Consider the cell phone. For us it's essential, and what's more, it's everywhere. It is, in fact, hard for people in developed markets to remember what it was like not to be available 24/7. The ability to reach anyone, anytime, from absolutely anywhere has become a given. BlueToothed or iPhoned, the connected yet very private (or at least self-absorbed) world of the cell phone could very well be the quintessential expression of Western culture.

Yet in much of the rest of the world, where even clear, accessible landlines are more of a plan than a reality, mobile telephony is starting to have an impact. Clearly, it's a huge economic opportunity for the industry. But there's more to entering these markets than throwing up a network of towers. Before you get the product in people's hands, it's essential to understand the culture.

Cultures are complex and dynamic systems, moved by often contradictory forces. Looking only at the dominant characteristics of a culture—as more than a few companies have done in failed attempts at cross-cultural marketing—is a bit like the Indian story of several blind men describing an elephant ("It's a wall!" "It's a tree!" "No, it's a snake!").

So when going from a cell-phone-rich environment to one that is cell-phone poor, mobile phone designers need to throw out everything they thought they knew about their product—and about culture. Instead, they have to look carefully at how people actually use cell phones in a particular emerging market. What they will find—as will designers of every type of product and service—are rich opportunities for value-added solutions that lie in the gaps between cultural ideal and cultural practice.

To get a better idea of how this sort of research works in the cross-cultural design process, let's look at three scenarios from an emerging market. In each of these stories from India, a Western product creates tension and exposes tensions within Indian culture itself.

**An Indian Cell Phone in Three Acts**

1. **Amar nudges his front door open as quietly as he can—only to find his parents sitting in the living room, pretending to watch television.**

   They'd told him to be home from the party by 10 p.m., and it's midnight. He's in trouble, all right, but missing his curfew is the least of the 17-year-old's worries right now.

   Amar is his parents’ pride and joy. They've already arranged a “suitable” marriage for him. He was allowed to go to the party only on the condition that he bring his father's cell phone and make himself available at all times. In his rush to get home, he forgot to erase the 12 calls and nine text messages he placed that evening—all of them to one person, his secret girlfriend, Leena.

   The late hour may actually work in Amar's favor. His father might just forget about the phone and ask for it in the morning. It’s his only hope. He can’t let his father find out about their relationship...

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II. Newlyweds Deepa and Saurabh recently moved to Mumbai. Deepa is captivated with the idea of creating a home like those of the “beautiful people” she’s always reading about in glossy magazines. Saurabh, a practical engineer, is not one to spend money on interior decoration. So Deepa creates her fantasy home with her own money, saved from before her marriage. When he asks how much she’s spent, she usually lies.

One day, Deepa goes to a close-out sale in Mumbai’s fashionable Bandhni district and gets a great deal on beautiful rugs and wallpaper. The prices are so low that, ironically, she ends up spending more than she’d planned. But then at least Saurabh will never know how much.

Suddenly, Deepa freezes. She’s just remembered that whenever she uses her credit card, her bank sends an instant message to her cell phone detailing transactions as a security measure. And she lent Saurabh her cell phone this morning because his was being repaired. When he asks how much she’s spent, she usually lies.

Raju, a literate member of the household, is entrusted with the cards. The accompanying letters tell him that there is a number he needs to have, a “PIN,” before they can use the cards. At that moment “Postman Uncle” rides up on his bicycle. The affable mail carrier is like a member of the family. Since Raju had learned to read, Postman Uncle no longer has to write letters for the family, but he now carries with him a mobile phone as part of a new government campaign for villages with inadequate landlines.

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Raju feels like a maharaja with his three cards. All three families now depend on him to get the money from the bank. What power! His mind whirs with the possibilities: Perhaps his mother and aunts will give him a small gratuity for the service, or maybe, just maybe, he should simply take it for himself. Meanwhile, Postman Uncle pedals on to the next house, puffed up with a sense of pride and importance. His cell phone had been the conduit to important information that enabled groundbreaking new technology. When he shows all the neighbors the numbers Raju’s father sent, everyone will know how important a person Postman Uncle really is…

Individualism, Collectivism and the Mobile Paradox

Plunged into the mobile-phone revolution, the characters in these stories have run smack into their own culture’s dominant characteristics. In India, as in most of Asia, society, groups, and families are valued over individual members. Space, objects, and technology are very often shared. Social sci-
entists have dubbed this tendency “collectivism.” It’s one of the primary dimensions they use to “measure” cultures. According to a ranking based on organization theorist Geert Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, the U.S. is the world’s most individualistic culture [1]. And it was American product designers, coincidentally or not, who came up with the mobile phone.

The cell phone would seem to represent a whole slough of contradictions for India. It’s a device from an individualist design context, transplanted into a fundamentally collectivist culture, that atomizes society while facilitating communication. Those contradictions haven’t stopped Indians from signing up for the service, though—cultural ideals never stood much of a chance in the case of culture versus phone. As this article was being written, India surpassed the U.S. to become the world’s second largest mobile network.

The Indian government has targeted 500 million telephone users by 2010 [2].

Culture Strain: Saying One Thing and Doing Another
Culture itself changes. New ideas and new technologies are always coming down the pike, and history has borne witness to the geopolitical and technological shifts that have radically changed society in Japan, China, and Russia. At the inflection point of change is what we define as “culture strain,” where the gap between what ought to be and what is creates tension—and critical opportunities for design solutions.

Take for example the huge popularity of Indians using headsets with their mobile phones or mp3 players. It’s an expression of the desire for privacy, the wish to be able to have one’s own space, outside the stranglehold of the collective, in which to assert individual identity.

