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Relationships: kinship on social media

On a quiet afternoon in December 2013 Govindan, a 33-year-old hard-ware goods trader, invited me to discuss his Facebook profile over tea in his already crammed 200 sq. ft office space at Panchagrami. Very soon the discussion turned to his Facebook 'friends' (around 130 people at the time of the interview). He soon started identifying his Facebook 'friends' either with a kinship term such as *'mama'* (uncle), *'annan'* (elder brother), *'machan'* (brother-in-law), *'sister'*, *'bro'* (a shortened version of brother; Govindan specifically used this term for younger men), *'pangali'* (co-brother), or with a deferential 'sir' or 'madam', though the use of the latter terms was less frequent. At first glance it looked as if a majority of Govindan's family (including his extended family) were online. Very soon, however, it became clear that the group he was identifying with kinship terms was a mix of Govindan's actual extended family members and several of his friends, to whom he referred in terms of fictive kinship.[1]

Though he referred to at least 17 of his friends as *'machan'*, Govindan had only one real *'machan'* who was not even on Facebook. He referred to almost nine of his friends as *'pangali'*, though in actual life he had none. Similarly segregating his 'sisters'[2] (actual sisters, as opposed to his cousins[3] and his female friends) was another exercise in itself. However, it soon became clear that he identified only those people with whom he had professional relationships and who were of a higher socio-economic class as 'sir' or 'madam'; all the others were addressed as if they were actually related to him in some form.[4]

Govindan's behaviour is typical of several others in the area who use kinship terminologies to address relationships.[5] Though people such as Govindan clearly know the system of addressing their relationships, to an outsider it could at first seem daunting and confusing.[6]

In order to understand the social structures of Panchagrami, we need to understand the nature and form of relationships existing within

and between its different layers. Relationships of various kinds govern Panchagrami, be they within a family, between extended families or even within caste groups. Likewise an examination of how these relationships migrate onto social media is central to understanding the use and consequences of social media in this region.

The basic social group in Panchagrami could be a family or a caste,[7] an organisation or an institution, a neighbourhood or even a residential complex. Each of these social groups brings its own form of relationships (kinship, employer–employee, peer–peer, friendships, romantic relationships etc.), some governed by hierarchy and power and others of a more egalitarian nature. If we are to understand such a complex pattern of intertwined relationships, it is best to follow the example above. This shows how the dominant idiom for most relationships starts at the most basic level, namely kinship.

This chapter therefore deals specifically with relationships that can be broadly classified as kinship. Chapter 5 discusses relationships within an office space and relationships in educational institutions, particularly in schools, are explored in Chapter 6. However, as we have seen from Govindan's example, friendship also needs to be included in this chapter as in Panchagrami it is incorporated in the form of fictive kinships. The use of social media within kinship circles is thus the overarching theme of this chapter.

An introduction to kinship in Panchagrami

The family system in Panchagrami, as we saw in Chapter 1, is typically patriarchal[8] in nature; it can either be classified as nuclear or extended. A typical nuclear family in Panchagrami consists of four or five members, usually the husband, wife and two or three children. However, this basic unit will differ based on several factors,[9] for example the marital status of the children or a husband's close relative (such as a widowed sister or mother) living with the family, etc. Often the nuclear family setup is merely the base for an extended family, with grandparents, uncles and aunts living together in the same house.[10]

This kind of setup is more evident among Panchagrami's long-term rural residents who retain this traditional system of South Asian kinship.[11] Take the example of Ganesh, a 23-year-old resident of Panchagrami; a college student, he lives in an independent house (i.e. not an apartment) with his parents, his widowed paternal great-aunt, his two unmarried younger sisters, and three brothers (all older and

married) and their families. This family, which can be classified as upper middle class, thus consists of 15 members, all of whom live under one roof and cook in one large kitchen.

Another example would be Sangeetha, a 32-year-old homemaker with a son and a daughter. She lives in Panchagrami with her husband Gangadharan and her in-laws. The family lives in a modest, one-bedroom house and can be classified as being from a lower socio-economic class.

This is not to say that 'regular' nuclear families, consisting of two parents and their children, do not exist in Panchagrami. Mathew, a 30-year-old married plumber, lives with his wife and year-old daughter in a rented house, close to his brother's house. Mathew moved to the present location two years ago, when he got married. Though the two brothers and their families meet each other every day, cooking is still carried out independently by the respective families.

While the long-term residents (from middle and lower socio-economic classes) live in either a joint[12] family system or have relatives close by, typical nuclear families with no close relatives appear in the cases of migrants from the lower socio-economic classes.

Moving on to the middle classes, given that average professionals in the IT sector receive higher pay than counterparts in other industries, these inhabitants of multi-storey residential buildings are Panchagrami's new middle class.[13] Though one can classify the family structures of several apartment complex dwellers as typically nuclear, it is also apparent that the family system[14] for these residents is slowly changing into a pattern neither entirely nuclear nor completely joint. Most of the middle-class families who inhabit these apartment complexes seem to be nuclear families when viewed as separate units. However, a trend of siblings and parents investing in apartments in the same complex is now gaining ground. For example, if a married daughter or a son has invested in an apartment[15] in a residential complex, parents or siblings may invest in an apartment in a neighbouring block of the same complex. They tend to cook as one household if they are in adjacent apartments, or to exchange food as and when needed. The pattern of elderly relatives staying with their sons is also not uncommon given the patriarchal structure of these families. Another interesting dimension to the joint family system emerges with grandchildren, who often have the highest priority in such households. Grandparents often take care of grandchildren while parents, typically IT professionals or entrepreneurs, are at work. This arrangement is not entirely unprecedented in traditional village life. There members of an extended family may appear to be living in different

houses, but in fact regularly come together to cook around the hearth of a particular house.

Consider the example of Shanti, a 28-year-old married IT employee whose husband, Sundaram, also works in the IT sector. They live with their five-year-old son on the twelfth floor of a multi-storeyed apartment complex in Panchagrami. Shanti is an only child and her parents have moved to the same apartment complex; they occupy a two-bedroom apartment on the eighth floor of the same building. This allows them to be near their daughter and take care of their grandson, while not intruding into the privacy of Shanti's family.

The case of Bhuvana, a 36-year-old IT employee, is similar; in this instance it is her in laws who have moved to the apartment next door to hers. Cooking is done by her parents-in-law, with meals either being sent to Bhuvana's house or the whole family eating together in either of the houses. Scores of other cases in Panchagrami reflect the same pattern; cooking is normally done in one house (normally in that of the elders), with the families of the younger generation either eating with them or receiving food packed and sent to their own home for consumption.[16] If the kitchen hearth is what defines families, then those described above are particularly interesting. At the outset they might appear to be two nuclear families living in two independent houses, but in reality they are one joint family living independently of one another.

Once again, however, this is not to say that nuclear families with no other relatives living with them or close to them do not exist in Panchagrami. On the contrary: they exist in large numbers owing to the influx of IT migrants and other investors in the area. Ravindran, a 44-year-old IT entrepreneur, represents the growing model of entirely nuclear families.[17] He lives in a three-bedroom apartment with his wife and three school-age daughters in a large apartment complex at Panchagrami. His brother lives in Kolkata (a city in northeast India, formerly known as Calcutta) while his sister is in Punjab (northwest India) owing to her husband's career in the Indian army.

Madan and his wife Poorvi, a middle-aged couple in their late forties, are in a similar situation. Both work for a family business that they own, while Poorvi's sister lives in the USA and Madan's sister in Australia. This couple live with their golden retriever in a three-bedroom apartment in Panchagrami.

As noted above, a significant trait seen at Panchagrami is that of extended families living close to each other, either in an apartment complex or in independent houses in the villages. However, when extended families stay in independent houses in a specific area, with

further family members acquired through marriage and birth, the area may become dominated by a certain inter-related caste group.[18] In one of the villages that make Panchagrami, for example, the long-term original inhabitants are all related to each one other. They belong to the same caste group and trace their origin to the 12 initial settlers in this area, who belonged to a single caste group. Each of these 12 settlers was called 'Thalakattu', or the patriarchal head of the family, also considered in the introduction. Although oral history records this group as an endogamous group, marital agreements from other villages did occur (while still maintaining caste endogamy). So now, 120 years later, the natives of this entire village will always address each other in kin terms,[19] although not all of them know precisely how they are related to each other. The use of fictive kin terms as a substitute for original relationship terminologies is prolific in this area.

