

Riding the Unfinished Wave: A Reader's Guide to the Independent Fellows Book

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The Mutating Subject

Research is never a mechanical affair. The moment you think of it as a simple matter of sending questions out into the ether and waiting for the answers to ping back, it becomes not much more than an exercise in tautology or, at best, the successful mummification of a discipline. True research is, by its very nature, about transformation. Everything does, and should change: the field, the objects one collects, the relationships one finds and makes, one's own self and the unanticipated journeys one ends up taking. The worlds change: the cities and the built-up structures, the hierarchies and mechanism of knowledge that we live inside, interact with, assign value to or not and internalise.

Being a witness to such dynamic and overlapping processes of research and practice can change you too. It's startling to think how much I've learnt since I first joined Sarai-CSDS, as senior editor and co-coordinator of the Independent Fellowship programme, in 2004. It's fascinating to think about how my writing being my vocational practice has also changed. The programme was then mid-way through its third year, and had expanded, at that time, to include more than fifty participants. There was a need for a Sarai member who would be exclusively devoted to organising and responding (equally, organising responses) to the multiple flows and sparks of thought that were now being generated on something like a daily basis. Sarai-CSDS, as an organisation, was not merely interested in sponsoring or giving money away to distant, deserving, self-identified researchers and practitioners. Rather, it wanted to, at all times, integrate the fellowship into its very being: its way of doing things, its ideas, its actions, its worldview. I, jumping straight into the deep end, was to be the organiser and editor of this integration process; Smriti Vohra, who joined at the same time, was to be, among other duties, its primary scribe.

The notional agenda of the distributed public research network that underpinned the fellowship programmes demanded not only that knowledge be sourced beyond and outside the ivory towers; it also required that new knowledge (pouring in from all directions, as we shall see) be treated and brought into the discussion on its own equal terms, which is also to say, *without* forcing it out of its own organically meaningful forms, styles and modes of presentation. The point was not just to set out to change the world but, while being firmly grounded in a set of basic governing principles, to be flexible and porous enough to let the world change us.

It was clear that this was going to be my dream job. Yet, at first, this great rushing plenitude of data, ideas, forms and channels could be, like Sarai itself, maddeningly obscure, continually tentative and in formation. I was struck by the idealism that stubbornly prevailed. Things were going to be done in a new way or not at all. No one and no project could be free from critical interrogation. To be smug was to be wrong. Restlessness, fluidity information roaring at the sluice gates to be free was to be the order of the day. There was an emphasis on process over neatly packaged products, which was exactly what the moment demanded, fair enough, but how could one understand what one was doing if one could not accurately describe it? It was a tension between self-description and self-unfolding, that is, between being and becoming. It was an important tension, and one that remains, although by habit one grows used to it and comes to understand the value of it.

Given that *process* was the governing deity of the Independent Fellowship Programme, this tension was (and is) also what each new Independent Fellow had (has) to resolve for her/himself, usually without any certain roadmap or the security straitjacket of requirements placed by a conventional disciplinary programme. What was the objective of the research being done? When does research come to a provisional end? What are the ways in which it might be repurposed? What shape and form would it take? When is it truly ready to sail out into the world? Sarai-CSDS had a few basic requirements: a minimum number of postings to ensure public engagement by the fellow, and to double up as a feedback and reporting mechanism; an archival submission requirement that brought us many gems and ensured the possibility of building on the research; and a final report that was meant to be anything but final. Beyond that, we went on trust and conversation, leaving imagination and courage up to the research fellow, ready to help out with suggestions wherever we could.

Courage was indeed what many independent fellows gained, through their fellowship s tenure or shortly after it. In some cases they had been far from any kind of association with a formal intellectual institutions banker tellers, nurses, journalists, schoolteachers, activists, programmers, writers; in other cases, they had been hemmed in, precisely because of formal intellectual institutions, into going in directions that did not particularly make them happy. They were facing a tangible audience perhaps for the first time, and discovering, startled, that their deeply passionate personal enthusiasms and obsessions produced knowledge that could be of vital interest, argument and surprise to many others. Sarai was a way of learning to speak to the world.