The culture strain in this case is the tension between a cultural ideal that does not value privacy (given the collectivist nature of society) and the cultural practice today of people wanting to assert their individuality, even if in a subtle way. The innocuous mp3 player or mobile phone now allows members of a family to maintain their collectively/hierarchically determined entertainment routine while each person indulges his or her own entertainment wish list in a way that is only minimally in your face.

The critical disjuncture where tension is strongest between cultural ideals and cultural practice is where designers can find ideas for products people are really going to need—and use.

In a society in which cell phones are widely shared, Amar would have given anything for a more surefire way of keeping call and message logs private. If you asked Deepa, she’d want to see a more secure way of accessing text messages. And even Raju’s technologyally illiterate family will soon have strong opinions on the subject—they’ll call for better authentication protocols and even an auto-delete feature for text messages.

The key question, then, is how do designers find out this stuff? How do they discover where, when, and how culture strain is occurring?

Ultimately, it’s happening inside the heads and hearts of the Amars, Deepas, and Rajus. Now in the West, when we want to find out what a target user is thinking and feeling, we trot out surveys and focus groups, in-depth interviews, observations, and talk-aloud testing. But canonical as these methods are in the industry, emerging mar-


kets tend to expose their limitations: the biases and assumptions built in to the design of the surveys. As ethnographer and anthropologist Genevieve Bell says, there are "things people don’t even know how to tell you, things you don’t know how to ask about," that get missed in interviews [3].

Would a Western marketer ever have conceived of a problem like the one Raju’s family faced? Probably not. But more even than content orientation, research methods need to be adapted to the very different styles of communication in the cultures of emerging markets.

Failing to Ask the Million-Dollar Question
It’s easy for researchers to be misled if they don’t make their subjects comfortable enough to give honest, unguarded answers. For instance, with greater sensitivity to hierarchy and subtext, Asian users generally require more context in communication. They can also be particularly averse to making negative comments. But if companies fail to get the proper information, they may fail to launch.

With marketing research indicating that a shift in taste is leading Japanese to add Western foods into their diet, French food-manufacturing conglomerate BSN targeted Japan as a priority market for its line of yogurt. After conducting a market survey, BSN invested in an expensive product launch, only to find that sales were well below expectations. BSN conducted a follow-up study in an effort to identify the problem. It discovered that the questions on the survey were not nuanced or “Japanese” enough for the Japanese. Too simplistic, they failed to garner accurate responses. The Japanese were also reluctant to answer “no” to any question, or to tell the interviewers that they didn’t like eating with a Western spoon because that wouldn’t have been polite.

BSN couldn’t get inside the heads (or taste buds) of its “users,” so the data on the size and potential of the Japanese market on which BSN spent so much money was completely invalid [4].

Fomabo Buildings, a Dutch company, targeted the expanding, industrializing Malaysian market to expand its line of European-style, prefabricated housing. Test showings got a very positive response. However, post-launch sales were, again, disappointing. There were several factors behind the failure; one turned out to be the design of the product. Once the Malaysians moved in, they found out that unlike their traditional wood houses, these houses needed boring tools for the hanging of pictures or other decorations on the reinforced concrete walls. More tellingly, the general “feeling” of the new homes wasn’t as comfortable to the Malaysians as that of the more culturally resonant Malay wood houses. The failure of initial surveys and interviews to elicit that critical response from test users was a big reason why Fomabo was forced out of the Malaysian market [5].

Shooting the Culture Gap
The dichotomy between cultural ideals and cultural practices can be intensely complex. If culture can be likened to a river, then dominant-culture communication barriers and hidden, counter-cultural urges form eddies that make emerging-market launches a challenging ride.

For instance, it’s not really a surprise that the cell phone is as popular as it is in India, or...
anywhere in Asia, or, for that matter, in developing markets around the world. It enables communications and strengthens social connections—both dominant cultural characteristics. It’s also the cheapest fix possible to an inadequate landline infrastructure.

Yet the cell phone also enables counter-culture behavior. To pick but one example, mobile phones have made it possible for women to connect with and talk to anybody, anywhere, in private. That kind of freedom is quite radical for women in many South Asian cultures. But since it’s a natural byproduct of something that’s meeting the requirements of the dominant culture, this new empowerment of women is quietly becoming part of the social ecology.

Television is another prevalent technology that addresses both mainstream and countercultural tendencies. In the U.S. and China, watching TV together is often the primary “group activity” for families, perhaps because it lends a sense of collectivism within the dominant individualist environment. The average Indian family, on the other hand, uses TV to escape their collectivist, dominant-culture mode and their individualist, countercultural mode.

For members of an emerging economy, dynamism—the explosive growth of a thriving market and a technological infrastructure that changes almost daily—coexists with the timeless nature of an ancient culture. Life is lived in a kind of dual reality, in which choices must be made every day between ever more divergent sets of cultural requirements.

As an agent of change, the technology designer must bridge that divide, to make possible a life supported by the best of both worlds rather than one spent serving the demands of each. As the Scottish journalist James Cameron says when he sees a changing India: “I like the evening in India, the one magic moment when the sun balances on the rim of the world, and the hush descends, and ten thousand civil servants drift home on a river of bicycles, brooding on Lord Krishna and the cost of living [6].”

ABOUT THE AUTHORS
Apala Lahiri Chavan is the vice president, Asia for Human Factors International. She is an award-winning designer (Audi Design Award ’96) and has started the new contextual innovation service at HFI. Contextual innovation develops breakthrough product/service concepts especially focused on emerging markets. Apala is learning to become a drummer; she believes that she was an anthropologist in her last life.

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