At this point we can see how understanding the family structure helps us in turn to understand some other key organisational principles. Castes and subcastes are closely related to family, and can indeed appear like an extended family, partly because most marriages are endogamous. Such an endogamous system in this area first ensures marriages within one's own subcaste group, already consisting of families networked through kinship. This is further emphasised by having one's identity since birth associated with such a system. An individual can therefore map a network of traceable relationships, not only with respect to his or her own lineage but also to more distant relatives twice or thrice removed. Several such endogamous subcaste groups go on to make a caste group in this area.[20]

In order to understand the patterns of communication and of social media in Panchagrami, one needs to follow this cross-pollination of family with class, caste, gender and age.[21] Using the family as an overarching category, we will thus focus upon inter-generational communication (parent–child and grandparents–grandchildren), communication between couples, communication between siblings, between extended families and that of friendships as fictive kinships.

A key component of this chapter is to understand how these different relationships map onto different social media platforms, and to explore the possibilities that arise within each. Communication within a close-knit family or within a specific social network (whether extended families or fictive kin) usually takes place only over channels that provide privacy; Facebook is hardly ever the preferred platform in these contexts. However, WhatsApp is increasingly seen as the platform that accommodates such family-based personal communication. For families

Facebook is more or less seen as a demonstrative platform; a certain level of performance takes place on it by different family members, but this is always directed to the outside world. This happens in cases of parent–child or grandparent–grandchild relationships, and specifically occurs in upper-middle class families. It is less true in lower middle-class or low-income environments, due to the absence of family members from these classes on Facebook.

Intergenerational communication

The role of social media in understanding filial relationships at Panchagrami and its influence in changing communication patterns provide us with a better understanding of the relationships themselves. A striking feature within a family at Panchagrami is the significant role played by a mobile phone. In Chapter 2 we discussed the importance of mobile phones in Panchagrami. This chapter provides a brief overview of mobile phones within a family context before examining the role of social media in the framework of intergenerational communication.

A mobile phone[22] is the major networking tool for intra-family communication. It has surpassed, and in some cases replaced, the traditional landline. Though mobile phones offer voice and text communications, the elderly members of most families at Panchagrami have retained their perception of phones as basically a voice-only medium. Further, even amidst a host of other communicative media, including the internet and a plethora of social networking sites, communication within a family mostly happened through voice. Parents, very specifically mothers, almost always seem to prefer hearing their children's voices rather than receiving texts from them. Family members mostly communicated with each other by calling rather than by texting. Generally the kind of parental insistence on the mode of communication that their children had to adopt while communicating with them demonstrates how age acts as a principle of hierarchy in determining the media to use. Education levels and literacy skills also impacted on the choice of one media over another in the case of lower socio-economic classes. Yet this pattern of trying to keep family communication entirely within the realm of voice occurred irrespective of the socio-economic class to which the family belonged.

At Panchagrami a typical nuclear family from a lower socio-economic background normally has access to at least three mobile

phones – one for each parent and one for the son. Daughters are not usually allowed access to a mobile phone.

The mobile phone owned by the mother is mostly treated as a landline, collectively owned by the entire family; it becomes a shared object. The mother is normally a homemaker[23] (though in certain cases she might help her husband with agriculture work for a few months of the year). A daughter is not normally given a mobile phone until she starts attending college or finds employment – or, in some cases, until she gets married.[24] There were several instances at Panchagrami where marriage or employment gave a daughter the appropriate status to own a mobile phone. Young men from these families have no such restrictions placed on them. In a typical family, communication normally takes place between the father, mother and a son over a mobile phone; a daughter normally uses her mother's mobile phone to communicate with the rest of the family, as in the case of Ravi's family, discussed in Chapter 2. Mobile phones thus become shared devices among female members of the family. While a daughter might face restrictions on phone use even in her early twenties, a son may get to own a phone at the age of about 15. Such age disparity by gender when it comes to owning communication devices affects the social media use in the lower middle classes and the lower socio-economic classes in Panchagrami.

The kinship diagram below indicates the general trend in the use of mobile phones in typical nuclear families from the lower socio-economic classes in Panchagrami (Fig. 4.1). In this illustration the blue triangles indicate men and the pink circles indicate women. An 'equal to' symbol represents marriage and vertical/horizontal lines show the offspring.

Once again in Chapter 2, the case of Ravi's mother indicated this pattern of continuity between the mobile phone and landlines as voice-only media. Such biases based on gender (where young unmarried women are not allowed a mobile phone) are sometimes visible even in middle-class families living in the villages (and even more so in families from the lower middle class). Here caste-based tradition binds the families in making such decisions.

While there exists a gender bias in the use of mobile phones in the lower socio-economic class and lower middle-class families, however, such biases based on gender are not normally apparent in upper middle-class families, who tend to inhabit large apartment complexes.

At Panchagrami filial relationships come with a stress on emotional bonding. The constant need to ensure their children's wellbeing becomes a priority and precaution takes precedence over all other
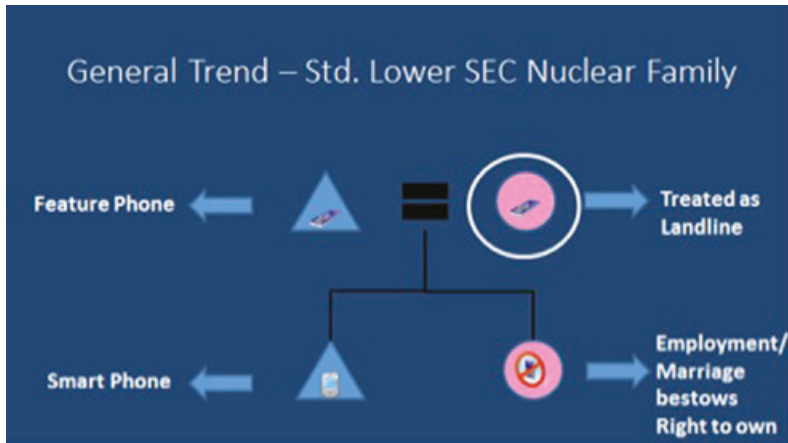
Fig. 4.1   Phone ownership in a typical lower socio-economic class family

factors – especially with daughters, as seen in the case of Shobana's parents described in Chapter 2. Though Shobana actually comes from a middle-class family in the village, the same issues apply to upper-class families with school-age children.

Sukrithi, for example, is a 14-year-old student in the ninth grade of an affluent international school in Panchagrami. Her after-school activities include swimming, singing, karate and tennis, and extra academic tuition. Given that both her parents work, she is taken to these activities in a Honda City sedan car by her driver, and is also accompanied by a female childminder through the early evening. To make sure that her status is always updated to her parents, she was given a Samsung smartphone as a present after promising to keep them informed of her whereabouts. Last year her childminder received a Nokia feature phone to keep Sukrithi's parents informed of their daughter's schedule. Sukrithi, embarrassed by this, had stated that she could attend to her schedule herself. To keep track of her movements, her parents gave Sukrithi a smartphone, but only on the condition that it did not have an internet connection (3G or 4G). The smartphone was mainly intended to be used for calling her parents; if they were not able to take the call, she had to text them to let them know where she was after school.

The emotional bonding that focuses on hearing the voices of children to ensure their wellbeing is not gender specific; it happens with the parents of young boys too. Rahul's case provides a typical example.

Rahul, aged 15, is also a ninth-grade student; he attends another affluent international school located very close to Panchagrami.

He lives in a multi-storeyed apartment complex located in the field site. Both of Rahul's parents work for IT companies and normally return home only around 7 pm, or sometimes later. So Rahul stays with his maternal grandparents (who have bought themselves a home in the same apartment complex) after his return from school at around 4 pm until his parents arrive back from work. The ritual that is stressed is the need for Rahul to call one of his parents to let them know that he has arrived at his grandparents' house. His parents then call him on his mobile phone (a Samsung smartphone) at around 7 pm to let their son know they are home. They also call his grandparents to let them know of their arrival.

