

The Sarai-CSDS Fellowship Programme: An Overview and Introduction Shuddhabrata Sengupta

The Sarai Programme at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (henceforth, Sarai) will complete its eighth year in February 2008. For the last almost eight years, Sarai, as part of its commitment towards the enrichment of the public life of intellectual activity in India, has consistently supported independent research projects and inter-disciplinary practice initiatives all over the country. These projects, undertaken by a diverse body of researchers and practitioners in English and Hindi, constitute a growing body of work that has emerged under the aegis of the Sarai-CSDS programme of fellowships for independent researchers and practitioners. To date, this has translated into more than three hundred foundational grants to independent research and practice projects located in more than twenty cities across India. These projects are best seen, not as a set of finished undertakings, but as an array of working questions – still evolving, still walking the streets of different cities, still pushing the boundaries of disciplines, still shaping the forms and methods of diverse creative practices. This book is an attempt to introduce this programme to a wider public.

Key Characteristics: Publicness-Multi-Sited Architecture - Diversity - Endurance

The Sarai Fellowship Programme and its allied activities are a response to the inter-related crises of the enclosure of knowledge and creativity within institutional settings, the isolation of researchers and practitioners, and the difficulties that exist in terms of access to support, sources and a discursive community. Most crucially, the fellowship programme privileges the bridging of the distances that exist between intellectual activity and research on the one hand, creative practices on the other, and the gap between both of these and a wider public.

The programme's innovation consists in putting in place a public architecture for the production, circulation and exchange of knowledge through a combination of physical and virtual encounters hosted by Sarai. The public architecture of knowledge generated by the fellowship programme invites and invokes a discursive and creative community into being, provides it with tools and platforms for the public articulation of its knowledge through electronic discussion lists, publication and public events, and creates a publicly accessible repository – a commons of discourse and creative resources – by generating an open archive (the opposite of an enclosed site that prevents access to knowledge, either through intellectual property safeguards, or disciplinary barriers, or both) that indexes and renders the results of the research activities and creative processes enabled by the programme.

Furthermore, this architecture, by virtue of its enduring, networked, multi-sited character, decentralises and democratises the production and circulation of knowledge, dissolves hierarchies based on location (in metropolitan institutions and universities) and disciplinary boundaries, and enables a communicative matrix between researchers and practitioners located at the centres and peripheries of intellectual and cultural life in India. It also brings into being a public dialogue that is not only episodic, but also one that can find opportunities for maturing over a long duration through a publicly generated archive of discussion, debate and reflective practices. The fellowship holders of tomorrow have an additional opportunity, through the enduring nature of the programme, to reflect on the work of fellowship holders of today and yesterday. In this way, the architecture of the programme enables a series of conversations across time, between practices and between different sites and situations of the production of knowledge and culture.

The Mix: Research, Creative Practice, Dialogue, Community

Research and Practice: The Sarai fellowships value and recognise a unique mix of rigorously academic research, sustained theoretical reflection and the pursuit of eclectic, independent and creative impulses that motivate practitioners. It is this mix that gives the programme its unique character.

Space for Critical Dialogue: This mix also generates a very special community of researchers, scholars and practitioners who engage each other in sustained dialogue through lively debate, particularly on discussion lists hosted on the Sarai website. Over the years, this dynamic dialogic community, which has become an integral part of Sarai's growing constituency has helped create a new, refreshingly critical space for discourse and reflection through a combination of online and offline encounters, which are worked into the design of the activities of the fellowship programme.

Unique Discursive Community: Such a discursive community, unique and unprecedented in its dynamism, and in the range of issues that it is prepared to address, would have been unimaginable in the present context in India without the presence of the Sarai Fellowship Programme.

A Journey into Serious Scholarship, Outside the Ivory Tower

In more specific terms, the Sarai-CSDS fellowship programme has been recognised as a pioneering and highly successful initiative in the field of support for independent, interdisciplinary intellectual and creative work in India. It has been cited as 'a journey into serious scholarship without the ideological baggage and the professional rules of academia... , as a space for ...engaging in academic creation without remaining in the ivory tower of specialists that is academia in our present times... , and as an initiative particularly suited to the myriad, hidden forms that give shape to everyday lives in the multifarious, teeming throbbing reality of contemporary India where small urban spaces contain accretions of thousands of sub cultures of all hues' (Studying Anything That you Like , Mid Day,

August 26, 2005).

Partha Chatterjee, writing in *Social Science Research Capacity in South Asia: A Report* commissioned by the Social Science Research Council, New York, says, Sarai began as an attempt to go beyond the academy in trying to understand and respond to the challenges of the new media, particularly the internet and other computer-based media. The programme seeks to bring together media professionals, academics, and community activists to explore the possibilities of exploiting the new media for furthering democratic politics in urban spaces. It also seeks to produce and support solid academic research on media history and to undertake archiving projects to collect materials in this area.

