

In urban centers like Mumbai, phones are an essential commodity, almost similar to an identification number used to identify digital accounts and to use a plethora of digital services. The lockdown has increased everyone's dependency on smartphones, while further excluding those who can't afford the device or the recharge costs. Our 30 respondents spoke about the importance that phones and devices have taken in their everyday life.

ONLINE ACCESS DOES NOT HELP OVERCOME BASIC INFRASTRUCTURE.

A smartphone each

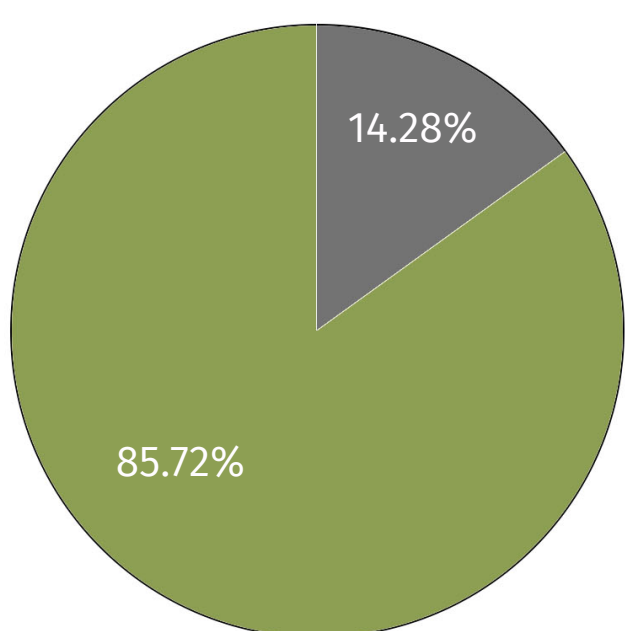
Aligning with the vision of Digital India, this lockdown has pushed multiple sectors to work in the realms of the virtual world. The restrictions imposed by the lockdown on physical movement has made the common man view mobile phones as a lifeline. Our interviews have shown that the few families who own only one phone are also those sustaining on daily-wage labour. Moreover, the phone tends to belong to the man of the house, increasing the dependency of the wife on her husband for everyday tasks that are now done via digital communication. The lockdown brought with it a growing need to own more devices, as one device could no longer meet the family's growing digital needs. When a fundamental necessity such as education is moved online, it seems imper-



Need for outdoor respite during lockdown

ative to develop online systems that cater to the length and breadth of the society, especially the low-income population who look to education as a tool for upward social and economic mobility. Hilda, a school teacher in Dharavi, had to make a personal investment in a smartphone due to the online teaching requirements. The advanced device specifications required for applications such as Zoom brought the cost up to Rs 15,000, which she took on an EMI. It was a significant financial burden on her during the lockdown.

Though the government has released multiple mobile apps and online portals to combat the collateral damage of COVID 19 and the lockdown, it leaves anyone without a smartphone outside the blanket of security. With transactions, registrations, applications, information dissemination and feedback mechanisms of vital government and private services moving online, the choice of one-person-one-phone soon transforms into a requirement.



Smart phones Feature phones

This pie chart shows the extent of how smartphones have replaced feature phones.

STORIES

Increasing digital dependency

Rizwana, the wife of a daily wage electrician, is struggling to meet the online academic requirements of her 3 children using one smartphone. Rizwana is unable to resume work due to restricted travel on local trains, and her husband's work came to standstill during the lockdown.