The above examples all refer to parent–child communication that involves a teenager or unmarried child. At this point it seems suitable to re-introduce Mr Raghavan, also discussed in Chapter 2. He is a diligent planner when it comes to communicating with his sons. In his case neither marital status nor the distance matters – even married sons living in different cities retain traditional voice communication with him.

Raghavan, aged 65, is an upper middle-class Brahmin.[25] Before retiring he was the head of training and development for a major pharmaceutical company. He invested in a smart, two-bedroom apartment at Panchagrami immediately after his retirement, and lives here with his wife, who has trained herself as a Montessori school teacher; she is also a specialist in a traditional Indian art form known as Tanjore painting.[26] One of the couple's sons lives in Bangalore and works for an IT company, while the other lives in Connecticut, USA. Raghavan and his wife own iPads and Samsung tablets, along with a Blackberry (for Mr Raghavan) and a Samsung smartphone (for Mrs Raghavan). They also own two landline phones. Further, they have a post-paid connection with Airtel[27] (India's largest provider of mobile telephone services), through which they have a CUG (Closed User Group). Calls within this group are free, and the Raghavans' son and daughter-in-law in Bangalore are within this group. They normally chat with their son and daughter-in-law on the phone on weekdays and catch up with them over Skype from their tablets over the weekend, giving them a chance to see their granddaughters too. In addition Mr Raghavan also owns a VOIP[28] telecom service called Magic Jack. Calls to the US are free of cost on this service, with the subscriber being assigned a US number in India. Once a month the entire family (from the US, Bangalore and Chennai) tries to get together for at least an hour, so that Mr and Mrs Raghavan can see all of their grandchildren and the young cousins can

see each other. Before getting on Skype over the weekends, however, Mr Raghavan follows a mini ritual:

> Step 1: Call[29] both his sons, asking them if they are free on a particular weekend
> Step 2: Call each son individually, just before the call, to confirm availability
> Step 3: Call each son over the phone again if he has failed to turn up within a certain time
> Step 4: If financial matters have been discussed over Skype, send a follow-up note on the discussion

His wife comments that he tends to formalise discussions and loves setting up these kinds of calls.

Mr Raghavan noted that he was disappointed to see his grandchildren using mobile phones at the ages of 9 and 10. Whenever he calls them, therefore, he rings their home landline, not their mobiles. His wife added that the grandchildren now understand their grandfather's preferences and recognise that they need to speak to him over the landline or Skype.

Mr Raghavan clearly uses his age and relationship as principles of hierarchy and power to determine channels of communication with his granddaughters. He does not send or receive text messages with his family. He also takes into account whether his daughter-in-law's parents are staying with the couple in Bangalore before setting up Skype calls. If they are present, Mr Raghavan calls his grandchildren only over the phone; he talks to them, but ends his conversation early. His attitude towards media use with his immediate family can be best summarised in his own words: 'if one is alive, better to hear their voice than see them mute.' Although this may appear to be a case of media multiplexity,[30] where the strong bond that Mr Raghavan shares with his grandchildren triggers communication over Skype and landline, what needs to be noted is that all his communication channels have *voice* as the overarching theme. The theory may prescribe that strong bonds use more media to communicate, but what is of note here is that this is not straightforward: it is influenced by the cultural context, as in Mr Raghavan's case.

This case in a way leads us to another aspect of intergenerational communication, that which occurs between grandparents and grandchildren. Parents working as professionals in the IT sector may encounter an ever increasing demand for travel to onsite projects[31] (including foreign assignments), in some cases for long periods of time, based on

the particular project or sometimes the foreign client for whom they work. There are several cases where IT employees invest in a house, live there for a couple of years, and then are asked to relocate to the USA, UK or another country for a particular project. For those who move abroad to the project sites with their families (husband/wife and children), the husband's parents may well decide to occupy this house until the family returns, instead of leaving it empty and locked up.[32]

In another scenario, several elderly couples invest in houses in Panchagrami, typically after the husband retires. They tend to live in gated communities and to socialise with similar couples. They usually stay in India for a period of six months and move to their son/daughter's house in the US or UK for a period of six months or so (as in the case of Mr Raghavan, whose son lives in the US). In such cases, though communication between the married son/daughter living abroad and the elderly parents living in Panchagrami does take place, the urge to communicate with their grandchildren seems to be particularly high. Although pictures of their grandchildren are often seen on Facebook, or are sent to the grandparents on WhatsApp, a bi-monthly Skype call or a Google Hangout becomes more or less a ritual. Similarly, in several cases, though the weekly general communication between elderly parents in India and the son/daughter abroad takes place over the phone, when it comes to communicating with grandchildren a visual with voice (typically Skype/Google Hangout) always takes precedence. If it is not possible to make a visual connection, grandparents are satisfied with at least hearing a grandchild's voice. This pattern is typically seen in families with grandchildren under the age of 10 years and living at some distance.

For example Varun and Varenya, 10-year-old twin grandchildren of Mrs Sarada and Mr Namashivayam, have a weekly Skype call with their grandparents. Sarada was given an iPad as a present on her last trip to the US over Christmas. It was 'given to her' by her grandchildren (though their parents paid for it). Sarada claims to have been taught by the grandchildren how to use Facetime and to Skype. Now every week, they get on either of these platforms for a conversation, though these can be very brief. Sarada noted that there were times when it so happened that she would have more conversations with her grandchildren than she did with her daughter (the twins' mother). She is also on WhatsApp, with a group named after her grandchildren, in which her unmarried son, her daughter, her son-in law and her daughter's in-laws (parents, sisters etc.) are also members. They constantly exchange messages and pictures over this group.

In the cases of both Mr Raghavan and Mrs Sarada, although voice remains the most significant factor, use of multiple media for communication is also evident. The only difference between the two cases is the higher frequency of visual accompaniment (through either Skype/Facetime) in Sarada's case. Both the examples above illustrate aspects of media multiplexity and polymedia.[33]

Mrs Geetha Thiagarajan, who sends messages to her daughter advising on the care of her newborn baby over WhatsApp, is a similar example. Her previous conversations with her daughter were over Skype, where they mostly discussed family gossip and Indian recipes that her newly married daughter could try in the US. Mr Thiagarajan jokes that since their daughter's marriage and subsequent move to the US, his wife has spent more time on Skype chatting with their daughter than she does speaking to him face to face.[34] Following the birth of their first grandchild, most conversations now centre on childcare tips. When their daughter's in-laws visited the US, conversations moved on to telephone and WhatsApp, in order to respect their daughter's time with her in-laws; it was seen as inappropriate to hold her daughter back on Skype for too long when her in-laws were visiting. (Of course, pregnancy-related nausea and tiredness was also a part of the reason why long Skype calls were not possible.) Though their daughter is on Facebook, Geetha, as well as her daughter's in-laws, had advised the daughter not to upload pictures of the child on Facebook for now, as it might lead to an evil eye.[35] So pictures are exchanged instead over emails or WhatsApp. Even the single picture that her son-in-law uploaded onto Facebook immediately after the child was born, to let everyone know the good news, was deleted after advice from Geetha.

Several grandparents believe that uploading pictures of their newborn grandchild on Facebook will lead to this phenomenon of the 'evil eye'. However, they appeared happy if a picture of a new baby appeared on Facebook after a couple of months. Facebook 'likes' on photographs taken of very recently born babies which have been uploaded onto Facebook are seen as an indication of the 'evil eye' too. They agree that thinking so might seem superstitious to outsiders, but reiterate that in their experience the evil eye does exist, and social media such as Facebook could be a medium to cause it. Such views can best be summarised in the words of Mrs Kalyani, a 68-year-old with a newborn grandson in the US:

> The people who you know are the ones on Facebook as well, so you very well know who is of what nature, so why give them a chance to harm you (by casting an evil eye)?

However, uploading and passing newborn pictures on WhatsApp to the nearest and dearest relatives (specifically to grandparents who have not been present during the child's delivery) is not frowned upon. Such images are designed for those people who matter most, and who would also be upset if they were not informed or shown a picture of the new baby. In conforming to the expectations of these family networks, therefore, the pictures are sent, but only over WhatsApp. Here again Facebook is seen as a public platform (or a platform that caters to a larger network) and WhatsApp as a more private platform (fostering a network of strong ties). The middle-class and upper middle-class elderly specifically split and categorise media as 'private' and 'public', and so decide which aspect needs to appear where. Their word on platform use is usually maintained when it comes to deciding the best way to communicate intimate, inter-generational family issues.

