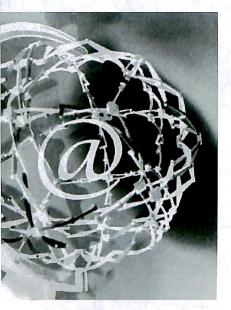# Mediated Cultures

The imposition of information and communication technology (ICT) in the cultural sphere has transformed the diversity of lifeways into a homogenised global lifestyle. For the advocate of cultural diversity, this is a great danger that is rooted in the destruction of multiple histories in submission to either the Western modernist's grand narrative or the post-modernist's undermining of historical and cultural meaning. The dominant Western account of ICT emphasises the convergence of two histories: computing and communications. The critical divergences between the nature of computing as a knowledge-creating process and of communications as the transfer of information have been obliterated. Knowledge diversity is obliterated in favour of a global value-added cultural commodity that is transferable from one place to another.

Three articles relate some of the choices to make and courses of action to take in working for development amid the "information society": "From Horse Mail to Intimations of E-Culture" by Shuddhabrata Sengupta and Monica Narula; "Defining the Zone" by Samirah Alkasim; and "Culture Is Dead, Long Live Culture" by Sushma Joshi.

From "Horse Mail" to Intimations of E-culture:
A Profile of Sarai-CSDS as a Space for Communicative Intersections[1]

by Shuddhabrata Sengupta and Monica Narula

What does "horse mail" have to do with electronic culture or e-culture, and what do both of these have to do with the word *"sarai"*?

What does contemporary e-culture have to do with the history of popular cinema, the economy of music remixes, or the aesthetics of poster art?

Why should people concerned with thinking about the uses of information technology for development and community empowerment bother about creativity and intellectual property?

How can young people in working class neighbourhoods, in a South Asian city, who have little or no English in their cultural repertoire, challenge digital inequalities? What can computers, the internet, the nuts and bolts (or the bits and volts) of the electronic community come to mean in their lives?

What does censorship have to do with surveillance and copyright?

What does free software have to do with research into the evolution of language forms and the shaping of popular literary cultures in Hindi?

If this is the sort of questions that puzzle, intrigue or attract you, and you have a curiosity about the dense cultural

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matrices and technological realities of South Asian cities, chances are that the pursuit of your enquiries will take you to the doorsteps of a space in Delhi called "Sarai." Sarai, a programme[2] of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi, initiated in 2000, encompasses an inter-disciplinary research programme, a platform for critical reflection, a screening space, a convivial context for online and offline conversations, and a media lab.

Sarai (the space and the programme) takes its name from the *caravansarai* for which medieval Delhi was well known. The *caravansarai* was a place where travelers could find shelter, sustenance, and companionship; it was a tavern, public house, meeting place, destination and point of departure, place to rest in the middle of a journey. Even today, the map of Delhi carries on it at least 12 place names that include the word "*sarai*." In medieval South Asia, *sarai*s developed into a network of staging

posts for an extensive system of communication that used horses and itinerant human couriers. Messages passed the length and breadth of the South Asian subcontinent from Kandahar and beyond in the far north-west, bordering Afghanistan and the Baluchistan deserts in the west to the Irrawaddy basin in Burma in the east, and from the Tibetan plateau in the north to the far southern tip of the Deccan peninsula. The successive cities of Delhi and the *sarais* of Delhi acted through centuries as hubs or junctions where many routes intersected. This dense network of communication was a key crucible in which the languages, cultures, trading practices and social mores that characterise South Asia today were formed. *Sarai*s were spaces that were as hospitable to signals and to acts of communication as they were to the people who transmitted them.

The Sarai initiative interprets this sense of the word "*sarai*" to mean a very public space, where different intellectual, creative and activist energies can intersect in an open and dynamic manner to give rise to an imaginative reconstitution of urban public culture, new/old media practice, research, and critical cultural intervention. This framework emerges from our understanding in the Sarai programme that digital media, e-cultures, and telecommunication networks need to be seen as enmeshed and emerging from within the history of communicative practices in South Asia.

Our efforts at Sarai in these past five years since it began is to create an ongoing context for intellectual and critical engagement with the contemporary urban moment in South

Asia. This necessarily includes an investment in thinking about, researching and actively practicing e-culture.

