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Digital Romance in the Indian city

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The Indian city is no Paris. Far from being a city of love, it spells of crowds, chaos and confusion. Within desperately strained urban infrastructures lie grey zones, grey markets, and grey practices. In Mumbai alone, the most populous city in India of 30 million, more than half of its population lives in grey zones such as slums, with speculation that by 2025, they will pervade much of Mumbai's urban landscape[1]. Characteristic of slums are inhabitants sharing small spaces but paradoxically, such forced intimacies come with major social distance architected by caste, class, gender norms and even the color of one's skin. In a contemporary urban culture where arranged marriages still dictate one's social life and being 'fair and lovely' is a ticket to social mobility, the city can serve as a traditional and chronic entrapment.

For instance, it is not unusual for young men in slums to have hardly spoken with girls in their life. As Mohan, age 18, says: "In the 10th and 12th I never used to talk to girls… even now I don't." However, having recently got onto Facebook, his romantic prospects seem to have expanded considerably: "On FB, one can talk freely without having any fear. That girl asks me 'come on FB.' She cannot ask me like that to come outside… She also uses [informal vocabulary]. She may not talk outside at all… it is easier to talk with a girl [friend] on Facebook than in person… Face to face, we cannot really talk anything.[2]" Mohan has found a creative way of connecting with girls in an otherwise restrictive urban setting: the fifty shades of grey have gone digital. Seems like Facebook in India, currently the 3rd largest market with over 70 million users, is creating a topography of romance even in the slums of the Indian city.

In recent years, there is much celebration about the 'making do' culture or 'jugaad,' a practice of being innovative and creative with limited resources and under constrained situations[3]. It has become synonymous with being Indian, and knowing how to navigate the complexities of the Indian city and its social fabric. Jugaad is everywhere it seems: from Tata's Nano, the world's cheapest car ($1700), Aravind Eye Care hospitals award-winning and cost-effective eye surgeries, to the Jaipur Foot, the inexpensive prosthetic leg, they all underline ingenuity in urban survival. While most talk about the economic mobility through jugaad, there is much silence when it comes to employing jugaad in navigating the matters of the heart.

Mohan is far from being alone in this jugaad of love. From the North to the South, from Almora, to Hyderabad, Kolkata, and Chennai, from the slums to the townships, the youth are finding multiple ways to seek each other out, and live a rich and subversive digital life. Brief glimpses into their digital worlds reveal sizzling and wide-ranging budding romances: boys and girls in Almora meet at a cybercafé to do their homework while simultaneously and surreptitiously yahoo chat with one another[4]; in a Kolkata slum, girls log into their MSN messenger and join the 'love and friendship rooms' to seek for more educated and upper class boys. As they befriend boys who are strangers, they express confidence that these males are not from their slum: "You don't go online to meet a boy from the bustee [slum]," says a

young woman of 21. [5] At a Hyderabad slum, a young man expresses anxiety of 'making the first move' as he sends a friend request to a girl he desires to befriend on Facebook.

After all, luring the girl as a 'friend' doesn't come easy. Jugaad is needed to profile oneself as a desirable male. They signal modernity and an upper class status by cutting and pasting English language posts onto their timeline. They friend foreign girls to show off their international standing . They strategically select 'cool' Hollywood actors as their profile photos and craft their personas through their choice of movies, songs and jokes online. Besides, these activities take time, and time is money. While mobile technologies and plans in India are marveled at for their cheapness and breadth of choice, it is still a considerable cost to the youth in the slums. Kulbeer a 16-year-old high school student from a Hyderabad slum knows only too well the struggle to sustain his digital life. He began using mobiles 4-5 years ago. He worked summers assisting a pharmacist and spent an entire month's salary (US$89) on a second-hand Nokia N-83 to support advanced gaming. Two years ago, for the first time, he used an Internet prepaid coupon.

The capacity to aspire for romance is tremendously high in a society where Bollywood's prime narrative of love contradicts the dominant social practice of fixed marriages. While we seem to have fleshed out a richer picture of middle and upper class youth consuming romance through Mills & Boon romance novels to matrimonial sites[6], we often neglect to see how the youth inhabiting the numerous grey zones in the Indian cities exercise their jugaad to fulfill their love fantasies with a little bit of reality through their digital life. A slum can be a Paris from time to time.

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[1] World Bank 2014: http://infochangeindia.org/poverty/news/54-of-mumbai-lives-in-slums-world-bank.html

[2] Rangaswamy N, 2013, *Mental Kartha Hai: Indian Urban Slums and Unmasking the Mobile Internet*, October, ISBINSIGHT, Indian School of Business, Hyderabad

[3] Radjou, N., Prabhu, J., and Ahuja, S. (2013). *Jugaad Innovation: Think Frugal, Be Flexible, Generate Breakthrough Growth*. Jossey-Bass, John Wiley & Sons

[4] Arora, P. (2010). *Dot Com Mantra: Social Computing in the Central Himalayas*. Ashgate.

[5] Chakraborty, K. (2012) Virtual mate-seeking in the urban slums of Kolkata, India. *South Asian Popular Culture*, 10:2, 197-216

[6] Radhika Parameswaran (2006). Western Romance Fiction as English-Language Media in Postcolonial India. Journal of Communication. Volume 49, Issue 3, pages 84–105

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