT

Mobile phone technology has changed the way people communicate; and it grappling with morality, the scene is set for the draconian constraints. With the increase in scandals following the Delhi Public School MMS issue, the misuse of mobile phones by school children came to the fore. Hence, a ban on mobile phones in schools is in existence in many states in India. In this descriptive study, we have attempted to shed light on the ban on mobile phones in schools by analyzing the viewpoints of the students, parents and teachers. The study develops on the analysis of data obtained by in-depth interviews and focused interviews. This study points to the lackadaisical attitude of parents and other authorities towards the ban. The paper also seeks to discuss the present scenario on the basis of the study and suggests measures for the effective execution of the ban in the context of misuse of mobile phones.

Key Words: mobile phones, misuse, ban, school, children, teachers, MMS, Scandals.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Scientific advancements have always surprised humans in its onward journey. Man's life ushered in comforts and luxury with the science growing with inventions and the resultant patents. Communication has been a primary function of human life. Man being a social animal cannot live without communication and relationships. With the advancement, man had to disperse and settle in numerous parts of the world. Earlier, messages were sent with the help of birds, like doves or human messengers. Science being 'sympathetic' for the cause had come up with revolutionary inventions to empower civil society with a comfortable and easily operational social network system. Prior to such inventions we had been able to maintain social relations with our dear and near ones through telegrams, letters and personal visits. Later on, telephones came in to existence and it transformed the favorite mode of staying connected both personally and for business purposes. And the revolution in communication technology started with the ingress of mobile phones.

Mobile phones a.k.a. cell phones/cellular phones have changed the way of life with text messaging, mobile internet, voice calling and so on. AT & T was the first to commercialize mobile telecommunications. The mobile networks evolved with 1G, 2G, 3G, 4G - creating increasing demands and better facilities. Now mobile phones provide other services like MMS, email, Bluetooth, games, photography etc. It makes and receives phone calls over a radio link by connecting to a cellular network provided by a mobile phone operator.

Like all technologies, mobile phones also brought with it its share of positive and negative effects. We have been provided mobile phones with built-in cameras. With the increase in popularity of the mobile phones, the misuse also hiked up. Mobile phones became popular among the children and it became an object to flaunt with its added perks of camera, games, music etc. With the popular scandals featuring school children, many Indian states woke up to the thought of eliminating mobile phone presence in schools.

Background of the Study:

In the international realm, mobile phones are banned from schools in the United Kingdom, France, South Africa etc. The international concerns center primarily on the health hazards and on the misuse of the same. In India, the proliferation of mobile phones and its increasing popularity among people belonging to all age groups led to the unquestioned possession of mobile gadgets by school students which lead to an array of mobile phone scandals spearheaded

by the Delhi Public School Scandal popularly remembered as the DPS Scandal. Mobile phones are banned in schools in Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Tripura and many other states of India. In Kerala, mobile phones were banned in schools from 2009 (The Times of India, 2009). Three years later, in 2012, the ban has been evaluated as 'ineffective' in a report by 'Childline' (The Hindu, 2012). Students are reported to carry mobile phones to schools despite the ban. The researchers found that it would be useful to conduct a study on the same to probe into the factors affecting the successful implementation of the ban on mobile phones in schools and to give suggestions for the healthy execution of the policy.

