



## Mr. T.V. RAMACHANDRAN

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Mr T.V. Ramachandran has played a key role in the creation and growth of mobile telecommunications in India right from its advent in 1994. He was the first CEO of Sterling Cellular Ltd. (Essar Cellphone), Delhi and went on to establish the industry body, Cellular Operators Association of India (COAI). He nurtured it over twelve years to the position of being one of the most credible and vibrant professional bodies.

In this interview with The Aware Consumer, he shares his views on the role of mobile phones in society and the effects of smartphone addiction on the populace.

**Q Mobile overuse and addiction are becoming serious concerns. What is your take on this growing issue?**

Mobile connectivity has truly revolutionised our economy and society, and it remains one of India's greatest strengths. That said, we must also be mindful of its double edged nature. Recent studies suggest that roughly 40% of Indian adolescents show signs of smartphone dependency. While this is a wake up call, it requires a balanced response and not a knee-jerk alarmist action. It is important to promote digital literacy alongside healthy usage habits – for example, all smartphones and even certain platforms include screen time dashboards and 'do not disturb' timers to help users self-regulate. Just as broadband is a great leveller bringing people together, smartphones can be enablers of education, productivity and inclusion – provided we accompany that with awareness and discipline.

**Q How much responsibility do you believe telecom operators and smartphone companies bear in addressing the misuse of mobile devices?**

Telecom and device-makers have a significant role to play, but they cannot solve this alone. Industry should lead by example: for instance, smartphone operating systems now offer built-in 'Digital Wellbeing' tools, weekly usage reports and app timers that help users monitor and limit screen time. The industry can also play a part by promoting parental-control features. In fact, the government has been undertaking consultation on this issue, wherein it was even suggested by certain associations that parental control applications be uploaded by default in devices by manufacturers. Ultimately, though, technology companies are enablers, not enforcers. They can build in user safeguards and transparency, but the responsibility is shared with users, parents and educators themselves.

**Q Mobile phones have opened up access to education, jobs and healthcare. How can the government encourage the positive use of mobile technology?**

The government can amplify the enormous benefits by continuing to invest in infrastructure and services that leverage mobile connectivity. The Digital India initiative, for example, explicitly aims to digitise sectors like education, healthcare and agriculture to reach rural areas. We see remarkable progress: schemes such as DIKSHA (digital learning for schools), eSanjeevani (digital healthcare) and UMANG (digital governance) all put

government services into the hands of citizens. Going forward, policy can focus on expanding these programs, ensuring content is available in local languages, and promoting literacy. Programs like the Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan aim to make at least one person per rural household digitally literate. This kind of digital skilling is key.

**Q What steps should be taken to improve responsible use of mobile phones, especially in rural areas where smartphone adoption is rapidly rising?**

In rural India, we must marry connectivity with education. Mobile adoption is surging, so parallel efforts in digital literacy are essential. This becomes even more important when misuse in the form of online scams, misinformation and other problems surface. All stakeholders have a part to play here, the industry, government and civil society as well as schools. For instance, MeitY has developed a 'Safenet' parental-control app, and DoT's Sanchar Saathi App and the Chakshu feature for reporting fraud/spam, are means in which the government is trying to promote safe and responsible use.

**Q With growing concerns around data privacy and mobile surveillance, what measures should be taken to protect users?**

The enactment of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023 is a positive step in the direction of empowering users with right to privacy among the other rights over their data. The Act requires telecom operators and digital service platforms to implement robust security protocols – including encryption and breach notification – to prevent misuse of personal data. The new draft rules even call for clear, plaintext notices and affirmative consent before any data collection. In parallel, user awareness campaigns especially, on consent management, cybersecurity risks, etc. is crucial to enable them as they are the ultimate harbingers of both supplying and consuming information.

**Q Do you foresee future regulations specifically targeting mobile addiction or excessive screen time in India?**

Frankly, I think direct regulation of screen time would be very difficult and counterproductive. Unlike harmful activities such as smoking, drinking, etc., smartphone use is integrated into education, entertainment, work and even our safety (e-payments and emergency alerts). The more likely path is what we are already seeing: self-regulation by the ecosystem, guided by awareness.





**Q What role can schools and parents play - and how can the government support them - in managing children's mobile use?**

Parents and schools are the frontline. Parents set the example and must establish household norms: tech-free meals, bedtime cut-offs, and the use of parental-control apps to block inappropriate content. Under the National Education Policy, Ministry of Education and CBSE have been promoting safe social media and internet use and all affiliated schools are required to follow 'Safe and Effective Use of Internet' guidelines with the increasing use of ICT in classrooms. Such government guidance and industry tools matching pace, schools and parents can jointly instil discipline and resilience in students, helping them use mobile phones as learning tools rather than mere distractions.

**Q In your opinion, what is the ideal role of mobile phones in a digitally progressive yet socially balanced society?**

Mobile phones should serve as instruments of empowerment and inclusion. Broadband and mobile connectivity are "essential enablers for successful and

productive living" and act as a great leveller, bringing together people from unequal sections. Phones and connectivity devices should put education, banking and healthcare in everyone's pocket, boosting entrepreneurship and access to information. At the same time, they should enhance, not replace, human connections – our social fabric.

**Q What message would you like to share with our young readers about using mobile phones responsibly and mindfully?**

To all the young people reading this: remember that your smartphone is an ally, not a master. It gives you access to the world's knowledge, creative tools and opportunities – so use it to learn new skills, show what you know, explore your interests and reach your potential, and to connect with Indian people and grow as India grows. But also set limits: take frequent breaks, cultivate friendships and hobbies in the real world, and question what you see online. There are downsides to always being on, so remember to be mindful. Mobile and the opportunities it brings with it are endless provided they are used wisely and productively. ▶

**Acknowledgement:** Mr Ramachandran is very grateful to his young and aware colleague, **Ms. Shubhika Saluja**, for her valuable inputs and assistance for the interview.