Recycling Modernity

Pirate electronic cultures in India

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Marx, now long forgotten by most who spoke his name but a decade or two ago, once said the following in his brilliantly allegorical essay on the Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte. “Bourgeois revolutions...storm quickly from success to success; their dramatic effects outdo each; men and things set in sparkling brilliants; ecstasy is the everyday spirit; but they are short-lived; soon they have attained their zenith, and a long crapulent depression lays hold of society before it learns soberly to assimilate the results of its storm-and-stress period”.

In Asia, reeling under the current crisis, the moment of ecstasy has long passed, and the ‘long crapulent depression’ is here to stay. India, a poor cousin of the East Asians, tried to ignore the crisis through its traditional west-centeredness. But the crisis has finally arrived in South Asia, the Indian rupee has dived steadily since last year and inflation is raging. But in the area of electronic capitalism, the mood is buoyant. Software stocks have risen 120 percent and soon software will become India's largest export.

Many fables have emerged as a response to the irruption of electronic capitalism in a country where 400 million cannot still read or write. The first fable is a domesticated version of the virtual ideology. In this Indianised version, propagated by the technocratic and programming elite, India's access to western modernity (and progress) would obtain through a vast virtual universe, programmed and developed by 'Indians'. The model: to develop techno-cities existing in virtual time with US corporations, where Indian programmers would provide low-cost solutions to the new global techno-space.

The second fable is a counter-fable to the first and quite familiar to those who live in the alternative publics of the net. This fable comes out of a long culture of Old-Left politics in India and draws liberally from 1960's dependency theory. The fable, not surprisingly, argues that India's insertion in the virtual global economy follows traditional patterns of unequal exchange. Indian programmers offer a low-cost solution to the problems of trans-national corporations. Indian software solutions occupy the lower end of the global virtual commodity chain, just as cotton farmers in South Asia did in the 19th century, where they would supply Manchester mills with produce.

All fables are not untrue, some more 'true' than others. Thus the second fable claims, not unfairly, that most Indian software is exported, and there is very little available in the local languages (ironically the Indian language versions of the main programs are being developed by IBM and Microsoft!).

The alternative vision posed by the second fable is typically nationalist. Here India

would first concentrate on its domestic space and then forge international links. In a sense both fables suffer from a yearning for perfection. While the first promises a seamless transition to globalism, the second offers a world that is autarchic. Both are ideological, in the old, 19th century sense of the term, which makes one a little uncomfortable. "Down with all the hypotheses that allow the belief in a true world", once wrote Nietzsche, angrily.

There is no doubt that for a 'Third World' country, India displays a dynamic map of the new techno-cultures. The problem for both the fables mentioned above is that they remain limited to the elite domains of techno-space in India. This domain is composed of young, upper-caste, often English-speaking programmers in large metropoles, particularly emerging techno-cities like Bangalore and Hyderabad. This is the story that Wired loves to tell its Western audiences, but in a critical, innovative sense most of these programmers are not the future citizens of the counter net-publics in India.

What is crucial in the Indian scenario is that the dominant electronic public has cohered with the cultural-political imagination of a belligerent Hindu-nationalist movement. Hindu nationalism in India came to power using an explosive mix of anti-minority violence and a discourse of modernity that was quite contemporary. This discourse appealed to the upper-caste elites in the fast-growing cities and towns, using innovative forms of mechanical and electronic reproduction. Thus it was the Hindu nationalists who first used cheap audiocassette tapes to spread anti-Muslim messages; later giant video-scapes were used to project an aesthetisized politics of hate. Some of the first Indian web sites were also set up by the Hindu nationalists. To this landscape has been added that terrifying 19th century weapon, the nuclear bomb.

This is an imagination that is aggressive, technologically savvy, and eminently attractive to the cyber-elites. The cyber-elites may be uncomfortable with the Hindu nationalists' periodic rhetoric of 'national sufficiency', but such language is hyper-political and has less meaning on the ground.

Outside the universe of the cyber-elite, is another one, which speaks to a more energetic technoculture. This is a world of innovation and non-legality, of ad-hoc discovery and electronic survival strategies. But before I talk about this, a story of my own.

Some years ago, I was on a train in Southern India where I met Selvam, a young man of 24, who I saw reading used computer magazines in the railway compartment. Selvam's story is fascinating, for it throws light on a world outside those of the techno-elite. Selvam was born in the temple town of Madurai in Southern India, the son of a worker in the town court. After ten years in school, Selvam began doing a series of odd jobs, learnt to type at a night school after which he landed a job at a typists shop. It was there that Selvam first encountered the new technoculture - Indian-style.

