

# "Our" Media City

JEEBESH BAGCHI + RAVI SUNDARAM



*The city exists as a series of doubles; it has official and hidden cultures, it is a real place and a site of imagination. Its elaborate network of streets, housing, public buildings, transport systems, parks, and shops is paralleled by a complex of attitudes, habits, customs, expectancies, and hopes that reside in us as urban subjects. We discover that urban 'reality' is not single but multiple, inside the city there is always an official city.*

**Ian Chambers**

*Popular Culture: the Metropolitan Experience*

*Our age is, in especial degree, the age of criticism, and to criticism everything must submit.*

**Kant**

*Preface to The Critique of Pure Reason*

In many ways Sarai was an effort to think differently about the urban experience.

The 1990's transformed the city of Delhi through a series of shock-like flows: large scale migrations of working people to the region, the spatial expansion of housing colonies, and the new visibility of the houseless on the street. This was also the period of the new globalisation, which introduced an unending flow of commodities, new techniques of reproduction, and our own peculiar mediascape.

Far less than the shiny, seamless mediascape against whom a long line of cultural theorists from Adorno to Virilio inveighed against, "our" mediascape made its presence on the street. The newer forms of urban media included millions of pirate music cassettes, videocassettes and parlours, grey-ware for computers, a new sensibility of software. A large part of the imaginative expansion of the 1990s took place in thousands of local PCOs, cyber cafés, street education outlets, back-alley cassette factories, and large non-legal markets for cultural commodities: Nehru Place, Palika Bazaar, Lajpat Rai Market. These spaces were sleazy and dynamic, dispersed and effective, and reached out to those parts of the city where the distribution networks of the media empires failed to imagine.

This is the 'other' media city, which produced a host of new practitioners of media. Local videographers, PCO-DTP operators, the unstoppable re-producers of cassette culture, a whole new generation of young programmers who never went to the Indian Institutes of Technology, and who learnt new media through a combination of hacking, sharing knowledge with friends, and an occasional visit to the local 'technology institute'. This is the (largely non-legal) culture that made the great expansion of the new media in the 1990s possible, not the state and large industry.

Non-legality is a problem for those who rule the city, for it seems to be a generalised condition of urban experience in India. Small industry, artisan shops, hawkers, weekly street markets all supply the mass of the population, and are also the target of legal violence, displacement using the discourse of cleanliness and order. This is an old trope, stretching from the colonial times, only this time an IT/shopping mall imaginary is held out as the solution to our urban crisis. The problem for our elites is this - the street has a strange way of returning to the city: for others this phenomenon is a critical resource of hope.

This is a media city where ruin and desire, cruelty and possibility, sharp exploitation and the dreams of mobility, the magic of the commodity and new dream worlds of radical programmers all exist side by side.

And here is the problem. Every large-scale techno-cultural transformation has witnessed the paranoia of cultural and political elites. Witness the problems with the print-revolution, the telegraph and the cinema. Just as censorship rules and fear of sexual transgression marked the early phase of the print revolution, so it is with the new media in India. While the state pushes the media empires' vision of an IT utopia happily coexisting with censorship and control, the old cultural elites, battered by the crisis of ideologies: Marxism, secular nationalism and ideology-*kritik* view the new media both with threat and puzzlement. This is a passing phase, the cruelty of transition.

For our part, we want to take the 'other' media city seriously. Not through a spirit of positivity, of an old-style valorisation of 'resistance', or as a discrete space innocent of power. We want to do so through an engagement that is playful and critical, and reflexive and historical in our attempts. That is why Sarai's own programme brings together practitioners and scholars.

Our urban crisis is real. What is also real is that this narrative of the contemporary is only now beginning to unfold, a constellation that is forming.

To write a history of the present is not easy. We want to make a modest beginning by attempting to understand the practice of daily life in the city.