Another concern that the elderly reveal about new communication media relates to how important life events of extended family members are communicated to them. Several elderly people, such as Mr Raghavan and Mr Karan (discussed in Chapter 2), ascertain that social media fails to recognise age or hierarchy, while voice and personal calls do.

For elderly relatives, communication within a close-knit family should necessarily take place by voice rather than texts when it comes to detailed or important communication with parents or grandparents. Little or no communication is routed through a social networking site, and these play no role in fostering a channel of communication between children and parents or grandparents who live with each other. The social networking sites assume a role only when it comes to communicating with immediate family members who have migrated to other locations within India or abroad, for education or for work. Physical distance as a variable determines the use and interplay of visuals in communication as well. Skype or Google Hangout come into play only when the distance between the communicating parties is substantial.

While media is clearly categorised for intra-family communication, we will now move on to examine how families employ social media (especially Facebook) to play a significant yet strategic role in fostering public[36] communication.

Though Facebook is not a preferred platform when it comes to communication between close-knit family members, it is much preferred as a channel to perform and showcase family intimacy to their intended social circles. In short, the exhibition of love and intimacy occurs over two cycles – one operating in the private sphere, within a

limited strong-tie network, and the other in the public sphere (specifically on Facebook) for a larger network to see.

Mrs Mythili Vijayan and Mr Vijayan, for instance, have a seven-year-old granddaughter who lives next door (a typical example of extended families living in adjacent properties as discussed above). Mythili's son Shankar posted a picture of his daughter on Facebook after her first day in a Western music class. Before being posted on Facebook, the picture had made the rounds of the immediate family circle on WhatsApp for a couple of weeks, with each family member remarking on how sweet the little one was; this admiration had quietened down after the first couple of days. However, when the picture was posted on Facebook, both the grandparents commented on how their 'little angel' looked, followed by their daughter-in-law's comment. This was then followed by several other comments from Shankar's sister who lived abroad. She had actually seen the picture a week earlier on WhatsApp when it was sent to her, and had already responded to that image.

Similarly Mrs Uma Prakash, a 35-year-old homemaker, regularly uploads pictures of her eight-year-old son Vidyut showing him playing, going to school, doing his homework etc. Each of these pictures receives responses as comments from her in-laws (sister-in-law, brother-in-law etc.) as well as her own parents, who live next door and see Vidyut every day.

In the case of Krishnan, a 67-year-old retired government telecom officer, the weekly Skype calls that he and his wife have with their son and his family (settled in the US) are the time when family news is shared. Conversations are often structured around their grandchildren, Varsha and Shyla, at school in grades five and four respectively. Sumi, the couple's daughter-in-law, uploads pictures of Varsha and Shyla on Facebook and each time the parents of both Krishnan and Sumi would comment on them – even though these pictures would have already been shared with them and appreciative comments already shared in private.

In societies such as Panchagrami there are several normative discourses related to the ideals of a good and model family. The essentiality of normative ideals within a family needs to be demonstrated openly, rather than being subsumed within the family itself. As in the offline world, where families perform for the outside world to show their closeness and how ideal their family is, Facebook has emerged as an online mass medium where families overtly display their affection, love and bonding for the world – in other words, their larger network – to see. This is also a typical example of scalable sociality; the families strategically

choose both the size and the nature of the group before posting anything related to their families.

While both the older and the younger generation participate in this performance, it is generally the elderly who do so overtly. This is not seen in the lower socio-economic classes, nor in the lower middle classes who live in the villages, as here parents'/grandparents' use of technology and social networking sites is much more limited. However, they do view and express admiration of photographs that their children might show them on their mobile phones. They would see these as photos shown on a mobile phone, however, rather than as material emerging from Facebook or WhatsApp – or any other platform for that matter. The hardware instrument (i.e. the mobile phone or the computer) is what is perceptible to them.

In conclusion, intergenerational communication over media (phone or social media) is multi-layered and strongly influenced by structures of power; these in turn spring from a cultural context with high regard for hierarchy, again driven by principles of respect for age. This does not necessarily mean that such controls over determination of media usage are devoid of care, protection and concern for close family members. Though issues of visibility, normative ideals, conformance to the expectations of a network and even skills influence the choice of one medium of communication over another, there is a convincing display of polymedia in these intergenerational communications at Panchagrami.

Married couples and polymedia

Unlike intergenerational communication, married couples were much more open to communication over text messages, with a balance created between text and voice communication. Their channels of communication were always private, however, and never exposed to the outside world. Couples living together rarely used Facebook to communicate with each other. They always used voice calls, text messages or WhatsApp, which they preferred over other kinds of social media. The media that they selected to communicate share features such as privacy, security and intimacy. The examples discussed below most often are from the middle classes (except for Sri Lakshmi and Karuppiah), rather than lower socio-economic classes, as communication between couples from the latter backgrounds normally takes place by voice or text (if both are educated; if not it is always by voice). Both levels of

education and the cost of access to certain technologies play significant roles in determining communication channels for lower socio-economic classes.

Chandralekha and Ranga

Chandralekha (Chandra) and Ranga work for the same ITES[37] company and had an arranged marriage (managed by their respective families). Once they were married Ranga got himself transferred to the same branch as Chandra. As the company does not allow married couples to work for the same team, Ranga and Chandra work for two different teams, located on different floors. However, they meet for lunch every day and schedule their lunchtime accordingly. As both appreciate that their work schedules are not always fixed, they send messages to each other asking if the other is free for lunch. However, they do not use their phones, or even WhatsApp or Facebook, to communicate this. Such communication takes place through an organisation-wide instant messenger, through which one can send personal messages to another employee to ask for something without calling him or her over the phone. Ranga and Chandra use this facility to communicate with each other, as this does not give their respective bosses the impression that they are talking about personal matters during office hours (Chandra's boss is particularly concerned with this). It is an easy and discreet method of communication, which the couple can use without attracting attention. They do this not only to schedule lunch, but also to fix the right time to stop work for the day, or sometimes even to discuss certain domestic issues.

Aarthi and Akilan

Akilan (aged 31) and Aarthi (30) are a young couple who live in Panchagrami with their five-year-old child. They had an inter-caste marriage, much against their parents' wishes, around eight years ago, since when they have had an estranged relationship with their parents. Time may be said to be a great healer, but it did not seem so in this case. They live as a nuclear family, with only Aarthi's mother[38] and sister visiting her when time permits. Though both work for IT companies they are not on Facebook, believing that other relatives too are unfavourably disposed to their marriage. Since membership on Facebook might connect them with these relatives and prompt embarrassing questions,

they avoid the site. However, they are members of technical (computer- and work-related) social networking sites, such as LinkedIn and other forums and groups. They both own Samsung smartphones and have a post-paid connection (Vodafone) with a CUG (Closed User Group – having only the two of them as a group).

At work the couple tend to communicate with one another over text messages before calling each other. A typical communication that took place on 22 November 2013, a Friday, went something like this:

Aarthi: Sappitacha? (meaning 'Finished lunch?')
Akilan: hmm n U? (meaning: 'Yes and have you finished yours?')
Aarthi: nt yt cll pannalama (meaning: 'Not yet, can I call you now?')
Akilan: Innum 10 mns pannatumma (meaning: 'Can I call you in another 10 mins?')
Aarthi: K (meaning: 'OK')
Akilan: anythng urg (meaning: 'Anything urgent?')
Aarthi: Illa thayir konjam pulikuthu (meaning: 'No, the curd seemed a bit sour') – curd rice is a common lunchtime food in India)
Akilan: hmm theriyum kandukalla avasarama sapttaen (meaning: 'Yes I know, I had to eat in a hurry so didn't worry')
Akilan: Seri 10mns la call pannuraen (meaning: 'OK, I'll call you in 10 mins')
Aarthi: K

As both work for IT companies, they appreciate that they cannot just call, as one of them might be busy, so each will message the other before calling. Their messaging has now migrated to WhatsApp.