From the late 1980's, India witnessed a unique communicative transformation - the spread of public telephones in different parts of the country. Typically, these were not anonymous card-based instruments as in the West or other parts of the Third World, but run by humans. These were called Public Call Offices (PCOs). The idea was that in a non-literate society like India the act of telecommunication had to be mediated by humans. Typically literates and non-literates used PCOs, which often doubled as fax centres, photocopy shops and typists' shops. Open through the night, PCOs offered inexpensive, personalised

services that spread rapidly all over the country.

Selvam's typing shop was such a PCO. Selvam worked on a used 286, running an old version of WordStar, where he would type out formal letters to state officials for clients, usually peasants and unemployed. Soon Selvam graduated to a faster 486 and learnt programming by devouring used manuals, and simply asking around. This is the world of informal technological knowledge existing in most parts of India, where those excluded from the upper-caste, English-speaking bastions of the cyber-elite learn their tools.

Selvam told me how the textile town of Coimbatore, a few hours from Madurai set up its own BBS, by procuring used modems, and connecting them later at night. Used computer equipment is part of a vast commodity chain in India, originating from various centres in India but the main centre is Delhi.

Delhi has a history of single-commodity markets from the days of the Mughal Empire. Various markets would specialise in a single commodity, a tradition that has continued to the present. The centre of Delhi's computer trade is the Nehru Place market. Nehru Place is a dark, seedy cluster of grey concrete blocks, which is filled with small shops devoted to the computer trade. Present here are the agents of large corporations, as also software pirates, spare parts dealers, electronic smugglers, and wheeler-dealers of every kind in the computer world.

This cluster of legality and non-legality is typical of Indian technoculture. When the cable television revolution began in the 1990s, all the cable operators were illegal, and many continue to be so even today. This largely disorganised, dispersed scenario makes it impossible for paid cable television to work in India. This is a pirate modernity, but one with no particular thought about counter-culture or its likes. It is a simple survival strategy.

The computer trade has followed the pirate modernity of cable television. Just as small town cable operators would come to the cable market in the walled city area of Delhi for equipment, so people from small towns like Selvam would come to Nehru Place to source computer parts, used computers, older black and white monitors, and mother-boards out of fashion in Delhi.

This is a world that is everyday in its imaginary, pirate in its practice, and mobile in its innovation. This is also a world that never makes it to the computer magazines, nor the technological discourses dominated by the cyber-elite. The old nationalists and Left view this world with fascination and horror, for it makes a muddle of simple nationalist solutions. One can call this a recycled electronic modernity. And it is an imaginary that is suspect in the eyes of all the major ideological actors in techno-space.

For the Indian proponents of a global virtual universe, the illegality of recycled modernity is alarming and 'unproductive'. Recycled modernity, prevents India's accession to WTO conventions, and has prevented multinational manufacturers from dominating India's domestic computer market. For the nationalists, this modernity only reconfirms older patterns of unequal exchange and world inequality. In cyber-terms this means smaller processing power than those current in the West, lesser bandwidth, and no control over the key processes of electronic production.

I suspect that members of the electronic avant-gardes and the counter net-publics in the West will find recycled modernity in India baffling. For recycled modernity has no dis-

crete spaces of its own in opposition to the main cyber-elites, nor does it posit a self-defined oppositional stance. This is a modernity that is fluid and mocking in definition. But is also a world of those dispossessed by the elite domains of electronic capital, a world which possesses a hunter-gatherer cunning and practical intelligence.

The term 'recycling' may conjure up images of a borrowed, unoriginal modern. Originality (the eternal search for 'newness') was of course Baudelairian modernity's great claim to dynamism. As social life progressed through a combination of dispersion and unity, the Baudelairian subject was propelled by a search for new visions of original innovation, both artistic and scientific. A lot of this has fallen by the wayside in the past few decades, but weak impulses survive to this day.

It is important to stress too that recycled modernity does not reflect a thought-out post-modern sensibility. Recycling is a strategy of both survival and innovation on terms entirely outside the current debates on the structure and imagination of the net and techno-culture in general. As globalists/virtualists push eagerly for a new economy of virtual space, and the nationalists call for a national electronic self-sufficiency, the practitioners of recycling keep working away in the invisible markets of India.

