

New Maps and Old Territories

A Dialogue between *Yagnavalkya* and *Gargi* in Cyberia

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I

We grew up hearing many kinds of stories. Stories of wise animals and stupid gods, arrogant kings and generous subjects, magical machines and speaking trees.

We grew up hearing the story of the wise man called *Yagnavalkya* and a wise woman called *Gargi*. And their conversation is a section in the *Upanishads* - texts which started out life as being interesting and elegant conversations in places where those in retreat from the world could gather (not unlike some chat rooms on the Internet today), and ended up dead as part of a formal philosophical canon in later Hinduism.

Both *Yagnavalkya* and *Gargi* were philosophers, natural philosophers, and while it was considered odd that *Gargi*, forgetting her 'woman' self should argue about the nature of 'being' itself, she did. And in this argument *Gargi* asks of *Yagnavalkya* again and again, so what is the web on which the world is woven.

This fragment of the *Upanishads*, the sit-here-and-listen parable of secret wisdom, is here re-configured for the third millennium of the Common Era. This Neo-*Upanishad* is a new source code, a manual of digital ontology, a map of how we might come to be. Imagine a new *Bhahdaranyaka* Section (The Debate at the Crossroads of the Great Forest of Cultural Code) where sit two re-configured *avatars*, gendered male and female, named *Gargi Vacaknavi* (The maker of new codes) and *Yagnavalkya* (Keeper of the sacrificial flame of pure code). What we want to say is like the small, unfinished conversation between two people who once allegedly occupied finite, distinct bodies - one male, one female.

Yagnavalkya talks of how man invented self, and so brought about other. He speaks of how self, *purusha*, *atman*, *Brahman*, consciousness, mind pursues other, *prakriti*, speech, body, form and how she (other) changes her shape, re-writing her operating instructions, every time he (self) makes a new programme, a new release version of her. He encrypts, she decodes. She is software, a virus, free to roam and pirate herself, he stays

hardwired, logged out and locked into himself. He pursues her, pins her, wins her, she runs away into the jungle of code again. He seeks her out yet again, and in the middle of his endless postulation of the real self and the self that is virtual, the other, her-self, he says to her: Gargi, silver tongued, chat room diva, endless whisperer, cyborg siren, look - the two of us are like two halves of a block, hardware and software, one and zero, man and machine, and between us dangles the web of the world. The World Wide Web. The mesh made of strings of code. Cyberia.

Then Gargi Vacaknavi began to question him, "Yagnavalkya", she said, "tell me - since this whole world is woven back and forth on strings of knowledge, threads of code, what then is the net of code and knowledge woven on. Where on the map is Cyberia?"

Y: "Knowledge and code are woven back and forth on the minds that made the code, on the accumulated electricity of millennia that went into the making of thoughts, that was written down, encrypted, encoded, streamed into machines, read and learnt and transmitted and taught and downloaded".

G: "And on what was that woven on, that mesh of thought, how did that get fabricated?"

Y: "On the little fissures where wealth and meanings, both of which we call 'artha', in Sanskrit, gather between keystrokes".

G: "And where did money and meaning come from?"

Y: "From the worlds of hands weaving back and forth, from the intermittent movement of eyes, both awake and rapidly dreaming, from neo-cortical storms, and from the stream of blood, within and without...".

G: "And what moves these joints, works these muscles and tendons, what makes this flow and ebb and stream?"

At this point Yagnavalkya told her, "Don't ask so many questions, Gargi, or your head will shatter apart! You are asking too many questions about that (the deity) of which it is forbidden to ask too many questions. So, Gargi, don't ask so many questions..."

It is said then that "Thereupon, Gargi fell silent".

This conversation arises from a recognition that cyberspace has suddenly posed strange and new questions even within those of us who live at it's farthest frontier, for whom connectivity and access to computers, and to the space they create between them, is not an easy dial-up option. We share computers, and e-mail accounts, and navigate the private spaces that we have created within our computer. We come from a situation where the scarcity of computers, the cussedness of phone lines, the fluctuating voltage and the simultaneous rush to be on a machine so as not to be rudderless in the world demands that several people share the same machine. At one time we were seventeen people logging on with the same ID. We are not mere cyborgs; we are evolving constellations of cyborgs. This makes for a proximity that is not unlike looking into each other's cupboards, and closets, catching the whiff of intimate traces of thought and feeling. This has made us look at each other and at ourselves in a new way. We, as a man, and as a woman, are beginning to ask of each other the question "What is the ground we stand on?" What are the conscious and unconscious flows of sensory and extra-sensory data between our bodies and minds, and within our common machines that shape our changing - neither binary nor unitary - natures.