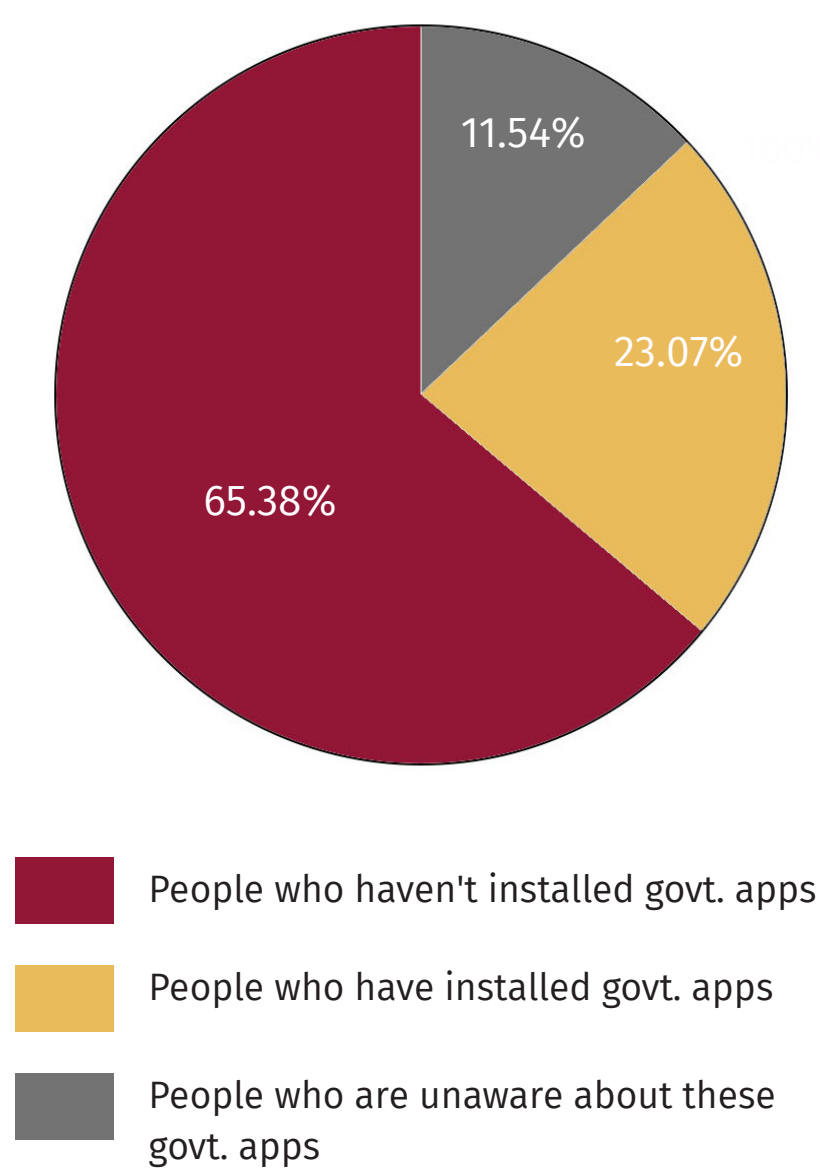
Nevertheless, she bought a phone for her eldest college-going daughter in May to cope with online studies. However, her daughter is solely responsible to meet the recharge costs, and has been borrowing from her friends in the last few months. The younger ones are unable to use the phone for their studies, due to excessive use by the eldest one and the fear of them damaging it. Additionally, the children are unable to follow online instructions, thus greatly impacting their academic learning in the last two months. They demand phones with larger screens, another prerequisite for the long hours of online studies. Their parents have made great sacrifices to ensure quality education for their children, and the experience with online learning has left them very disheartened.

Rizwana's husband has a feature phone purchased at Rs 200 on the second-hand market. He stretches his Rs 50 top-ups for many months by making limited phone calls. For a family whose need of the hour is to ensure food on the table every day, providing a suitable device and a studying environment at home for online learning is well beyond their means.