E-culture has been seen as the "integration of information and communication technologies into the primary processes of production, presentation, preservation and (re)utilization of cultural expression. But it would be worthwhile to ask what the characteristic features of e-culture in South Asia can be, given the history and cultural dynamic [sic] of our societies."[3]

The cities of South Asia have been important social laboratories for information and communication technology (ICT) at least since the middle of the nineteenth century. Here, we mean ICT to be the technological means that facilitates information exchange and dispersal—a domain much wider than a mere clubbing together of computers and other digital media. New mechanical printing technologies, photography, cinema, and the parallel histories of telegraphy and the radio, and, later, television—all of these "technocultures" created new publics and new forms of communication.

Consequently, urban spaces in India have long been spaces of high information density, and this is what made the transition to e-cultures of communication at the popular, or street, level at least, a relatively simple matter of adapting to new machines and techniques and not a complex and culturally fraught process of negotiation between different ways of ordering meanings and cultural expression. In fact, one could hazard a guess that, at least at street level, there has been much greater ease of usage of new ICT than has probably occurred within the circles of Indian cultural elites (barring specifically technocratic elites).

Take, for instance, the proliferation of internet-based communication practices in urban (metropolitan as well as small town) India. Today, India has the distinction of having the fastest rate of increase in e-mail addresses, among other countries. This clearly indicates that e-culture, at least at the level of basic communicative practices, has become firmly entrenched in the realities of contemporary India.

We see a vast array of practices—such as e-mail and chat (increasingly using Indian languages and their fonts); internet telephony; informal p2p file sharing of music, movies, software and other media; and the integral link that street corner digital publishing and image processing practices create between neighbourhood studio photographers; digital camera technology; and image files of "backdrops"—downloaded from the internet, or circulated from hand to hand in CDs.

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. . . rather than in big dams or even in a cyber-elite's notion of what it takes to be with the times, it is in the pirate modernist's street-level creativity that modernity lives and breathes in Indian cities and towns. At Sarai, it is in this terrain that we see the foundations of an e-culture that is particularly responsive to the realities of South Asia.

It is important to understand that access to computers and the internet in Indian cities is no longer confined to a wealthy elite. Access takes public forms, and these forms, for sound business reasons, have to be inexpensive and ubiquitous. It is, in fact, cheaper and easier to access the internet in Indian cities than in most western cities. However, this is a different culture of usage. It takes place in cyber cafés, and small shops that offer a range of digital services like printing, desktop publishing, photocopying, music copying, and photography. The arena of this plethora of practices is not in the privacy of people's homes, because computer ownership is still relatively low. However, low ownership is by no means an index of low access. Cyber cafés and digital service shops dot every neighbourhood in all Indian big cities and in an increasing number of small towns, and are emerging as important places for young people from non-elite backgrounds to meet and gather. It is much more expensive and difficult to get online, or to work with a computer, say, in a street in Paris, than it is in the street

of any Indian city. Increasing wireless access, the marriage of mobile phones to computers, and the decreasing costs of laptop computers and other hand-held devices will only accelerate this phenomenon.

Moreover, in the streets and in backyard workshops all over South Asia, there has emerged a creative, improvisational culture of "making do," of adaptation, of street-smart problem solving, of creative mechanics and everyday inventiveness with recycling, and of transformations of existing technologies to solve day-to-day problems of cities with failing public transport systems; highly unequal water, electricity and telecommunications systems; and a general deterioration of public infrastructure. As urban structural crises intensify, it is but natural that people will turn to communicative practices (which they will themselves engender) to draw attention to their problems, to communicate common concerns, and to create the basis of networked community action.

This culture of improvisation, marked by its tense relationship to the law, is one of the most creative and energetic technocultures in the contemporary world. Often described as *jugadu* (Make Do) by its practitioners, it has evocatively been characterized by theorist Ravi Sundaram (one of the initiators of the Sarai programme) as a culture of "pirate modernity." It could be argued that rather than in big dams or even in a cyber-elite's notion of what it takes to be with the times, it is in the pirate modernist's street-level creativity that modernity lives and breathes in Indian cities and towns. At Sarai, it is in this

terrain that we see the foundations of an e-culture that is particularly responsive to the realities of South Asia. Other than an investment in researching and reflecting on informal and improvisational e-culture, we are also deeply invested in FLOSS (free, *libre* and open source software) initiatives. Sarai has an active and ongoing FLOSS research programme[4] that is interested, above all, in localisation, pedagogy and critical social usage of FLOSS products and processes.