2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

A search for previous research literature showed that many studies reflected on mobile phone ban in schools but the majority was centered on the health implications of the use of mobile phones. Gilroy (2004) mentions that educators are struggling to handle a situation like 'technological terror' entering the classrooms. Many faculties consider classroom use of cell phones as very uncivilized and at worst a serious distraction to the learning environment. Parry (2006) examines global examples of the misuse of camera phones in schools and the issues and problems that emerged. The article states that because of its ubiquity and social potency, it is probably a mistake and an overreaction on the part of education authorities or schools to introduce blanket bans on the possession of camera phones. Instead it would have been better to devise sensible agreements and policies on camera phone usage. Charlton, Panting and Hannan (2006) had investigated the cell phone ownership among primary school students, the sample size being 351 and concluded that nearly half of both boys and girls owned mobile phones and that the non-ownership of mobile phones may lead to social exclusion. Pew Internet (2010) in a study among the American teens concluded that the mobile phone has become the most favored communication device. It studied the text messaging and calling aspect of mobile phones and its relationship with the teens. The study points out that 65 percent of cell owning teens at schools that completely ban mobile phones in its campus, bring phones to school every day. Mariappan and Elumalai (2011) in their paper studied the health implications, parental attitude, usage patterns of college students and suggest the ban of mobile phones in the campus. The study which was conducted in Tiruchirapally, is a pointer to the attitudes of society towards the ban. But we realize that the ban of mobile phones in schools cannot be equated with that in college. Hence, the findings do not intersect our present study.

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

It was decided that qualitative research methodology was the most appropriate because we wanted to begin the study without any preconceived notions which could have influenced the findings of the study by bringing in some form of bias or the other. The study is primarily descriptive in nature. Many methods were contemplated upon before we finally decided to execute a three layered investigation. The methods for collecting primary data were interviews - both in-depth interview and focused interviews. The sampling method was purposive and the time frame of the study was between January 2013 and June 2013. The study was done in the State of Kerala.

At the outset, in- depth interviews were conducted on ten boys and ten girls who were High School students (between thirteen and fifteen years of age) studying in schools in Kerala. Care was given to include girls who studied in both girls-only and co-educational schools. Students were chosen from different schools to prevent homogenous data as there is chance for the overlapping of responses due to similarity of situations. Each interview lasted for thirty to forty minutes approximately. Informal conversational approach was relied on, given the sensitiveness of the issue and with the additional aim of easing the participants.

Secondly, it was realized that the parental attitude towards the ban is vital for our study. Sixteen parents, whose children studied in High Schools, were interviewed. Either of the parents- the father or the mother was interviewed. The sample also included single parents. Each interview lasted for a maximum of thirty minutes.

Thirdly, focus group interview sessions were conducted with the school teachers. The interviews were conducted during the lunch break at schools, the mention of which is to imply that there had been interruptions. The interviews were conducted at the staff rooms at their leisure time after lunch. Three sets of interviews were conducted in different schools, each lasting thirty minutes approximately. Specifically the following areas were predetermined to be probed. (i) The present scenario of the ban, (ii) the difficulties in enforcing the ban and (iii) suggestions for better mobile phone use policy in schools.

The data gathered were first processed manually and given appropriate codes. Then it was analyzed by using qualitative methods to identify themes which were compared and merged to form the corpus of this study.

4. RESULTS

THE STUDENTS' ANGLE

A. General Information.

(i) Ninety percent of the boys among boy participants- and thirty percent of girls among girl participants take mobile phones to schools. *"We are not doing any illegal activity with mobiles. I keep in touch with my friends in Trivandrum where I studied previously. I am new to this school and find it difficult to get friends here. I SMS during the lunch break"*, Aditya (13yrs) quipped.

(ii) Those girls who do not take mobile phones to school are studying in girls-only schools.

(iii) Having mobile phones handy gives a feeling of security to girls.

Jasmine (15yrs) opined so: *"I get out of my home at around 7.30 A.M and get home after tuitions by 6.30PM. Mobile phones make me feel secure and in touch with my people whenever I need to. I can know if my father cannot pick me up from the tuition center because of any work errand and I have to walk back home."*

Mobile phones do make children feel safer as most students have tuitions or dance/ music classes to attend after classes. In a study in America, 94% of parents and 93% of teens aged 12-17 yrs appreciate the safety aspect of mobile phones (Lenhart, 2010).