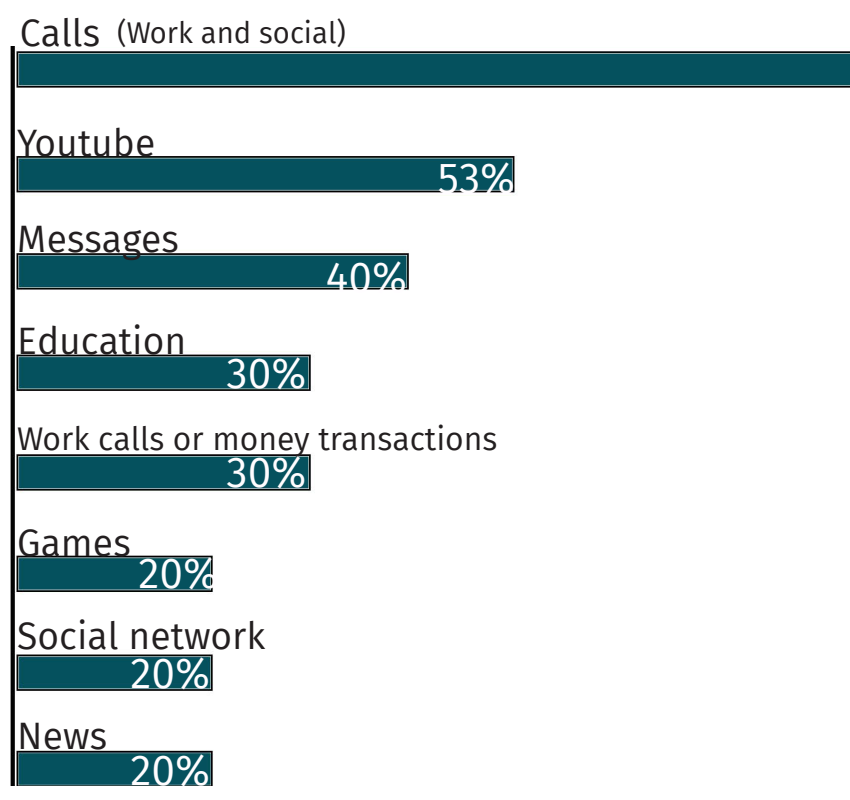
Why do you use your phone?

With the plethora of functions now added to the mobile phone, the main purpose of it remains to contact people, for either personal or professional reasons. A few of our interviewees have also been using their phones actively to coordinate relief work during the pandemic. Whatsapp has been an age-old all-purpose communication app, recently used for online teaching as well along with Zoom. The lockdown has seen an increase in screen time, especially for entertainment purposes, using platforms such as Youtube, TikTok, social networks, offline and multiplayer games, news, web series such as Hotstar, amongst others. Phones have taken over the role of TV in many households and this is reflected in the rise in data usage during the lockdown. Fortunately, that has not impacted most people's wallets due to unlimited data and calling packs or Wifi plans. However, many have corroborated a spike in their regular telecom service plans.

While most people have taken to various digital platforms, the numerous applications launched by the Central and State governments during the lockdown for health and employment support, including the Aarogyasetu application are not as popular. A large number of our interviewees claimed to have neither knowledge nor trust in such applications and hence don't use them. This raises a pertinent question regarding the success of information dissemination of government policies and schemes within the most affected populations.



This chart shows the division of people based on their approach towards government apps.



The graph here shows the diversified use of a smartphone based on the responses from the interviews.

Children and Phones

Phones and education became synonymous during the lockdown. A couple of years back whenever a child was seen using a phone, it was usually for entertainment purposes. With schools gradually introducing tablets in school, the role of technology in a child's life has been changing, but so far this was limited to the affluent.

The lockdown imposed the use of smartphones for academic learning on every section of society. Overlap of teaching instructions and homework on Whatsapp adds to the already burdened minds of young children who are unable to follow online instructions and course material, and some are losing out on attendance as well.

While most of our respondents have affirmed to letting their children use their phones to study, there is restricted to negligible play time on the phone, primarily due to fear of damage. This leaves the children with little entertainment respite, especially due to restrictions of playing outside and meeting friends.

No phone?

While many of our cases said they had neighbours without a phone, they all returned to their native places due to unbearable living conditions in the city. This indicates that many out-state migrants, mostly employed in the daily wage sector, are still without a device that was considered an essential service during the lockdown. From our respondents, we learned that they would usually borrow their neighbour's phones for emergencies, otherwise relying on PCO (Public Call Office) operators for regular calls.