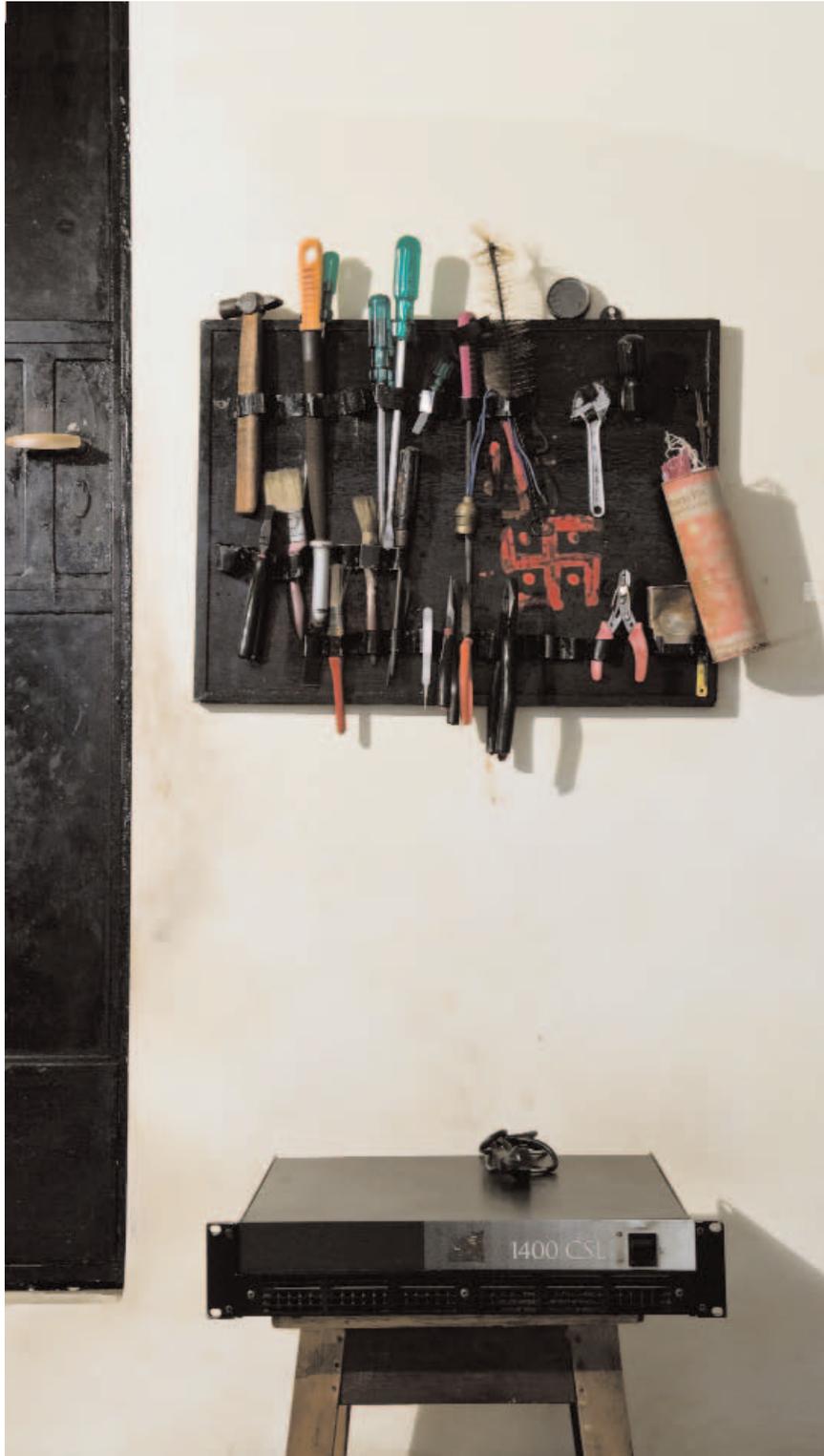
We went very quickly from being excited by the things it had sparked in the world to rushing to keep up with the changes as they happened. Each year, applications piled up in the programme room, full of unexpected gifts the new vibrancy of the Indian metros and, each day, more of the smaller town, the buzz of traffic in between. Sarai-CSDS had been found-