Diversity and Criticality

Emerging Areas of Research: The programme has acquired a reputation, particularly amongst younger scholars and researchers, of an initiative especially suited to the seeding of work in emerging areas, out-of-the-box projects and ideas, as generating a context that is friendly and hospitable to the asking of difficult questions, the articulation of marginalised experiences and reflection on contentious contemporary realities.

Inside/Outside the Mainstream: The fellowships are viewed as providing a crucial element of support particularly to younger scholars and practitioners embarking on innovative projects, especially, but not only in universities, institutions and sites outside the academic mainstream and the circuit of metropolitan cities. The opportunity to produce work for the fellowships in English as well as in Hindi also ensures a rich mix of social backgrounds.

Design for Diversity: The design of the kind of areas and themes that the fellowships offer support for, which the Mid Day report calls the multifarious, teeming, throbbing reality of contemporary India also ensures a high degree of plurality and the spectrum of successful applicants cuts across every indicator of social diversity. This is evident if we consider in some detail, the diversity embodied in the themes of the successful projects and the identity of the fellowship holders themselves.

Women: The breakdown of successful projects demonstrates an excellent gender ratio for the Indian context - 45% of the successful applicants are women.

Non-Metropolitan Spaces: Small towns are well-represented here and almost 20% of successful projects come from outside the four main metropolitan cities.

Minorities and Disadvantaged Groups: We have a substantial number of fellows from religious minorities, Dalits, ethnic minorities and other disadvantaged groups. This is not because of a tokenism of inclusion, but

because applicants from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds see the Sarai Fellowships as a safe, non-patronising and hospitable context for the pursuit of their enquiries, without any pressure or expectation to conform to either a majoritarian, culturally dominant and hierarchical conception of identity, or a universalising tendency to deny difference, or the pressure to affect an intellectual or cultural performance of the self simply in terms of minority representation.

Situations of Conflict: Projects supported by the fellowships include those that are embedded in the difficult conditions of Jammu and Kashmir and the North Eastern States of India where endemic conflict and violence have severely affected intellectual and cultural life.

Queer Applicants and Themes: The fellowships have also consistently supported work by queer scholars, activists and practitioners.

Hindi Fellowships A large number of proposals are submitted in Hindi, and more than sixty projects have been successfully completed in Hindi. The fellowship programme has also generated an active online community in Hindi.

Disability: The Sarai fellowships are unique in having supported work by disabled scholars and practitioners, not only because they were disabled, but because the areas that they were working in, deserved support.

Commitment to Criticality and Creativity: While the fellowships have maintained a consistently high degree of social diversity, the commitment to diversity has not required any compromise with the quality of work and enquiry.

An emphasis on innovative methods of doing research and on deepening the intellectual content of creative cultural practice has led both to new approaches to the generation of knowledge and a higher degree of risk-taking. The dialogic character of encounters between fellows, and between fellows and Sarai, has ensured a high degree of critical responsiveness. Affirmation, within the framework of the fellowship, from peers is accompanied by a robustness of questioning, feedback and debate which takes place within an ethos of intellectual hospitality. Care is taken, especially on the part of the custodians of this dialogic process at Sarai, to ensure that this process does not degenerate into an inquisitorial mode of functioning, competitive one-upmanship, intellectual exhibitionism or jostling for its own sake. This encourages fellows to develop a critical attitude towards their own enquiry, and to sharpen the edge of the questions that they ask in the course of their project without feeling threatened by the necessity of having to do so. The fellows who make use of this opportunity find that they are enabled through this process to refine, deepen and extend their enquiries and creative processes. The challenge to find engaging methods of presentation and public rendition also ensures that

researchers and scholars are motivated to think in creative ways. Conversely, creative practitioners find it possible to raise the intellectual bar of the processes that they undertake because of the high level of discussion and debate that takes place during the duration of the fellowship.

While the fellowships have maintained a consistently high degree of social diversity, the commitment to diversity has not required any compromise with the quality of work and enquiry. Rather, a high degree of diversity has brought with it an intense criticality and has opened up opportunities for tackling difficult questions, and venturing into risky terrain within a context that is hospitable to the articulation of difference. The support provided by the fellowships goes a long way in helping researchers and practitioners produce a body of work that can then attract the attention it deserves, either through publication and production opportunities, or through further assistance for research from more established grant making bodies.

The Sarai fellowships thus function as an incubator, catalyst and laboratory for new and original work in a variety of areas.