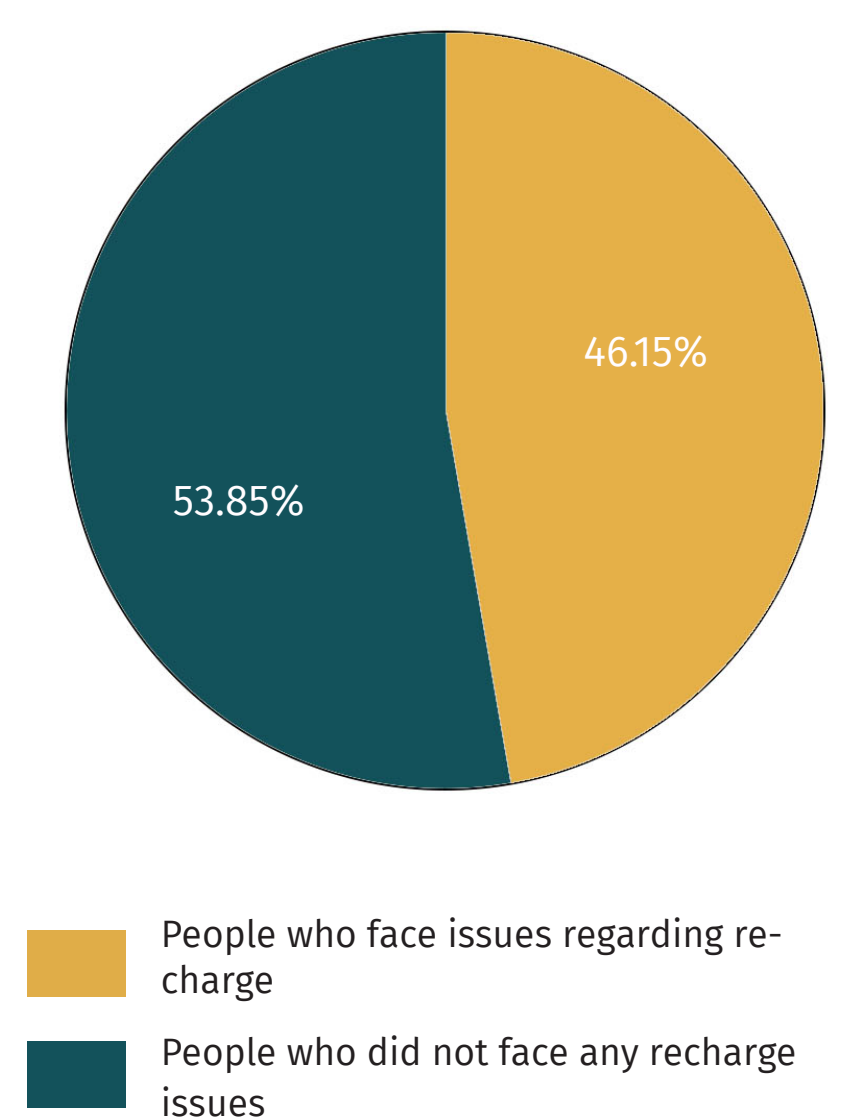
Unfortunately for them, PCOs have been on a steady decline in India, with 50 lakhs in 2009 to 5.7 lakhs in 2015.

The combined cost of the device and regular recharge keeps mobile phones out of reach for many.

Burden of recharge and repair

The lockdown has turned the monthly mobile recharge into a significant financial investment for the majority of our respondents. Many who wait for a call to bag a trickle of work need to have a service pack to receive incoming calls. With a negligible source of income, this regular expenditure has been affordable only to a few, the rest turning to family and friends in Dharavi or their native place for help. People have also been getting help from various organisations.

It has been a financial and logistical nightmare for those who have faced problems with their phones during the lockdown. From the repair shop owners interviewed, we learned that most people have trouble with the phone's display or charging slots. Due to the recent ban on Chinese products, along with a limited supply of repair parts, the costs have almost doubled for common repairs. This has led to higher costs for the customer, and loss of business and lower profit margins for the repair shops. Moreover, repair shops were shut for the initial months of the lockdown and now operate only three days a week from 9am-5pm. All these factors have not only made their repair services scarce to the customer but have taken a substantial toll on their business, resulting in the closure of one of our respondent's shops.



The chart shows that almost 50% of the people interviewed faced problems regarding recharge.