When we founded Sarai, the challenge before us was to cohere a philosophy marrying this range of concerns to the vision of creating a lively public space where research and media practice could flow into one another. We were interested in how the urban space we were located in would begin to reveal itself to us as a dense communicative network. As a matrix (as crowded as the streets of the old quarters of our city) within which new and old technologies and practices of communication, ranging from print to photography to film and the internet, were able to constantly renew a dynamic media ecology, which, though it was besieged by the predatory power of powerful state and corporate media interests, was also kept alive by a technologically astute street-level creativity in the making and transmission of signs, through informal appropriations of new media forms. Sarai was the focus of our desires to understand and intervene in this space of contested meanings and transmissions.

This imperative to understand contested meanings and transmissions within the spaces opened out by e-culture has taken several inter-related forms. It has, first of all, taken the shape of an intensive research project called "Publics and Practices in the History of the Present" (PPHP)[5] that studies how different media spaces, networks and markets (cinema, cable, telephony, assembled computers and informal software markets) mark and shape the urban fabric.

Furthermore, since 2001, Sarai has supported more than a hundred independent research and practice projects[6] proposed by artists, media practitioners, researchers, and academics from all over India. These have included support for India's first published graphic novel; an audio-novella about growing up in depressed industrial suburbs; a cluster of new media art projects; oral histories of popular music; reflections on the public life of cities besieged by violence; research into the histories of free software, radio, early cinema, popular music, photography, printmaking; and the media representation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities in South Asia.

We have also invested greatly in creating resources to enable a vibrant digital culture in Hindi and other Indian languages.[7] This has meant not only content generation but also working on creating open source support structures for the localisation of desktops and support to the creation of fonts and keymaps for Indian languages.

All of these activities take place within the framework of an expressed commitment to enriching the public domain, and contributing to the "commons" of contemporary

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intellectual and cultural life. The research projects feed into an evolving archiving impetus, and the reflective energies are channeled into a series of regular and occasional publications in English and Hindi. These publications include the *Sarai Reader Series*, which by now have acquired an international reputation for their foregrounding of key debates and discussions on themes—such as "The Public Domain," "The Cities of Everyday Life," "Shaping Technologies," "Crisis/Media," and "Bare Acts"—by a large body of international scholars and writers. These publications, which are produced and designed in-house at the Sarai Media Lab, are all available for free access and download from the Sarai website.[8]

The practice of making all our textual materials (books, essays, documents, texts) available for free download is indicative of the seriousness with which Sarai views the task of creating a commons of e-culture that is rich in quality, diverse, and responsive to

changing realities. The discursive field around Sarai also includes a family of lists, including the "Reader List" and the "Commons Law List," which are vibrant communities of discussion and debate.[9]

The research processes, reflections and investigations into contemporary realities animated by Sarai are complemented and echoed by a series of community-based interventions and creative processes. An instance of this resonance is the "Cybermohalla Project."[10] The "Cyber Neighbourhood" project generates a long-term creative and interpretative context for digital reflection on the urban condition through a sustained engagement with working class young people associated with media labs seeded by us in collaboration with an NGO, Ankur. The labs are equipped with free software-enabled computers and situated in underserved areas of Delhi.

The practitioners associated with Cybermohalla—many of whom are school dropouts, some of whom work in factories, and all of whom live in conflict-ridden, tough neighbour-hoods—create digital works, animations and installations, write texts, publish wall magazines and edit books, and maintain discussion lists and blogs, in partnership with practitioners and interlocutors in Sarai. This practice embodies the creation and sustenance of a specific form of self-reflective and highly articulate urban e-cultural practice to which the Sarai initiative has given rise.

The expressions that have emerged from the project as books, print objects, installations, and performances are testaments to the creative vitality of a

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group of young people living in circumstances of extreme inequality and systematic violence. What they do signals to the immense social possibilities that lie in the exploration of an ethic that privileges a diversity of articulations over communicative closure. Today, the Cybermohalla Project is an inspiration for a growing number of groups and initiatives in different parts of the world working in media and ICT projects within a social dimension.

An environment animated by the presence of e-culture can find fruition through continuous public engagement. In the end, any form of cultural practice, be it analog or electronic, requires the rendition of ideas, interactions, discourses, and processes into public forms. The Media Lab[11] at Sarai is the conduit through which all the various processes at Sarai find public rendition. This Media Lab is the continuous and everyday workshop of e-culture at Sarai. Here, a team of practitioners creates new media works; designs web and print content; produces installations, books, and CDs; and animates the design/media

processes of different Sarai projects. The Sarai Media Lab is a space that has enabled the production of works that have traveled to prestigious international contemporary art venues, such as Documenta 11; the Walker Art Centre; the Generali Gallery in Vienna; Ars Electronica in Linz; the Itau Cultural Centre in Brazil; and the Venice, Liverpool and Taipei Biennales. At the same time, the Media Lab remains attentive to the design of low-cost materials like stickers, posters, broadsheets, magazines, and radio programmes that are situated in local and community contexts. It is also a site for experimental testing and research into usage conditions of various free and open source software dedicated to media and communications practice.