(iv) Ninety eight per cent of the children take mobile phones to schools with prior consent from their parents. Parents are aware of their children carrying mobile phones to schools. The parents allow their children to carry mobile phones to school for multiple reasons which includes keeping in touch with them when they go to school without completely recovering from any illness or when they need to be instructed on certain aspects like the place where they need to wait to be picked by their parents /guardians.

Nisha (15yrs): *"It shows my parents trust me that I would not misuse it."*

Interviewer: *"Don't you think parents are allowing you to break the rules by allowing you to take cell phone to school?"*

Nisha: *"As a matter of fact I do not carry it to school often. But when I am sick and cannot miss classes.....One day when coming back from school a man was standing in an indecent manner on the road adjoining the main road leading to my house. I felt bad. It continued and I told my parents and my dad checked on me the next day. That whole month my mother made it a point to put mobile phone in the school bag daily so that I do not get scared off because I am walking home alone."*

- (v) Mobile phones are brought to school to make calls and to send SMS.
- (vi) Mobile phones are kept in silent mode during school time while some switch it off till lunch time or school hours. Krishna (15yrs) shared that he keeps his mobile phone off during school hours and puts it on only when he gets out of school campus. While Manikandan (14yrs) admitted that he keeps the phone in silent mode throughout.
- (vii) Boys hide the mobile phones in school bags and pockets while girls keep it in bags.
- (viii) Ninety percent of the boys admit having pictures of film actress in mobiles and sharing them.
- (ix) Twenty percent of the boys admit the presence of porn in friend's mobile and knows the mobile repair shops where they can buy pornographic clippings into the mobiles.
- (x) All the respondents have built-in camera in their phones.

B. School Environment

- (i) Teachers confiscate mobile phones when they find that it is used inside class/campus following complaints.
- (ii) Mobile phones are used in the class during lunch breaks.
Krishna explains that those who use mobile inside class during lunch hours *“sit in the last bench or where there are no windows or doors. They are very alert.”*
- (iii) Pictures of classmates are taken but only with consent as they cannot risk a complaint which would lead to its confiscation.
- (iv) Some schools confiscate the mobiles and return it after class but when confiscated more than one time parents are asked to come and collect the mobile phones.

C. Scrutiny

- (i) In schools, it is the teachers and not the office staff who act against the presence of mobile phones inside campus.
- (ii) Twenty per cent of the boys and eighty percent of the girls admit that their parents check their mobile phones occasionally.
Nikhil (14 yrs) stated that parents are always alert and check the mobile phone 'under the pretext of using them'.
- (iii) Parents, who are either illiterate about the technology or have no interest in the device, do not check their children's mobile phones. In the present age, the scope of literacy does not confine to basic level competency in reading, writing and arithmetic. To keep pace with the

technological development, related awareness or literacy is a must now. An adequate awareness and information about mobile phone technology, its applications and use may help us in addressing the related issues. Despite its advanced developments and applications, many use mobile phones only as an oral conversational device. Cell phones are more than just phones.

Mahesh (14yrs) expressed that his mother is a housewife and father is working abroad. *“Mother does not tamper with mobile phones because of fear of spoiling it. She is a little backward in technology”.*

PARENTS’ CONCERNS

(i) Parents support children to take mobile phones to schools to be able to monitor the children en route to their schools.

(ii) Parents of girls allow them to take mobile phones to school when they need to travel by public transport.

(iii) Most of the parents consider it as an important tool to keep contact with their wards, when they are out of homes.

Rita, a bank employee mentioned that if her son is sick or has any problem she keeps in touch with him through SMS during lunch hours. *“He cannot miss classes even though he might not have been fully recovered from some sickness and the schools are strict in attendance matters. So, I enquire things with him over SMS. It will be an ordeal to call up and enquire at the school office. I feel ok when I enquire his condition directly from him and SMS is hassle free way of doing so.”*

(iv) Parents of children studying in girls-only schools forbid taking mobile to schools.