Deepa and Vasu

The case of Vasu (aged 37) and Deepa (35), who also had an inter-caste marriage, is similar. Vasu, whom we met in Chapter 2, owns a business and Deepa is a homemaker. As with Akilan and Aarthi, both of their families opposed the marriage. However, the couple has now been married for 10 years and has two children who attend primary school. Both Vasu and Deepa are on Facebook as well as on WhatsApp. Both have Samsung smartphones, while Vasu also uses an iPhone (purchased while on a business trip to Dubai).

When it comes to everyday communication, however, both prefer to call each other or send quick messages on WhatsApp rather than to

use Facebook. Deepa calls Vasu only between 1 pm and 1:30 pm, when he is normally at lunch (he is particular about the time when he eats, as he is in the early stages of a stomach ulcer). So she knows that she can reach Vasu by phone between 1 pm and 1:30 pm; otherwise Deepa texts him and normally waits for him to call her. Their conversations usually centre on daily chores. A conversation that took place through WhatsApp messages between Deepa and Vasu ran as follows:

Deepa: Varumbodhu Milk vanganum (meaning: 'Please can you get some milk on your way home?')
Vasu: Seri (meaning: 'OK')

Another example of their brief WhatsApp conversations is as follows:

Deepa: Madhiyam sonnatha marakathinga (meaning: 'Don't forget what I told you this afternoon')
Vasu: Marakala (meaning: 'haven't forgotten')

Sri Lakshmi and Karuppiah

Sri Lakshmi is a graduate and works for a call centre. Her husband Karuppiah, aged 25, is a driver with a taxi company that runs special services for local IT companies. He dropped out of school but still communicates well in English – a skill he made sure to learn, so that he could communicate with his customers (foreigners and Indians alike). Karuppiah and Sri Lakshmi each own a Samsung smartphone and are avid users of WhatsApp. Karuppiah has a hobby of taking pictures of himself at various locations that he visits during the day; he then sends the images to Sri Lakshmi and a few other friends. He maintains separate channels (a private one just with Lakshmi and a group chat for his friends) to communicate with each of them on WhatsApp. Karuppiah's WhatsApp picture listing shows him standing before IT companies, five-star hotels, university buildings etc. For her part Sri Lakshmi only comments on these pictures during her work time from her workplace through voice messages if she is free or through smiley faces or 'thumbs-up' symbols if she is busy.

If Sri Lakshmi wants Karuppiah to undertake a chore, she normally calls him. If he does not pick up, she understands that he may be busy driving and leaves him a voice message on WhatsApp, either asking him to call back or to do a particular task. In their case sending text messages does not happen: they use either voice messages or visual symbols.

Indra and Arvind

Indra, aged 43, is a homemaker and the mother of two children. Her husband Arvind, aged 45 years, is an entrepreneur who runs a huge showroom for cycles. Although Indra takes care of most of the domestic chores, Arvind chips in at times, specifically when on his way home from work. If he comes across hawkers selling fresh fruits or vegetables next to his workplace, he takes a picture of it and sends it to Indra on WhatsApp, asking for her approval before making a purchase.

The same thing occurs when Indra asks her husband to shop for a particular spice during her busy cooking periods at weekends. Here again, if Arvind forgets or gets confused over the ingredient, he snaps a picture of the spice and sends it to Indra over WhatsApp for approval before he buys it. Indra does the same when buying presents for their mutual friends (for their birthdays and anniversaries, for example), to see if Arvind likes the idea and agrees about the cost. However, communication other than sending pictures for approval happens over the phone and by voice, rather than through any other media.

Vasudha and Mahesh

Vasudha, aged 58, is currently in the US[39] to help her daughter around the birth of her second child. Her husband Mahesh, aged 62, had to remain in India because of his professorial job in a management institute. The couple communicate over the phone every day and via Skype once every two or three days. If the phone rang at 7 am or at 9 pm Indian time, Mahesh knew that it was Vasudha calling.

Vasudha used a VOIP-based phone in the US to call India. Similarly, as she did not have a smartphone in the US, she used her iPad to send emails to Mahesh letting him know a good time to Skype. Initially they did not have a firm schedule for Skype, as they had done with phone calls. As time went on, however, schedules for this also fell into place, and Vasudha's iPad proved very useful in helping her Skype with Mahesh. Calls were made mostly on Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays, when Mahesh was also relatively free from his teaching work. Other than a few private conversations, most of their conversations revolved around how to cook a particular dish. Vasudha always made a point of checking with Mahesh that he was eating well, and discovering what dishes he had cooked.

Radhika and Santhanam

Radhika, aged 33, and Santhanam, aged 36, are a couple as well as equal business partners in an entrepreneurial venture. They run a fashion garment showroom as well as a hair salon. Their model of management is not differentiated, i.e. both look after both businesses. While Santhanam is concerned with finance, logistics and operations, Radhika is more involved with marketing, sales and HR. Such segregation of work is not strict, however, and both end up taking care of everything.

The couple has a dedicated Facebook page, but use it more to communicate with their friends than with each other. Most of their communication took place via voice messages as well as normal text messages; Radhika claimed that it was rather a mess, as personal texts got mixed with work-related ones. However, they now have a work group set up with WhatsApp. Personal texts are sent to each other over WhatsApp, while professional texts are sent using a group name, which goes with their company name, thus avoiding confusion.

As witnessed in the case studies, communication between couples tends to show a pattern of intimacy, care and concern – even in conversations that might appear mundane to the outside world. Another subtle pattern that emerges is the negotiations with channels of communication, where they are chosen based on what suits and is convenient for both the parties concerned. While the intergenerational communications reveal a pattern of control, in the case of couples there seems to be a kind of agreed-upon rationale that precedes the choice of media. The choice of platforms to be used is also determined by understanding each partner's time and space rather than just that of whoever was initiating the conversation, as shown in the above cases.

Another subtle pattern emerges in which such cognisance during communication is displayed more by women than men. Although, as specified earlier, platforms offering intimate and secured channels are generally preferred over others, this does not preclude users from demonstrating their intimacy to a larger network of people or the public, as shown in the following cases with regard to one particular platform – Facebook.

Facebook as a performative platform for couples

Facebook acts as a performative platform that allows couples to demonstrate their intimacy to the wider network, just as in filial relationships.

The following cases show that even where couples live together, the performance of their love and adoration for each other was displayed on Facebook. Here, however, it was meant to be a performance that the world could see, rather than being a private communication between them.

Similar to the normative discourses of an ideal family, discourses pertaining to an ideal couple, or an ideal marriage, are taken seriously. With Facebook, such ideal aspects are revealed for the world to see, rather than being subsumed at a family level alone.[40] As in the case of filial relationships, Facebook becomes the platform where such 'global' demonstrations have an impact. The following three case studies give examples of these performances.

Saranya and Srijith

Saranya, aged 24, and Sreejith, 25, fell in love when they worked together in a financial firm. With their respective parents' approval, they married within a year of meeting one another. Saranya, who was active on Facebook, uploaded pictures of herself with Srijith from the start of their courtship. Immediately after her wedding, her profile on Facebook was filled with pictures of the event. After a couple of months, it changed to pictures of the couple going out together. Until this point Srijith had never commented on Saranya's profile, nor was he very active on Facebook. Yet a couple of months after their marriage he started posting messages on Facebook on how much he misses his wife while at work – in reality his workplace was located just one floor below Saranya's work place. Both also posted messages on Facebook saying how much they had enjoyed their dinner at a restaurant the previous day as well as their drive back home in the car.

Chaya and Varun

Similar to Saranya and Srijith's situation is the case of Chaya and Varun (both also in their mid-twenties). In addition to pictures of the holidays they had taken together, notes on how they had enjoyed a particular place together or even eaten an ice cream together would go on their Facebook profiles. Both said they intended such posts to be memories, but these were always followed with a conversation between the couple on Facebook, rather than it being viewed as a space for other people to comment on.

Sandhya and Gopal

Sandhya, aged 23, noted that her husband Gopal, aged 26, had always been a romantic and wished to express his love to her publicly. Sandhya admitted that she had previously been embarrassed, but had got used to it in the process of living with Gopal. Sandhya, an HR executive, travels around the country to recruit human resources for the IT company she works for. Gopal, a software programmer by profession, does not travel much, and remains at home when Sandhya travels. Each time she went on a trip Gopal made a point of putting a romantic song from YouTube, either Tamil (Kollywood)[41] or Hindi (Bollywood),[42] to indicate he was missing his wife. These posts embarrassed Sandhya, but she viewed the fact that her husband loved her so much positively and had become reconciled to them.