ed to tap the creativity of the new Indian street, yet it is possible that even we were (are) underestimating the degree to which things are changing, for the better and possibly also for the worse. We never knew what would come up and, before we knew it, we had a new set of projects on subjects as far flung science and technology in the NGO world, the cultural anthropology of banking, the political economy of sport, inter-species relations, research towards activist workshops, and more, all from as varied and various a group as I had ever come across, and one that was always willing to reinvent itself: the engineer turned photographer, the poet turned philosopher, the nurse turned writer, the academic turned filmmaker and so on. One year we suddenly got seventeen proposals to do graphic novels, and understood that the genre had steadily been on the rise ever since Samath Bannerjee had first received a Sarai-CSDS fellowship, and that it had now not only captured the imagination of a whole lot of young Indian intellectuals, but that (gasp!) it was even possible to both make money and garner literary fame by publishing in the genre.

Scouring the applications was like searching for the true new pulse and frequently finding it. Independent Fellows set out into the world; all around us new institutions like ours were being founded, networks grew dense and knotted, formed in once-distant towns or in far-flung corners of cities. Soon we were not so alone. Being part of Sarai-CSDS was *still* all about removing oneself from isolation. The street itself had now become far more confident in its ability to produce knowledge, and now India, that country, was changing on an unimaginable scale: a change full of life and vibrancy but, at the same time, sponsoring backlashes, unease, paranoia, attempts at control and surveillance. If, in the early years, the whole political thrust of the research had been to make the marginal visible, visibility itself no longer seemed necessarily desirable. The terrain of research was renewing itself, and the issues as well.

I use the past tense in the previous paragraphs, perversely, probably because nostalgia is inevitable, because we will never return to the homes we left to, eventually, stop during the course of our travels at this sarai. Actually, with no evidence apart from my own perception for this next claim, I might even dare to suggest that nostalgia is a mode that most Indians now easily succumb to.

In truth, all this is happening in the present and will continue to transform, perhaps in ways barely just barely foreseen or prefigured by the wide field of independent researchers you are about to get a taste of in the catalogue section of this book. In truth, the Sarai-CSDS Independent Fellowships will continue, and continue to transform. This book is just a milestone, a marker, a retrospective and a pause to breathe after the first five years of the adventure.



How to Use this Book

To the book, then. We have not been able to include all the previous I-fellows in our sample catalogue; that would be the sort of comprehensive multi-volume tome that might appear, in print or in dispersed digital form, several years hence. Instead, what we have done is make a selection, in our catalogue section, that would give an indication of the range and variety of the projects, as well as showcase some of the projects that we have grown fond of. **A full list of all independent fellowships awarded, with contact emails for the researchers**, appears at the end of this book.

As for the **catalogue** section, we do expect that, as with a book of poems, many lay readers will not read this section from start to finish, but dip in here and there. All the same, as with a book of poems, we have arranged and ordered the pieces for the reader who, in fact, may well desire to read the book from beginning to end, as a kind of fragmentary novel of our times. What we have done in the catalogue is to try to produce a set of narrative arcs, a rough argument in the ordering. Quite certainly, this is, in many ways, an imposed narrative. Other equally valid viral or rhizomatic leaps between entries in different sections of this book can and should be made by active readers. Narratives are always multiple, and connections are endless, they constantly emerge. We have put together the book in one way just so that different projects might spark more connections and, moreover, show each other off. Readers who are interested in a more conventional classification of the texts by discipline, approach, practice, etc., should consult the **thematic index** given at the back of the book. Readers who would like to go straight into fascinating and in-depth representative accounts of individual research could do no better than to read the excerpts from the **interviews** and to follow these up with their complete texts online.