(v) The parents of girls check the mobile phones for SMS, pictures, audio/video files and calls from unknown numbers and call duration; while boy’s mobile phone is checked for audio/ video files, MMS and pictures.

(vi) Single working mothers would like their children to be available on mobile phones.

THE TEACHERS’ DILEMMA

(i) Teachers favor the mobile phone ban in schools as it reduces distraction in class. Most of the teachers are of opinion that prior to the ban, the students used to fiddle with mobile phones in the class. They used to play games or chat/SMS even during class hours. So the ban is welcome.

- (ii) Teachers warn the students not to bring phones to school, but it is not feasible to check everyone's belongings daily.
- (iii) Teachers confiscate mobile phones when they receive complaint or when they see students with mobile phone.
- (iv) Teachers opine that it is the parents who can make sure that the child does not take the mobile phone to school and they are one of the primary stakeholders of the ban.
- (v) Awareness on the ban is given to students in classes and via notice boards and to the parents at PTA Meetings.
- (vi) The schools cooperate in activities of 'Childline'. There are *Childline* ambassadors to propagate dangers associated with the misuse of mobile phones.
- (vii) There is adequate support from the classmates because of which the students who violate the ban do not get caught.
- (viii) Mobile phones when found are confiscated and given only on bringing the parents to school.
- (ix) Teachers point out that parent could call up the school office to enquire about their children instead of supporting them to belittle the mobile phone policy in schools.

5. DISCUSSIONS:

The study indicates that the mobile phone ban in schools has not been effective as students manage to take mobile phones to school in Kerala where the mobile ban is still effective. Ninety percent of boy participants and thirty percent of girls carrying mobiles to schools has been a pivotal finding. It is also a noteworthy finding that all the student respondents had mobiles with built in camera. Boys hide the mobile phones in bags/ pockets, girls in the bags and many use them during lunch time.

It is alarming that twenty per cent of the boys have knowledge of pornographic clippings in friends' mobile phones and knows about the avenues for access to such materials like mobile shops. It points towards an alarming tendency of some members of the society, to sell such objectionable things to children for a price. Serious attempts should be made at penalizing those who distribute pornographic materials in the electronic form, to children in particular, by making amendments in the Information Technology Act. Presently, section- 293 of the Indian Penal Code would cover inter alia, '*sale and distribution of obscene objects to young persons*'. But, it is rather doubtful if the pornography in electric form would fit in the criteria of 'obscene objects'

as the *Rule of Ejusdem Generis* could be evoked. Maxwell (1969) explains, “..... the general words which follow particular and specific words of the same nature as itself takes meaning from them and is presumed to be restricted to the same genus as those words.” It is lamentable that the sale and distribution of pornography to children did not surface as a concern in the recent ‘Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012.’

The ‘Alertness Factor’ is present in the mobile phone usage inside school campus which arises out of the fear of getting caught doing an act forbidden. It is testified by the choice of locations which provides the safety factor like back benches and isolated places ‘not easily accessible by doors or windows’, and that ‘pictures are not taken without consent’ for fear of complaint and getting the mobile confiscated. The study reveals the consensus of parents in violating the ban of mobile phones in school campus. The rationale of parents of girls that they allow the girls to carry mobile phones to schools when not travelling in school bus/ van is justified. It is found from the study that parents of eighty percent of girls and twenty percent of boys check mobile handsets regularly, while we are of opinion that the parental scrutiny should be regardless of the gender of the children. It is also found that the parents who are ‘digitally’ or more precisely ‘mobile illiterate’- who know how to use the phone for basic calling functions only, put their children under freedom to misuse the gadget without the fear of parental scrutiny. An effective mechanism has to be in place to curb the violations. Teachers should don the role of counselors and bring in awareness among students.

It is to be noted that our study pointed towards a feeling of security when mobile phones are handy. It should be understood as a ubiquitous feeling as a similar finding was noted in a study conducted in the United Kingdom where 89 percent of girls find it safer when carrying mobile phones (Mobile Life, 2006).