Earlier in this chapter we saw day-to-day intimate conversations between couples. In this section we have seen how an enhanced selection of these conversations is showcased to a larger network. At first glance these may appear as a demonstration of intimacy to the outside world, but, as Chaya notes, such posts are also memories of their time together. So these posts could be seen not just as a communication to the outside world, but also as a communication between each other and a strategic accumulation of memories, to refer back to in the future.[43] Though such posts could be initiated by just one of the parties involved, they very soon get the partner's approval and participation, even if he or she is initially embarrassed. This does not necessarily mean that all couples that posted in this way went through the same cycle, however. There were cases in which one of the partners restricted such posts, keeping the couple's intimate moments either to themselves or to a select, strong-tie network.

Communication between siblings

Communication between siblings belonged to a different genre from communication between couples or intergenerational communication. In Panchagrami communication between siblings living with each other was primarily face to face or over the phone. It migrated to Facebook and WhatsApp when one of them married and moved away, especially if one or both of the siblings was female. Siblings supporting each other or each other's children on Facebook were a common sight, especially if one of them was a woman. In other words, the use of Facebook and

WhatsApp as communicative platforms between siblings happened more often in cases of sisters or a sister–brother relationship than it did between brothers.

A clear trend emerged showing that if the age gap between brothers was four years or more, they had separate sets of friends; although both of them might be on Facebook they never friended each other, though they privately communicated over WhatsApp. This was especially clear in the cases of young, unmarried brothers. The situation changed in the cases of brothers who were married with children, however; if they were still on Facebook, the men friended each other. This was especially the case with those from the lower middle classes. However, with upper middle classes the entire family (including the brothers' wives) would also be friends with each other on Facebook. Usually no WhatsApp group was established by brothers from a lower middle-class family, as their wives were not on it. In an upper middle-class family, however, a family WhatsApp group between the brothers' families was a common occurrence; more often than not it was established by the wife of one of the brothers, with support from her in-laws.

However, when it comes to brother–sister relationships, things were very different. Although these men generally perceived Facebook as a potentially dangerous tool for female family members, they differed in their stance when it came to women outside their immediate or extended families. The visibility that the women from their families might have on social media was generally not accepted as a good example of womanhood; it is not considered a normative ideal for a good Tamil, or even an Indian woman.[44] The discourses on ideal womanhood in the context of Indian culture, and the ways in which men always strive to ensure this for female family members are not rare. Such sentiments often reflect the influence of traditional social norms and the principles of certain caste-based political parties to which these men belong.

The situation became very different when sisters married and moved away, however, as in Ravi's case (as discussed in Chapter 2), where his sister initiates calls with her family every week even after marriage. Another example is the case of Ranjith and Sreelatha; after Sreelatha married and settled in Bahrain, she started to use Facebook and became her brother's friend. She pestered Ranjith to upload pictures of her parents on Facebook and to keep changing these every week, so she could see how her parents looked now.

Ranjith always has to be there for Sreelatha to Skype with their parents, as they are not comfortable using the desktop computer

or Skype on it. Skype calls thus take place just once a month, and in between Sreelatha calls her parents rather than seeing them online. As a consequence Sreelatha contacts Ranjith and asks him for pictures of her parents and relatives.

Before Sreelatha was married, Ranjith accepts that he controlled his sister; he was in fact so strict that he would not allow her to access Facebook. He now agrees such behaviour was foolish on his part, observing sadly that only when she moved to Bahrain did he appreciate her value and his love for her. Ranjith also agreed that it was Sreelatha who had friended their long-lost cousins on Facebook and re-built relationships once lost. He admitted that he never once tried reaching out to his extended family, while Sreelatha did so immediately after signing onto Facebook. Ranjith also noted that it was Sreelatha who became Facebook friends with the girl with whom he fell in love. When he had issues with his parents over the relationship, it was his chats with Sreelatha over Facebook that soothed him. Ranjith was shortly to marry this girl, all thanks to Sreelatha who had convinced his parents. He regretted his foolishness in believing his sister to be immature, and now declared that she was in fact more mature than he, despite being over three years younger. Strangely the brother and sister did not communicate over WhatsApp, though both owned smartphones. When this question arose in an interview with Ranjith, he smiled knowingly and said that they would be doing it soon.

Communication between sisters was in a different realm altogether. They did not mind being friends on Facebook, even if there was an age gap, and generally commented on or liked each other's posts and profiles. While particularly personal discussions took place through voice-based calls or texts, or even through WhatsApp, use of Facebook Messenger was also evident in several cases.

In lower socio-economic classes, many young, unmarried women were not allowed access to communication technologies. However, when employed or married (and if educated), they do become significant social networkers, in order to keep communication flowing between family members. This does not necessarily mean that they would use social networking tools/sites, as use of these also depends on who in the women's social circles used them. However, networking through text messages and voice messages certainly occurs.

After having explored patterns of communication within a close family circle, we will now move on to explore communication between extended family members at Panchagrami.

Communication with extended family

Communication with extended family members depended on their offline relationships, as the offline nature of ties[45] (stronger or weaker) influenced the frequency of communication. However, there were several cases where long lost relatives were found on Facebook. In Panchagrami this had even to a certain extent become a hobby for a few upper middle-class elderly people. This was a mixed group that could not be categorised as consisting mainly of men or of women. It seemed as if people of both genders were equally enthusiastic about such projects. They would become members of Facebook and invariably start looking for relatives on the site. Several elderly people were proud of their achievements in finding their second cousin's daughter on Facebook, or even distant relatives from their native village, whom they had last seen decades ago. As Mr Rajaram, a 69-year-old Facebook enthusiast, observed: 'it was like finding someone who got lost in a temple fair.' Geni[46] was another site to which these elderly people thronged, as it helped (automatically) to construct family trees for them.

Several retirees had started writing their family history by going back to the villages they hailed from, and most of them were on Facebook to find points of contact. However, when a point of contact (such as a long-lost relative) was found, the one-to-one relationship transferred to phone conversations, or even WhatsApp, for serious conversations, leaving the hunt for other relatives to continue in the Facebook jungle or carnival (depending on how you view the site). Since WhatsApp has now also taken over text messaging, communication between these extended family members took place on WhatsApp too – sometimes in the form of family group communication and sometimes individually. Once again this depended on the nature of relationship that one maintained offline.

Communication between cousins, specifically married cousins who lived some distance apart, normally took place over Facebook, as this was seen as the medium through which one could catch up with an extended family. Skype calls and phone calls also take place; however, these depend on how much of an offline contact relatives had with one another while growing up. Several instances of cousins liking and commenting on each other's Facebook profiles and albums occurred, and these may substantially increase once they have children. Support for each other's children is extended through likes and comments each time a picture of a cousin's child is uploaded on Facebook. There were cases where groups of cousins organised an event (rather like a festival

at their native village), but this only took place either if the cousins had known each other while growing up or at least if their parents had been close to each other.

Life events such as births, weddings and deaths appeared more visible on Facebook than other day-to-day communication between extended family members. Their visibility was a result of the high response rates (in the forms of likes and comments) that such events elicited from extended family circles on Facebook. Though a child's birth would generally be announced on Facebook, uploading pictures of a newborn baby is postponed until the child is at least a fortnight old or the religious rites associated with birth of a child are completed, for fear of attracting the evil eye – as discussed earlier in this chapter in relation to Mrs Geetha Thiagarajan. Such practices were followed rigidly in families where the elderly had a stronger say in such matters, for instance in the case of Mrs Geetha Thiagarajan discussed above.

There were in fact also cases where pictures of new babies were uploaded within a day, but this depended on how the elderly in the family perceived social media. If the extended family group had strong ties and were members of a common WhatsApp group, such pictures were usually exchanged over WhatsApp rather than on Facebook; somehow the latter, in comparison to WhatsApp, was seen as a mass media unsuitable for certain communication. Even when such pictures were shared over WhatsApp, none of the relatives in the group uploaded those pictures on Facebook. Instead they waited for the baby's parents or someone in the immediate family to upload these onto the site. There seemed to be an accepted ethos within such family circles with regard to certain forms of communication (in this case visual) transitioning from one platform to another. This does not necessarily mean that news of the new baby's arrival is kept within family circles, but rather that, even if such communication moves out of these networks, they are only in textual or oral form. What emerged was evidence of strategising not only the platforms to communicate such messages, but also which parts of communication should appear on different platforms.