The Fellowship Programme's Impact on the Cultural/Intellectual Scene in India

Sarai's impact on the intellectual and creative scene in India propelled by the fellowship programme and allied activities has been both deep and sustained. Issues such as the Public Domain, Intellectual Property and its Critics, Technology and its Cultures, Politics of Information, Surveillance and Censorship and the transformation of urban spaces, which were either marginal or low on the agenda of discourse in the intellectual milieu have become fairly significant as a result of the programme's in-house research as well as the activities of a widely distributed network of researchers enabled by it. Sarai's commitment to FLOSS (free, libre and open source software), which has taken the form of a pioneering category of FLOSS fellowships has led to creative and multi-functional software projects and a wider public acceptance of alternatives to rigid intellectual property as the only model for cultural production, at least in India.

A new interdisciplinary ethic of practice has become much more significant as a result of Sarai's distributed research network. There has been a modest increase in the level of publicly available support for independent artistic and research projects through fellowships, as the Sarai fellowships model has found takers in the case of other initiatives and organisations working within the South Asian context. Further, the support extended by Sarai through fellowships and residencies to practitioners and collaborative partnerships with the Sarai Media Lab have brought forth dividends. These have been in terms of an increased international visibility for contemporary art from South Asia, as well as the emergence (within the Indian context) of new forms such as the graphic novel, media installations, sound art, tactical media forms, and collaborations between artists

media practitioners and software programmers.

The Sarai-CSDS Fellowship Programme: Context, Background, Reasons

One of the motivations behind the initiation of Sarai lay in our understanding that the climate of higher education and research in India, particularly with reference to Urban Studies, Media Studies (including Cinema & Television Studies, New Media Studies and Journalism) Architecture, Contemporary Art and Popular Culture was severely handicapped by the traditional disciplinary framework of the prevailing academic ethos in universities, research centres and institutions of higher learning. We were dissatisfied with the restrictive modes of conceptualisation and practice then prevalent within the universities and the media; we felt a general unease at the stagnation underlying the absence of a critical public culture.

Our challenge (and desire) was to link this range of conceptual concerns to the collaborative vision of creating a lively public space where research, media practice and activism could flow into and sustain each other, and for this vision to carry the continual potential of expansion and emulation into self-sustaining networks beyond us.

Cross-Disciplinarity and the Construction of a Public Architecture of Knowledge

The starting point for the building of the fellowship programme's network is Sarai's central concern to stimulate dialogue across disciplines. Conventionally, this is understood as a productive dialogue across academic specialties. This remains one of our aims too: without naively trying to collapse the boundaries between disciplines, we wish to encourage the probing of their limits and their ability to ask new questions from other frames of engagement. However, we have also tried to take this further by bringing together different styles of engagement with an even greater variety of actors in the contemporary world - this is what we would call the dialogue of the researcher and the practitioner. This is an emerging trend, common to many alternative and independent initiatives across the world, where it is no longer strange to find, as a preliminary example, trained academics as producers at art festivals and artists engaged in critical discussions at academic conventions. Furthermore, this talk across boundaries is also an important, and distinctive, feature of the new media.

New Forms of Public Knowledge

Sarai has begun to take this further by drawing into this discussion a wide range of both professionals and enthusiasts (apart from researchers, intellectuals and artists), including activists, lawyers, nurses, software programmers, bank employees, designers and cartoonists, who are allowed to be both the subjects as well as the producers of knowledge in the public domain. In other words, we mean to encourage not just public intellec-

tuals, who might be formally-trained scholars wishing to find and create more publicly accessible forms and platforms for their research, but a much wider architecture of public knowledge which is created and critically engaged with by its own subjects. In this schema, thought itself becomes a vital category of action - rather than importing developmental models that seek to improve the quality of livelihoods on behalf of marginalised populations, we believe in also fostering reflection and creative intellectual input in a non-imposing but non-patronising way directly from the marginalised. Towards this end, Sarai's early insistence that the projects under the fellowship programme may be undertaken in both Hindi and English, and its vital, wider, continuing programme of cross-translation, has helped to address educational hierarchies and boundaries, especially in the Northern Indian context.

The hospitality that the programme offers to a wide range of backgrounds and experiences has meant that some people have availed of opportunities to consolidate their practices and disciplinary positions even as others have made full use of the intellectual and creative liberty that the programme offers to strike out into new territories and explore new forms of practice and research for themselves. This has resulted in a combination of thorough and grounded projects along with activities and initiatives that are more experimental, that embrace risks and are not insecure about having to be innovative. Academics have undertaken creative projects. Artists have enjoyed getting to grips with archives and research processes. Fellows from activist backgrounds have been able to go beyond simple polemic to significantly deepen their understanding of the issues they are working on. A number of fellowship projects have gone on to achieve a public life of their own beyond the framework of Sarai.