Last year, the Media Lab produced "The Network of No_Des"—an interpretative hypertext collage that grew out of collaborations between the practitioners of the Media Lab and the researchers of the PPHP project at Sarai.[12] Research field notes and juxtapositions between various found media material constitute the raw materials of this work, which was exhibited at ISEA 2004 in Tallinn in August this year. The Sarai Media Lab was awarded the UNESCO Digital Art Award for 2004.[13]

"The Network of No_Des" uses "driftwood" from web searches, messages in data bottles, fragments of Hindi and Bengali film scenes, and research notes from Sarai's ongoing exploration of new media street culture in Delhi to present an array of associational possibilities. The work weaves threads that connect basements

in Delhi to depots for migrants in Ellis Island, philosophers to comic book superheroes, lost and found notices to the drying up of a sea, food to forgery, and death sentences to internet matrimonials. The path that takes the visitors as they travel between the nodes in "The Network of No_Des" brings surprises, confirmations and detours that make the visitors come face to face with their own foraging in the undergrowth of the information economy.

The jury for 2004's UNESCO awards based its decision on the fact that the Sarai Media Lab's work combined an imaginative approach with innovative research strategies, a commitment to social and cultural criticism, and a dynamic connection to a sense of public space. In themselves, these are reasons for modest satisfaction as these are precisely the criteria that we at Sarai would consider critical to enabling a dynamic and vibrant mode of e-culture practice.

We are inspired and excited by the challenge of continuing to apply these criteria to everything we do. We may have gone far from the age when horse-borne messengers mapped new territories but as navigators of the electronic and digital landscapes, which intersect the real-world densities of the streets of our city, we are continuously aware of the fact that we are on the way to many discoveries.

That—and for the sake of the adventure it continues to represent, as well as its intimations of the possibilities of new worlds nested within the realities of our times—is what makes us cleave to our work.

Shuddhabrata Sengupta and Monica Narula work with the Sarai programme in India.

Endnotes

1 This article was originally published in 14D Magazine, *November 2004. http://www.i4donline.net/nov04/intersection.asp*

2 http://www.sarai.net/

3 Netherlands Council for Culture. (August 2004). "From ICT to E Culture: Advisory Report on the Digitalisation of Culture and the Implications for Cultural Policy," The Hague.

4 To know more about Sarai's FLOSS projects, see: http://www.sarai.net/freesoftware/freesoftware.net.

5 To know more about the PPHP project, see: http://www.sarai.net/citylives/citylives.htm, and http://www.sarai.net/mediacity/mediacity/htm.

6 To know more about the distributed research network of Sarai, see: http://www.sarai.net/community/fellow.htm

7 To know more about the Hindi Language Projects, see: http://www.sarai.net/language/language.htm

8 To read and download all Sarai Readers, see: http://www.sarai.net/journal/journal.htm

9 For the lists on the Sarai website, see: htpp://www.sarai.net/community/lists_info.htm

10 To know more about the Cybermohalla Project, see: http://www.sarai.net/cybermohalla/cybermohalla.htm

11 To know more about the Sarai Media Lab and other nodes of Sarai, see: www.sarai.net/aboutus/spaces.htm

12 "The Network of No_Des" was created under the ambit of "Towards A Culture of Open Networks—A Collaborative Initiative in Bridging 'Information Society' in Europe and India through Culture and Communication," a network consisting of Sarai-CSDS, Delhi, the Waag/Society for Old & New Media, Amsterdam and the Institute for New Culture Technologies, Vienna (also known as the "Public Netbase"). The network is supported by the EU-India Economic and Cross Cultural Programme. The work is accessible on the website of "Towards a Culture of Open Networks" at http://media.opencultures.net/no_des/

13 The Sarai Media Lab's participation in ISEA 2004 (Helsinki, Tallinn, Baltic Sea) was made possible by support from HIVOS. To know more about Sarai Media Lab at ISEA 2004, see: http://www.isea2004.net/ >.mainframe.php?id=latestnews, and http://www.isea2004.net/mainframe.php?id=hot_sarai. To know more about the UNESCO Digital Arts 2004 prize, see: http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ en.phpURL_ID=2240&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html