Invitations to children's birthday parties were also sent over Facebook. Though this was generally acceptable, in other cases – such as that of Mr Raghavan, discussed earlier in this chapter – invitations over social media were construed as being impolite; only personal phone calls were acceptable. Only a few birthday pictures were sent over WhatsApp, with most being uploaded on Facebook for all of their networks to see, although the intention is to target the extended family members. Response rates in the form of comments were evident in

the first few pictures (generally the first 12 to 15 or so) compared to others in the album. The only exceptions were portfolio pictures of the child and the parents, or those in which the child cuts the cake. These were an expected social norm that extended family members had to satisfy in close-knit families. Once again, there was a certain level of performance by the extended family to highlight the closeness that they maintained with a specific group to more distant relatives in their social circles.[47]

Weddings were another important life event made apparent by changes in a couple's profiles. The first change would occur in their relationship status and the next would be in their photo albums, where visuals of the engagement ceremony would be uploaded, eliciting several positive responses. Pictures of the wedding ceremony itself would be uploaded in two cycles, the first cycle consisting of a handful of pictures uploaded immediately after the wedding and specifically meant for those extended family members who live abroad and might have missed the event. The next cycle, with a full album, would be uploaded almost a month after the wedding.

It is almost an expected norm that people within India would attend the wedding. A few pictures from the wedding ceremony would be uploaded by those attending the ceremony, for example cousins, aunts or uncles of the bride or bridegroom, in order to give their non-attending relatives a sense of being present at the event through live updates. Such images might be sent over Facebook or WhatsApp. As noted above, either the bride or the bridegroom would upload the entire album of professional wedding pictures taken by the photographer onto their Facebook profiles around a month after the event. This time period was generally accepted within the extended family circles, although pictures and gossip from the ceremony would circulate on WhatsApp during this period of time. In a couple of cases, both from upper middle-class families, an engagement ceremony was streamed live on Skype and other professional streaming channels[48] for members of the extended family unable to attend the ceremony. However, all of this depended on the closeness that the extended family members on either side shared with the couples' families.

What was more apparent was the communication of the deaths of elderly relatives on the profiles of middle-aged informants. Posts on deaths attracted a lot more responses than those of other genres. This might in part be because several visuals of other ceremonies were uploaded onto Facebook, whereas news of a death was generally accompanied by just one or two pictures, and so responses had to be centred

on these posts alone. A couple of distinct patterns were observed on such posts. Either the extended family would all group together on the Facebook comment section of the user who posted the news (normally one of the children) and express condolences; or, if the deceased was well known in their family circles, several members of the extended family would repeat such memorialising posts on their profiles, thus symbolically expressing their mourning. Condolences are also expressed on the family WhatsApp group.

While there might just be a general update on the time of cremation on Facebook, a more periodic update on such activities appears on the WhatsApp family groups. Selfies with the dead body were generally not encouraged and in a few cases middle-class families had even stopped people from taking pictures of the death ceremony, since they felt it was inappropriate to elicit likes on Facebook for such posts.

The use of social networking tools within family circles (those related by blood or marriage) were discussed above. However, as we saw in the case of Govindan, kinship relationships at Panchagrami extend to friendship circles in the form of fictive kin. As exploring the use of social networking tools within kinship circles is the primary focus of this chapter, the next section deals with those friendship relationships that may be classified as 'fictive kin'.

Facebook and fictive kinship

While communication between friends at Panchagrami is a significant relationship that needs consideration, this section concentrates on a form of intimate friendship that becomes a relationship of fictive kin. It is important to recognise that not all kinship relationships are as intimate as certain friendships, and nor does fictive kinship necessarily translate to an intimate relationship.[49] Some common terms that signify such fictive kinship are used in everyday parlance even between strangers, for example *'Anna'* (older brother)*, 'Akka'* (older sister)*, 'Amma'* (mother) and so on. Just because one person addresses the other in such terms, it does not necessarily mean any kind of close relationship, or even friendship of any sort. While tradition in Tamil Nadu is to refer to even strangers in these kin terms, the use of non-kin terms such as 'Sir' and 'Madam/Mam' also occurs. The case of Govindan, discussed at the start of this chapter, is a typical example of this kind of fictive kin vs. non-kin segregation. However, this section is concerned only with those intimate friendships[50] in which fictive kinship terms are used to address each other.

Understanding the relationships that develop in a certain area dominated by a certain caste is essential in understanding how kin become friends who once again become kin through fictive kinship associations. Take the case of the particular 120-year-old village mentioned earlier in the chapter, one that is a part of Panchagrami and dominated by a caste that has been particularly unfortunately discriminated against historically. Several youngsters in this particular village are vaguely aware that almost the entire village (specifically its long-term residents) was related at some point in the past. However, more confusion arose with the recent conversion to Christianity (though their religions have changed, their caste groups remain the same) and also with a polygyny practised by the older generation. As a result, few know what relationship they share with a neighbour. Apart from a few youngsters, not many can trace relationships. Other youngsters of their particular age group would normally be seen as friends. However, there is a particular system through which everyone addresses each other with a kin term, thus relating to the other as a friend and not as a relative. So the village inhabitants would address each other as brother ('older brother') or 'uncle' or 'brother-in-law', or even as 'co-brother'. The same more or less applies to female friends too. In cases such as this, a parabolic curve of kinship–friendship–fictive kinship exists. Actual forgotten kinship relationships are seen as friendships (in order to mediate confusion) and expressed in terms of fictive kinships. The reason this is discussed is because these are the kin terms with which these people address one another on Facebook, and it has to be understood in order to appreciate them as a social group. A few more examples of fictive kinship as expressed at Panchagrami help to present this kind of relationship more clearly.

Sridhar, aged 26, has been actively involved in the politics of a local caste-based party. Since he helps local young people, he has always been referred to as 'Annan' ('older brother'). Following a command by his local party leader to develop a more aggressive activism and membership drive,[51] Sridhar adopted a mechanism to attract secondary-school boys of his caste from the village into his party through social media. When they meet Sridhar offline these secondary-school students address him as '*Annan*'; even when they address him on Facebook, he is always referred to as '*Annan*'.

Prakash, a 21-year-old college student who lives in Panchagrami, is pretty well known among his neighbourhood peer group of men. His fame comes from his ability to have friended around 30 women (actually strangers) from other Indian states on Facebook. He used to be referred to by his peer group as '*machi*' (brother-in-law), but once they

saw his mastery in friending strangers (particularly women) as friends on Facebook, and his willingness to help his group in doing the same, peers began to refer to him jovially as '*mama*' (which normally means uncle, but is also a slang Tamil term meaning a pimp). Though the peer groups only chat with each other on WhatsApp, the pictures they upload on Facebook always refer (or are tagged) to Prakash as '*mama*'. Although he is in a way a distant uncle to some of his Facebook friends, this is generally forgotten, as the reasons why and how he is actually their uncle are not known. The friendship here extends to fictive kinship, and the group members relate to each other through these terms. As noted some of them are actually related, and may on occasion refer to each other as *pangali* ('co-brother'). However, *mama* seems a far more common term of address for Prakash on social media, as well as in face-to-face conversations offline.

This specific idea of fictive kinship transcends class and caste in Tamil Nadu. However, at Panchagrami, this was much more evident in lower socio-economic classes than it was in the middle class or upper middle class, at least on Facebook. But this is not to say that such fictive kinship is not expressed on Facebook by the middle classes. The difference is the frequency. Birthday/anniversary messages expressing such fictive kinship relationships appear on the timelines of a few middle-class informants. For instance Sunithra, aged 23, writes birthday messages on her Facebook friends' profiles, in which she expresses a fictive kinship relationship.