Highlights of the Fellowship Programme Until Now

As of now, several Sarai research grants are feeding into widely-received films, books, academic articles and art projects. It is possible to get a sense of the range of areas that are being addressed if we undertake even a cursory survey of just some of the projects that have achieved maturity over the years. They include - an exhibition of the photographic idiom of street digital photo studios by curator Nancy Adajania, documentation and development of fonts and typefaces through studying urban signage by Vishal Rawlley, a documentary film on women boxers by Pankaj Rishi Kumar, India's first graphic novel by Samath Bannerjee, studies in law and sexuality by Arvind Narrain, monographs on Dalit cultural history by Sharmila Rege, photographic documentation projects and ethnographies related to Cinema spaces by Shahid Datawalla, Zubin Pastakia, Mamta Mantri and Madhavi Tangella, a performance oriented feminist art work by Jasmeen Patheja, free software for the online collation of news reports from newspapers by Subramanian Sastry, open source localisation of computer software in Indian languages by G. Karunakar, a play by Ram Ganesh Kamatham, non-fiction writing by

Aman Sethi on the experiences of the urban labouring poor, historical studies of the literature of partition in Bengal by Debjani Sengupta, restoration and cataloguing of rare early recordings of Hindustani Classical Music by Sanjay Ghosh, archival collections of cinema posters by Madhujā Mukherjee, a collection of Islamic calendar art by Yousuf Saeed, studies of popular vernacular crime fiction by Deb Kamal Mukhopadhyay, oral history recordings of lives within the left by Taran Khan, musicological studies of the music of the Indian People's Theatre Association by Sumangala Damodaran and urban ethnography research blogs by Zainab Bawa. A number of projects have looked at the world of childhood, the experiences of women in urban spaces, questions of sexuality, histories of conflict and many neglected and marginal spaces of everyday life in small towns and suburban contexts. Several of these projects, and many more have been introduced and highlighted in this book.

Ex-fellows who had been previously isolated in their practice and interests have been able to both benefit from and build on various overlapping networks, in India and abroad; many have continued to dialogue with each other and to mentor, encourage and invite new applicants and fellowship recipients.

In many cases, the confidence acquired as a result of working for the fellowship programme has been a turning point in the career of young scholars and practitioners, particularly from non-metropolitan backgrounds.

Evolution and Growth

The fellowship programme has been able to develop, reflect on, and stabilise a strong working process design for advertisement, selection, feedback, and final presentation through workshops. All these aspects are now working smoothly; in addition, the emphasis right from our call for proposals has been that fellows collect a variety of materials for our archive, at a bare minimum. As a result of this, each year, we have received fascinating and exciting material in a variety of formats for our burgeoning archive. This material is now available to future researchers who may wish to build on it, or use it as a starting point for further investigation and analysis.

Conclusion: Formal Innovation/ Public Rendition

We have repeatedly argued that a dynamic public culture of research and creativity can only be fostered in a climate of infinite possibility and engagement, and an emphasis on how a variety of research modes and forms of public rendition can be made to speak through, against, and with each other. Sarai fellows have been encouraged to experiment with a variety of forms of presentation in the spirit of adventure and exploration. This has endowed the programmatic aspects of the Sarai-CSDS fellowships with a uniquely creative personality. We are recognised as being the sort of space that especially supports creative and out-of-the-box intellectual

activity and maintains, at the same time, a deep commitment to the idea of the publicness of intellectual life and task of democratisation of cultural activity. We are seen as being a space for initiatives and processes that are discerning without being elitist, democratic without being populist, and critical without being pedantic.

We are eager to see what direction is taken by the initiatives that have been seeded by this programme. We are acutely aware that currently, intellectual and cultural activity in South Asia desperately needs a climate of autonomy, a third space that is free from the seductions of the market as well as from the blandishments of the state.

The Sarai Fellowship program, located within the capacious intellectual space provided by CSDS, has only been able to scratch the surface in terms of the multitude of interesting ideas and projects that are out there, that need support, encouragement, a critical discursive community, institutional anchorage and concrete solidarities of practice. This requires the patient building of a space and a network that is hospitable and generous towards research, independent artistic activity, and media practices - that can be carried out in a variety of languages, and in diverse contexts, all over India and South Asia. We know that such a space can only be built with civic support that emerges out of a general, public commitment towards the independence and criticality of contemporary culture. We hope that this book, by pointing towards the possibilities opened out even by a modest structure of support towards such activity, can act as an invitation to everyone concerned with the state of intellectual life and cultural practice in India, and in South Asia, to come forward and initiate many other such networks of possibility. We also hope that our programme finds all the support and critical solidarity that it needs to carry itself into the future.