In fact given the evidence, it could even be argued that recycling's claim to 'modernity' is quite fragile. Recycling practices (today at least) lack modernity's self-proclaimed reflexivity, there is no sense of a means-ends action, nor is there any coherent project. This contrasts with the many historical legacies of modernity in India - one of which was Nehruvian. The technological side of this modernity was monumental and future-oriented; it spoke in terms of projects, clear visions, argued goals. And the favourite instrument of this modernity was a state Plan, borrowed from Soviet models. Nehruvian modernity has been recently challenged by Hindu nationalism, which too, has sought to posit its own claims to the modern, where an authoritarian state and the hegemony of the Hindu majority ally with a dynamic urban consumption regime.

Recycling practices' claim to modernity relies less on any architecture of mobility, but on an engagement with speed. Speed constitutes recycling's great reference of activity, centred on sound, vision and data. This is the pirate modern's 'eternal present' (Benjamin), one that is historically situated and mediated through various registers of difference. Speed in the time of the 'now' is the effort at acceleration propelled partly by global techno-capital. Temporal acceleration, which Reinhart Koselleck claims is one of modernity's central features, speaks to the deep yearnings of recycling's praxis. But this is a constantly shifting universe of adaptation to available tools of speed, the world info-*bahn* being but an infrequent visitor. Consider the practice of speed in a Third World country like India, where both the given-ness of access to the net and the purchase of processing power do not exist in simultaneity. They have to be created, partly through developing new techniques, and partly through breaking the laws of global electronic capital.

Recycling's great limitation in the computer/net industry is content. This actually contrasts with the other areas of India's culture industry - music and cinema. In the field of popular music, a pirate culture effectively broke the stranglehold of multinational companies in the music scene and opened up vast new areas of popular music that the big companies had been afraid to touch. Selling less from official music stores but from neighbourhood

betel-leaf (*paan*) shops, the pirate cassettes have made India into one of the major music markets in the world. In the field of cinema and television, content has never been a problem with a large local film industry that has restricted Hollywood largely to English-language audiences.

What accounts for this great limitation in the net and the computer components of recycled modernity? Recycling practices have, as we have shown, been very successful in expanding computer culture, by making it inexpensive and accessible. Most importantly recycling provided a practical education to tens of thousands of people left out of the upper-caste technical universities. But content providers are still at a discount. But perhaps not yet. The last time I went to Nehru Place I met a young man from Eastern India busy collecting Linux manuals. In a few years the recyclers, bored with pirating Microsoft ware, will surely begin writing their own.

Thinking through the Transitions: The City and the Pirate Modern

The emergence of a large 'pirate' electronic space in India gestures to a number of emergent practices in India in the 1980s and the 1990s. Though 'globalisation' is usually held out as a representational shorthand to capture this era, one can argue that in fact a number of complex, often unintended factors cohered in making the 'contemporary'.

Globalisation discourses in the public sphere have tended to focus on the state and its regulatory regime as a major reference point. While neo-liberal critics of the old regime of state-centred accumulation have pushed, often successfully, for a dismantling of state controls, critics from both the right and the left have tended to defend a nationalist economic model which would retain regulatory controls.

In fact, one of the most interesting aspects of the 1990s in India has been the dramatic retreat of the state at the level of the everyday. The magnified imaginary of the regulatory national state which informed the architecture of Nehruvianism is little in evidence, with a number of competing actors on the ground.

The 'everyday' is something that needs to be clarified here. The state, for example, continues to retain a close grip on the means of legal violence, and the regulatory model has not been allowed to disappear. In fact this model has been grafted onto a corrupt liberalisation regime to award the larger contracts in infrastructure.

I would like to speak of the 'everyday' as a space where practices of quotidian consumption, mobility, and struggle are articulated. It is this space that has been largely absent even in the cultural discourses on technological globalisation which have tended to look at elite domains of consumption and identity.

Looking back at the 1990s without the benefit of long-term hindsight, one can posit a number of preliminary formulations on the transitions of the decade. For clarity, I will limit my argument to the electronic everyday, the world of phones, computers, communication, television and music cultures.