Children have rights too. It is to be understood that being children does not deprive them of any rights that are inalienable to humans. Human rights are applicable to children in the full sense. The Constitution of India also does not discriminate against children. The Convention on The Rights of Child (1989) is a document with global acceptance. Art.13 of the Convention envisages the right to freedom of expression and information which is subject to restrictions like those for the protection of public order, morals etc.

6. Limitations of the Study:

The methodology adopted for this study was qualitative research. Qualitative research methodology was deliberately chosen to understand the 'real issue' from the depths of those who are affected, directly and indirectly, by the ban. So the study is one which might be an analysis lacking breadth as the method of data collection was only interviews. In-depth interviews are time consuming and it does not serve to give clear figures to generally quantify the findings.

Secondly, the sampling was purposive given the time consuming nature of the research method. The purposive sampling by nature is non-probability sampling; thus the question of the whether the sample represents the universe would arise.

7. CONCLUSION

Well known theologian, G. Bromley Oxnam had quoted- "Change is inevitable. The great question of our time is whether the change will be by consent or coercion". Times have changed but the laws and policies are vying to be accepted disguised in the garb of public good. Education and civilization has sculpted rational beings who can find ways to flout the law and circumvent the coercion. The study leaves scope for some suggestions for better execution of the mobile phone ban in schools.

Suggestions Evolved:

In order to prevent the ban on mobile phones from becoming a dead letter, a multi stage action policy has to be churned out.

- An awareness campaign should be done through the media regarding the evil implications of the misuse of mobile phones and cyber crimes in schools. Popular media like FM, television channels could organize programmes to spread awareness on the mobile phone ban and remind the audience of the possible outcomes of not having the ban in place. Newspapers should publish articles to periodically reinforce the evil implications of evading the ban.
- Parents should practice constant surveillance of mobile phones of their children checking the contents to ensure there is no objectionable downloads, SMS, MMS, audio, video or pictures. The scrutiny of mobile phones should be done regardless of the gender of the child. The parents need to ensure that their children tote a basic model of mobile phone instead of smart phones or camera phones, though the present market floods with mobiles with multi functions.

- The PTA should strive to reach a consensus on the measures for effective implement the ban on mobile phones in the particular school. Fixed land line for student enquiry and provision of coin-box telephone facility would be helpful to a great extent.
- The teachers should have a mechanism to check the lunch time activities of students when most engage in socialization and make sure that it is not ‘antisocial mobile association’. It was found from the study that most students who carry mobile phones to schools switch it on during the lunch break.
- Students who have pornographic clippings in mobile phones must be regarded seriously and has to be given counseling and parents must be informed of the same, promptly. It should also be taken care that the matter is dealt with utmost secrecy and efficiency. And the confiscation of mobile phones should be followed by a strict investigation into the student’s activities and contents of the gadget.
- Provisions for exemplary punishment should be developed by school authorities for enforcing the ban.
- The mobile giants could develop and market mobile phones exclusively for students like the Kosher phones. Kosher phones are those phones which meets the standards other mobile phones could not, especially regarding orthodox religious restrictions. Such phones are without Internet access, cameras and text messaging. The government could make use of such innovations and ensure the prevention of misuse of mobile phones, which is the primary impetus for the mobile phone ban in schools. Such a measure could bring relief instead of a blanket ban on the use of mobile phones in the campus, as the purpose of connectivity is served.
- Children are innocent. Teenaged ones are on the threshold of adulthood and hardly out of childhood. It is the time in life one gets curious about everything. So, serious attempts should be made at penalizing those who distribute pornographic materials in the electronic form to children by making amendments in the Information Technology Act.

The act of circumventing the ban will tend to bring with it the tendency to flout laws in future also. It is also to be realized that instead of a blanket ban on mobile phones, other regulations and mobile phone use policies could be introduced to ensure strict compliance to the law.

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