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Privacy concerns grow in India

By Rama Lakshmi, [E-mail the writer](#)

NEW DELHI — The Indian government's recent announcement that it taps nearly 300 new phones every day has sparked a debate about privacy in a country that traditionally views such concerns as an ugly offshoot of Western individualism.

Indians tend to stress identities of family and community over any others. But a growing desire for privacy and what many say is a government assault on it are creating tension in this nation of 1.2 billion people.

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India, which is on track to become the world's most populous country by 2025, hopes to transform its demographic boom into an engine for growth, but the country faces many challenges, including educating its young.

The reasons for the shift, experts say, include changing family structures and lifestyles among the urban middle class, a mass media explosion and the Internet, all coming just as the government has begun tapping more phones and using surveillance cameras in more public places.

India's constitution does not guarantee a right to privacy, nor does the country have a [data protection law](#) to guard against the misuse of personal information. But the government has proposed a wide-ranging privacy law, and a coalition of organizations and activists, including the newly formed advocacy group Privacy India, is trying to help shape it. The groups and officials discussed the issue at a national conference in New Delhi this week.

"An enormous amount of information about us is being collected," said Apar Gupta, a partner in the New Delhi-based law firm Advani & Co. who participated in sessions about the law. "Not only are the phones being tapped, but taped phone conversations are leaked to the media and Internet. All this is making people nervous."

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often living with their parents, for example — there has been little insistence on personal space and privacy. Passenger lists, including name, gender and age, are posted on the outside of train cars. Students' names and grades are pasted on the walls of high schools and colleges. Sustained eye contact and staring are acceptable public behavior. And a 10-minute conversation with a stranger can seamlessly lead to questions about salary, caste and religious affiliation.

“We are culturally trained to say, ‘It is not about me.’ But now public discussions about privacy are beginning to come up every time there is an attack on it,” said

Ponnuram Kumaraguru, an assistant professor at the Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology in New Delhi who is conducting a survey on Indians' [perceptions of privacy](#). “What is changing is that Indians are beginning to demand privacy protection for the information they share digitally, even though they are still not able to articulate a demand for privacy within the families and communities.”

In recent years, a flurry of developments has raised concern. They include sting operations conducted by TV news networks targeting politicians; secretly recorded cellphone videos of ordinary people as well as celebrities; and the release of taped phone conversations, usually involving politicians, corporate lobbyists, journalists and businessmen.

Stung by the income tax department's tapping of his phone conversations with a lobbyist, influential businessman Ratan Tata told the Supreme Court in November 2010 that his right to privacy had been violated and asked that the broadcast and publication of the conversations be stopped.

A year ago, lawmaker Rajeev Chandrasekhar proposed a law to strengthen privacy laws that would seek to protect people from being “blackmailed or harassed or their image and reputation tarnished” by the misuse of digital technology.

“Every individual has the right to a private life, and anyone seeking to abuse that must be brought to account in law,” said Chandrasekhar, who is waiting to discuss his bill in parliament. “The laws must keep pace with changing technology and social norms.”




Even a [government program to collect biometric and personal details](#) of more than 600 million Indians by 2014 — and link the database to welfare programs, banks and hospitals — has come under a cloud after a parliament panel and activists questioned the exercise in the absence of an effective privacy and data protection law.

The government also is working to integrate 21 databases — including information on taxes, travel, and Internet and phone use — into a national intelligence network. But critics say the country lacks the means to regulate intelligence agencies and protect citizens' rights.

But perhaps the biggest concern here is government surveillance of ordinary citizens.

Not unlike in the United States after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, India has undertaken a massive overhaul of its surveillance capabilities since attacks in Mumbai in November 2008. India has bought a variety of interception equipment, officials say, and has given its intelligence agencies unlimited powers to bug phone calls and e-mail.

Last week, Mumbai officials announced that they plan to blanket the city in London-style

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surveillance by adding 6,000 new cameras to the existing 400.

“We understand we need it for security, but they will be collecting horrendous amounts of data about our lives,” asked N.S. Nappinai, a Mumbai-based lawyer who favors making the government privacy bill tougher. “What will they do with it? Who will keep it? And for how long? Are we going to be policing the police all the time?”

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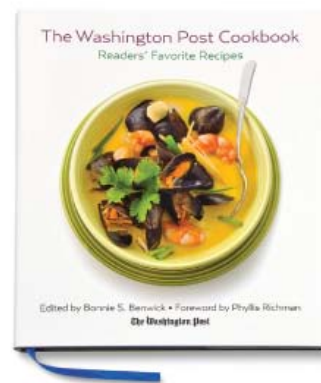
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