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While reminiscing about issues in communication, it is often said that “in those days mobile phones were not there”. Now, the world over, be it in deep Africa or posh Europe, almost everyone holds a mobile phone. If this be an index of progress, India is far advanced, with the urban-rural divide getting narrow. UPI payments are being favoured in all cities and even in some villages. It makes transactions in small denominations easy while buying *jhal muri* on a train or peanuts from a roadside vendor.

In the 1980s, on my first trip to Dubai, I wondered why people walking on the road were talking to themselves. It took me a while to realise that they were, in fact, talking over their mobile phones. I felt silly, just like the dapper senior in a television commercial a couple of decades later when mobile phones came to India. He believed that a lovely woman was inviting him to dinner, until she took her mobile phone away from her ear.

In the clutches of the mobile phone

Addiction to the device is assuming dangerous dimensions everywhere



ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

The heartbreak visible on his face was enhanced by the tinkling of shattering glass.

From a young age

Recently, I saw a toddler in a pram with a mobile phone strategically clipped in front. The baby with a pacifier in the mouth was looking wide-eyed at cartoons while the mother was pushing the pram and talking on her mobile. A mother had come to a restaurant with her three

young children. She was feeding them in turns, even as each child was glued to a device. My husband, a surgeon, narrated an incident. A 10-year old girl awaiting surgery refused to let go of the phone while the nurse wanted to take her inside the operation theatre. The patient's father, a villager, told helplessly that she would not part with the phone and whatever injection required to induce anaesthesia could

be given with her holding her mobile and that was done. On regaining consciousness after surgery, the child searched for her mobile.

Vice-like grip

Currently, we are in a vice-like grip of mobile phones and constant scrolling. Even world leaders attending a funeral have been unable to remain solemn and were caught taking selfies. It is common to see youngsters posing in dangerous locations and at precipitous heights for a photo that will get “likes”.

Despite the warnings on signboards, almost all drivers talk while driving, be it on a two-wheeler with a mobile phone clutched between a tilted head and a shoulder, or while navigating a car on busy roads. While attending functions or watching television, people find it difficult to let go of their mobile phones. It is like a genie that has come out of the magic lamp. Everyone seems to be possessed to make the genie constantly work at the cost of overloading the brain and losing direct inter-personal communication. When family and friends gather to meet, instead of conversation with eye contact, everyone seems

to be glued to their phones; such snubbing has a name now – phubbing.

The overindulgence in mobile phones points to a need for damage control.

Many countries and a few Indian States have imposed restrictions on the use of mobile phones by children. Methods of digital de-stress are being discussed.

Instances of young people preferring to die rather than live without their mobile phones made me think of an outrageous solution – an automatic periodic down regulation of the mobile phone to its basic function of just receiving and making calls. Such periods will help to defog the brain, and get the eyes to refocus on distant objects, neck to straighten and shoulders to roll back. But it is not fair to blame technology for our lack of self-control. The world has moved far into high tech and convenient communication. Technology will keep evolving because that is what humans do, become better and more advanced. The challenge is to maintain our sanity and take care of our mental health. That responsibility solely lies with the user clutching the phone, not to fall “into its clutches”.