> *To my sweetest brother, we grew up together and celebrated each other. Here you go with one more. Happy Birthday!*

Though this message from Sunithra appears to be addressed to her actual brother, it is in reality addressed to her close friend, who grew up in the same neighbourhood with her. Another example is the case of Bhaarathi, whose response to a comment to her picture on Facebook from her mother's friend was as follows:

Mother's friend: '*Nice dress Bhaarathi kutty,*[52] *look so beautiful*'
Bhaarathi's response: '*Thanks Aunty. Got this at Express Avenue last week. Amma's*[53] *gift*'

Messages such as these do appear from time to time on several residents' Facebook timelines. Several of them are event-based (especially birthdays or anniversaries).

Posts expressing such fictive kinship relationships appear on the Facebook profiles of lower socio-economic class informants on a daily basis. They are not necessarily event-based, but rather an everyday occurrence. In lower socio-economic classes it is more usually men who post such messages, but in the middle classes it is much more in evidence among women.

A reverse system of fictive kinship also occurs in the middle classes, but is nearly absent in lower socio-economic classes. In this case an actual relative might sometimes be referred to as a friend. It happens particularly in cases of kinship relationships arising from marriage, producing relationship such as sister-in-law, co-sister, brother-in-law and so on. The messages are often event-based; when women write birthday messages, for example, they frequently express such relationships as friendships. For example Saraswathi, a 42-year-old homemaker, received an anniversary message from her sister-in-law that went something like this:

> 'To my Anna and my dearest friend Saras, may God bless you on this wonderful day. Wishing you many more such beautiful days.'

Messages such as this appear on the timelines of many middle-class informants. However, messages that express both kinship relationships and friendships overtly are also evident on Facebook timelines. For example Abhinaya, a 25-year-old IT employee, posted the following message on Facebook to celebrate her aunt's birthday:

> 'Happy Birthday to my dearest Chithi,[54] my all time bestest friend'

In a Tamil society notions of hierarchy govern intergenerational relationships such as those between aunt and niece, or even relationships in the same generation, for instance between sisters-in-law. However, the idea of being friends, as expressed in the above two examples, showcases to the outside world that their relationship is one of equals, based upon a free flow of thoughts rather than ones dictated by hierarchy.

This is not to imply that men do not post such messages. Their messages are similar to those that Abhinaya posts, expressing both the actual relationship and the idealistic relationship that they share with the person. For example on his birthday Sarvesh, a 32-year-old IT professional, had messages such as these on his timeline:

> 'To my kutty thambi[55] ... my life advisor, my friend, Happy B'day da!'
> 'My fav cousin, my 4 am friend, philosopher, guide, wishing u a sooper b'day!'

Sometimes messages such as these clearly state the relationship that this person has with others in his friendship circle on Facebook. But look again at the first birthday message to Sarvesh: though it gives the impression that it was a message expressing kinship and friendship at the same time, it was in reality a message from a sister-like friend of Sarvesh's. It was not a message from a real relative. The second message, by contrast, is a message from an actual cousin. Unfortunately Sarvesh just knows that they are somehow related; he cannot map out how they are related as cousins, so uses 'cousin' as a generic term of reference.

While the frequency of such expressions differs by gender and class, this constant reshuffling of friendship to fictive kinship and kinship to friendship happens often. One reason for it might be the constantly nudging normative idea that comes from Tamil cinema, and the distribution of moralising memes saying how friendship is far more important to people than kinship.[56] These idealistic discourses on friendships encourage people to treat friendships as analogous to close kinship relationships, and vice versa. Significantly, however, in the lower socio-economic classes all friendships appear as fictive kinships, whereas middle-class posts have a tendency to express kinship as a friendship rather than as kinship.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has explored the idea of relationships and intimacy through kinship relationships. Kinship, a significant aspect of anthropology, is also fundamental to the social structures of Panchagrami, influencing not just everyday offline relationships, but also relationships on social media.

This chapter started with an exploration of intergenerational relationships. Here principles of age and the hierarchy of kinship exerted power and influence, ensuring that the choice of communication channels for intergenerational communication within a family was made only within an array of media determined appropriate by the elderly. Such influence on the choice of media was multi-layered, and had to be understood in the cultural context where such firm media attributions existed.

It was evident that in intra-family communication (specifically that of parent and child) communication by voice more or less dominated other forms due to issues of concern and care. For example Lakshmi, the young mother whom we met in Chapter 2, was not able to talk to her children from her workplace, yet she still recorded voice messages and

sent these over WhatsApp to be played to her children. However, one cannot disregard influential variables such as literacy and other skills, as these also played a role in lower socio-economic class families choosing to communicate by voice rather than other forms of communication. Stronger patterns, which support the theories of polymedia and media-multiplexity, existed in middle-class and upper middle-class families where the elderly could afford to choose multiple communicative media. However, even while other factors, such as physical distance, influence the choice of communicative media, when it came to intergenerational relationships all classes generally preferred voice communication to other forms of communication.

In the case of extended family relationships normative ideals, conformity to network expectations and visibility play significant roles in determining the levels of performance that a family might put up on social media platforms such as Facebook, so that the world (a wider network of ready audience) can witness their closeness as a family. This was also becoming apparent on WhatsApp groups of extended family members, where a few close-knit family members performed for the others.

When it came to everyday communication between married couples, secure private channels such as text messages and WhatsApp alternated with voice-based communication. This could also be since the frequency of communication between married couples was much higher than intergenerational communication. A sense of mutual understanding was evident in the partners' choice of the best way to communicate, selecting from an appropriate array of media. This was also influenced by the general cognisance of the time and space occupied by the other partner, and awareness of what media were available to them.

While there were cases where visibility and the normative ideals of a married couple influenced performance in such relationships, their rationalisation of such performance as a strategic accumulation of memories for the future is worthy of note. Though such overt posts of communication between married couples do take place on Facebook, displayed for a wider network to see, they were strategic, seeking to portray only those contributing to the ideal. Meanwhile the supposedly mundane everyday communication took place privately on WhatsApp or through text messages.

The chapter has also explored relationships with siblings across the social classes. When this is correlated with the earlier discussion of gender and communicative media, it becomes clear that while for the middle classes (more so in the upper middle classes, where women are allowed to use social media), sibling bonding can happen even when

women are single, in the lower socio-economic classes (and in the lower middle classes) this presents a challenge. Younger, unmarried women from these backgrounds are not allowed access to primary communicative media, and thus are restricted from the use of social media. Sibling bonding over social media for this class thus only happens after the women are married or enter employment, when they are able to have their own phones. In sibling relationships that involved a sister, communication seemed to occur with a higher frequency, irrespective of the social class.

Finally this chapter moved to view friendships from the point of view of fictive kinships, as kinship was the primary focus of this chapter. A significant aspect of this was the ways in which fictive kinship and friendships alternated with each other across classes, and how they find themselves expressed on Facebook. While those from lower socio-economic classes viewed all friendships in their area as fictive kinships, the middle class alternated between actual kinship, fictive kinship and friendship – sometimes viewing and expressing actual kinship as friendship and vice versa. It was apparent that at times, when the nature of relationships was more fluid, there was a tendency to move in a parabolic curve from kinship to friendship to fictive kinship.

Also apparent in these examples was a neat case of polymedia, where communication within certain relationships transitioned between platforms. In Chapter 3 we saw visual communication conforming to network expectations. In this chapter we observed that even the apparent use of multiple platforms, and the nature of communication over platforms themselves, are centred on the expectations of the network that one maintains. Also significant were the perceived notions of Facebook as a mass media meant for external communication and WhatsApp as a more private platform. Another layer of division as public and private emerged even within WhatsApp, based on the social circles maintained on it. While certain WhatsApp groups are therefore treated as public, as on Facebook, others are treated as private. Also apparent from family communications is a clear strategic pattern of transaction, oriented towards different networks on WhatsApp conforming to their expectations.

Within the kinds of communication that occur between various kinship relationships across classes, there exists an inherent sense of belonging to a much larger social group. This may be the younger generation, negotiating their own media preferences in contrast to those of older family members or parents. Restrictions may be imposed by this group, who sincerely believe that their motivations are just to

protect and secure the best interests of their daughters by telephoning them; even brothers who do not allow their sisters access to certain media would claim concern for their safety. Another aspect of communication between groups is the complex, parabolic curve of kinship, friendship and fictive kinship. By alluding to the concerns of maintaining an ideal family, in a way users actually conform to the ideals and expectations of the much larger social group in which they are embedded. The study of kinship, and communication of different relationships on social media, is thus a reflection of a much larger society.