In the mean time, let me provide an overview of the ordering in the **catalogue** section of this book (the luminous individual entries themselves have been written and compiled by Debjani Sengupta), lest the reader ask, What were they thinking? Hopefully this will also give you a sense of where else in the book you might want to turn to now.

Chapter 1— The Mainstream Media and its Peripheries (Describing the Beast – Alternate Universes / Parallel Fantasies – Education, Communion, Policy)

The mainstream media is a term that somehow still manages to make sense today, and refers of course mostly to the big newspapers and the big movies. If this large scale level of the media is sometimes misleading as a focus of what happens, it is certainly true that some of the key big debates of our time from censorship to the ministrations of justice

between the courts and the perceived mobs to the nature of official truth, to all kinds of paranoia about the spread and ubiquity of information are regularly staged as debates about the nature of corporate or state-owned broadcast media. The mainstream media though, has always had strange counteractive effects. What happens is that the very idea of a big media begins to fray at its edges: whether in attempts to think through the spectre of the internet or in small scale but historically persistent imitations of the big format, as with madrasa magazines or duplicate Sholays.

We start with this chapter because most people (including applicants for the fellowship) inevitably think, because we advertise as an organisation doing research on media, that our primary focus must involve content analyses of television or mass-circulation newspapers. One way or another, these particular mediums have managed to hijack and take ownership of the word media, such that even a very experienced or famous blogger might have trouble thinking of her- or himself as part of the media. The time is soon coming however, with the blurring of various kinds boundaries, the frantic cut-and-paste and exchange of text and image and video that we are seeing now, when it may be not be of any use to even have a term such as mainstream media. For now, we may provisionally define what is left of it as aspiring to certain functions of mass education, policy and communion although communion already has interactive connotations that lead us towards the community of the next chapter.

*Chapter 2 — Lived and Mobile Spaces: Communities, Expressions, Structures
(Colony in the City – The Shrinking and Expansion of Public Space – The Train of Dreams)*

At the time of its founding, Sarai-CSDS had already begun to understand that the most trenchant and relevant study of the emerging information economy would not come from endless content analysis of corporate news stories, but from taking a walk down the street, with its happily garish excess of signs, sounds, messages, and communiques, and its constantly innovating and productive life of information. In 2001, the proliferation of STD (Subscriber Trunk Dialing) phone booths became an early figure for the new, more interactive exchange of information as it was being magnetised on the Indian street. Only later would come cable television, VCDs and various kinds of virtual tourism and community. The transition from looking at media to looking at communities became crucial, and that is what this chapter attempts to introduce. What is important is how the networks as they formed and reformed on the street could be compared, or at least put in conversation with, Sarai-CSDS's idea of a distributed research network. One could begin to see that the democratisation of knowledge and information was not a far-fetched or cold cerebral idea but merely a conduction of what was already being claimed in the more and less public spaces of our cities.

The last section of this chapter, then, is entitled *Train of Dreams* in a gesture to these fantasies engendered by both physical and virtual mobility as well as interactivity. Before we can get there, however, we need to back up and understand the spaces in which such expression has emerged, and the history of their formation. The second section looks at this, cautiously noting that, while public space might be claimed in some places, in other areas of the Indian periphery such as Srinagar it has also been shrinking, thanks to the paranoia, discipline and surveillance of the Indian state. That too is a possible future for all of us. Finally, or more accurately firstly, the opening section of this chapter, *Colony in the City*, means to be a partly historical inquiry into the formation of city spaces and the kinds of characteristics and moods that attach to them. I use the word *colony* with a bit of cheek, for I certainly do not mean to signal the dreaded presence of the erstwhile empire, nor particularly to nod to postcolonial studies, but to merely bring to the fore the everyday regimes and constructions that, by a quirk of naming, many of us live in: colonies. In this context, Sanjay Joshi's project on security and security guards is brought at the end of this section as a kind of caution.