The first would be that this everyday has emerged within a distinct urban space, in India's fast growing metropolitan centres and small towns. The notion of a distinct urban culture has lacked a public register in the Indian case, but this 'new' everyday has in a sense announced the arrival, albeit hesitantly, of a wide-ranging cluster of forms which we could

organise under the term 'urban experience'. Unknown to many of us who lived through the decade, the urban arrived in India in the 1990s. To be sure, the multiple crises of the Third World City are also reflected in this 'urban experience' - large-scale inequalities, violence, collapse of infrastructure, and the rise of elite suburbia based on automobile transport. In the midst of all this is a pirate electronic space speaking to the new phone, television, and communication cultures that offer a new mobility and employment to thousands in the grey economy.

Thus the second aspect of this everyday would be of its preponderant non-legality. Operating at the level of techno-cultural services to the vast majority of the population in cities and towns, the actors in this space have simply ignored the state as the regulator of everyday life. The thousands of small cable television operators; pirate audiocassette shop owners; and grey market computer companies have, with significant success evaded state controls on their operations. Part of the problem has been the state's slow response to impose regulatory mechanisms due to an inability in understanding the new technologies. But when regulation has come, success has been uneven, with only the larger firms falling in line.

The third aspect of the everyday is that the networks of quotidian consumption are dominated by those who, in the older Marxist language would be called 'petty-commodity-producers'. Much of 20th century Marxism from Lenin to the structuralists has puzzled over the reproduction of petty-commodity production in contemporary capitalism. Often this sector has been seen as a derivative category distinguished from the main dynamic of capitalist production, a form that is mired in 'circulation', not production. In fact in the expansion of the electronic everyday in India's cities in the 1990s, it is precisely this petty-commodity-sector that was crucial. Dominated by small entrepreneurs often focused in their own locality, this sector laid non-legal cable television networks, set up small PCO and computer shops, and distribution outlets of music cassettes. Along with this expansion came a host of other interventions in the locality: community advertising through inexpensive desktop-published flyers, and informal credit networks that give liquidity for low-cost consumption goods like black and white television sets sold in poor parts of the city.

Many years ago, before he joined the academic star-system, Jean Baudrillard wrote *The Mirror of Production*, a critique of Marxist political economy. Despite its problems, some of which anticipate his later shifts, Baudrillard's text nevertheless managed to point to the anthropomorphic core of Marxism's critique of political economy. Marxism's primacy of production (the 'realm of the concrete') led to a devaluing of the circuits of exchange and consumption. Exchange was always seen as exhibiting a lack, a space where labour-power was reified, and often generating 'false needs'. In the Indian case many of the critics of globalisation, by focusing on the elite consumption spaces (with their effects of waste and violence), tended to miss out on the profound transformations that were taking place in daily life in cities and towns. The Marxisant/nationalist heritage with its hostility and moral suspicion towards consumption in general, played no small part in this.

The last feature of the electronic everyday has been the insertion of a spatio-temporal experience in the locality through speed. As urban neighbourhoods get connected through phone lines, television, and increasingly PCO/internet access points, we can speak of

flashes of what Paul Virilio has called the possibility of arrival without departure in late modernity. Virilio argues that temporal experiences have been fundamentally transformed with the arrival of the new telecommunication networks. Central to the transition is the transformation of modes of travel, thus for Virilio the audio-visual is the 'last vehicle' in modernity, after the railway, the automobile and the aeroplane. Further, a new form of chrono-politics is increasingly displacing the older forms of geo-politics.

Virilio's model is too extreme for the Indian case, but one can surely detect a transformation of the 'local' in the city with the spread of techno-cultural density. With the generalisation of modes of simultaneity through new technologies of transmission (live telecasts, sport events, long distance phone use by sections of the migrant poor), the 'locality' loses the old form of spatial security. The abolition of distance has of course been the great motive force of speed. In India this was pioneered by television (one can recall Heidegger's comments on television: "The peak of the abolition of every possibility of remoteness"), but also through the phone network.

The 'Asian' Modern?

Are pirate/recycling electronic cultures the defining mark of the 'Asian' engagement with contemporary modernity? 'Asia', is of course a violent abstraction, but one can surely detect the chain of non-legal electronic markets from Hong Kong to Shanghai, from Singapore to Delhi. Non-legality has been a major feature of all East Asian computer cultures where Western electronic commodities are re-sold in the world market, particularly the Third World. In the Indian case, the mimetic act is less punctual; the copy is not crucial to pirate culture. Rather, it is the insertion into the non-legal local, cultural commodity chains, and the unintended mocking of the state that define 'pirate' cultures in India. It is this mode that opens a wide spectrum of possibilities, many of which remain unrealised.