Chapter 3—The Singular Lens

There are many fellowship projects that might be enticed into a thematic category only with a great deal of coaxing, and there are some that resist easy definition to the very end. This is hardly an accident; it has been a conscious intention of the selection process. From the whimsical and quirky to the almost painfully felt, the fellowship has always been a welcome home to oddballs and heretics. We mean that in the best way; the city is emblematic of the place where such an individual is supposed, at least in theory, to survive, thrive, find friends and fellow travelers. Moreover, this chapter tries to transition from the plethora of quirky, mostly unsigned expressions on the street to individual researchers who bring a distinct style or aesthetic strategy or more generally, a distinct way of seeing to their work. Of course, we are not for a moment implying that many other projects throughout this book do not also bring a distinct style or way of seeing. This chapter is meant mainly as a representative showcase of such a deeply personal approach.

Chapter 4—The Narrated Life

Like Chapter 3, Chapter 4 is also about the distinctiveness of voice, and sometimes relies on the revelations of autobiography. Of course, we come to all these voices narrating their lives, singly or in groups, after decades of postmodernist suspicion and cynicism, but still, no matter they provide a flood of perspectives far beyond the big men of the old histories. For the researchers in this section have focused deliberately, though never predictably, on lives that the larger histories deemed marginal: the wives, the supporting artists, the session musicians, the outsiders, the everyday people. At the same time, if you were expecting

merely a patronising people's history of oppression, be warned. The voices here insist on their singularity too, and in their narration attempt to move far beyond tropes of victimhood or heroism into realms of consciousness and genuine insight.

Chapter 5—Research into Interventions / Intervention as Research (Crisis in the Everyday – Cures and Preventions)

Does reflection lead to practice or vice versa? Should this chapter come towards end of the book, or is it fine here towards the end? In the context of a programme such as the Independent Fellowship Programme, where does research end and practice begin?

It's hard to say, obviously. If we (Sarai) are sometimes the target of suspicion by old-fashioned academic institutions about whether the people we fund are really well-trained researchers, we are equally the target of suspicion from groups in the activist arena who feel that we intellectualise or aestheticise too much and don't act. We don't have any glib responses to these points of view, except to reiterate that thinking is an important form of doing (and not merely a prelude to it) and, for that reason, there should not be a division of responsibilities between institutions (or people) that think and institutions (or people) that act. This arrangement of entries in chapter 5 is partly meant to signal an exploration of these issues, ranging in its scope from activist agendas to more conventional developmental work to urban policy, and brings together a variety of researchers with multiple identities and responsibilities that might productively mix these questions up.

Chapter 6—The Ghosts in the Archive (The Lost World—The Arrival and the Return)

What has, at various points, kept Sarai from getting either too futuristic or too presentist has been, from the very start, its active interest in the historical roots of the present. I hope it is apt, then, that this chapter ends with projects that, largely speaking, are historical explorations as well as acts of recovery, where we turn back to look upon, and even try to collect from, the little trail of bread crumbs that we have left behind us.

We say ghosts because, when we stop reading the artifacts in historical archives merely as dead information and begin to understand them as presences, as many of these projects actually do, then we begin to move into a new conversational, open and contingent relationship with that history. Artifacts here should apply equally well to texts, although it is true that sound is a more immediate and dangerous transmitter of presence.

This chapter is divided into *The Lost World* and *The Arrival and the Return*, although in truth, loss, arrival and return move not in sequence but are intricately overlapping. Recovering the past in these projects is very often not merely romantic nostalgia or longing, but an active intervention in

the present. This would be evident in a consideration of just four examples of this: the projects of Mahmood Farooqui or Sumangala Damodaran (who have been collecting dead or dying genres to bring them back to self-aware contemporary performance), Yousuf Saeed (who has repurposed his popular collection of posters into, among other things, an entertaining short film that undermines contemporary religious orthodoxies) or Shai Heredia, who is building a new lineage for contemporary experiments with the moving image.

Finally this chapter is also an entreaty to the reader to move on from this book to our archive at Sarai-CSDS, where more in-depth explorations and surprises await. In the mean time, we hope you find this book thought-provoking.

Some Thankses

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