II

Two clusters of images for two kinds of migration.

A person steps off a train into a city of fourteen million people, looking for the comfort and the freedom of anonymity, wary of loneliness and the scrutiny of unwelcome surveillance.

A person finds a patch of wall in a shantytown, off a busy street and builds a shelter with tin and packing cases, begins a new neighbourhood, changes the map of the city.

A person clocks into a factory, makes up a new name and invents a new self, fills in forms saying: single, childless, temporary worker, migrant, no permanent address...

A person switches on a computer, logs on and toys with a new password. She is looking for the comfort and freedom of anonymity and is wary of loneliness and the scrutiny of unwelcome surveillance. She builds herself a shelter, calls it a website; she begins a new neighbourhood, calls it an online discussion forum, she changes the map, she clocks in at work, and a new day begins at the virtual sweatshop.

In a sense, all those who venture out into cyberspace for the first time are stepping out of a train into a new metropolis. They are looking for the freedom of anonymity, wary of surveillance, building shelters and neighbourhoods, clocking in, changing the map.

Given that the Internet began as a playground for men in suits, lab coats and uniforms, all others - women and men without suits, lab coats and uniforms, and just about anyone else who is not a part of a networked transatlantic matrix, someone who lives in time zones and meridians on the outer reaches of cyberia, is really a recent immigrant.

It is the malediction of many migrants in the real world that in the new destination they are too often forced to become exiles or indentured into the workforce, where the act of leaving becomes a gesture poised on the thin line between free will and despair. Many of us too may have left the everyday battles for survival, dignity and recognition somewhere in order to chart a new continent of being, and the world. But when looking back from cyberspace into the everyday, what are the relationships between 'virtual' and real 'selves' that we now see and seek?

Is the virtual self of the on-line person only an *avatar*, a multiplied polymorphous androgynous cyborg amazon realizing liberatory visions, or is she also a networked data-drudge, divided and multitasked within herself as she logs on to supply and reproduce labour power in a digital pan-capitalist global marketplace. For long she has been the vehicle for the reproduction of living labour. Is she now in danger of being trapped into being the vehicle for the daily reproduction of virtual labour?

Further, is the interface that some of us initially welcomed as the possibility of transcending the determinations of biology, also returning to menace us with more bionic shackles in the prison house of gender. The web, for instance has come a long way from being the playground of gender identities. The remaining spaces for play and experimentation with online identities are becoming increasingly sidelined, as e-commerce, with its relentless search for marketing niches within marketing niches, underscores and amplifies the accepted notions of who we are.

Far from the transcendence of gender, we now have a proliferation of 'acceptable femininities' that address and hard sell safe images of 'womanhood'. We are not talking of the sex industry on the Internet, but of mainstream 'women's portals' because these are the sites that women are being asked to walk into by aggressive media campaigns. This is where the real action of e-commerce and household linked purchases and lifestyle products and the cosmetic industry really is. This is really where women are, and are being placed, on the web.

Of course the beauty of pointcast marketing is that every time you log on, your gender becomes an issue, and you fill in a form that asks you your sex, and while your personal details get farmed by data trawlers, you, your gender and your correlative consumer profile becomes means for the creation of value. Because, every woman, every calculable entity, who logs on to a woman's portal is in a sense making room for the next customer, just by being a taxonomically appropriate female. Her presence is value creation. So you are working while you shop on line, and it's such a delight that you don't even know it, and nor does anyone else, but for those who farm your life. In a way in which domestic labour was always 'unaccounted for' in the textbooks of political economy, so too the shadow-work that is a part of the simple fact of gendered presence on the web is an unaccounted reality of cyberspace.

The last six months in India have seen the rise of at least ten competing women's portals - www.smartbahu.com, www.icleo.com, www.ajisunteho.com, www.mysakhi.com, www.chaiwalli.com, www.today'sindianwomen.com, www.seetageeta.com, etc . And many more are planned as the Internet burst takes hold. These portals target different aspects of the online feminine. There is the portal for the teenage girl, advice about dating games, parental issues, school scores, cosmetics, fashion, and boy bands. The portal for the bride to be - how to get your trousseau in order, lingerie, mother-in-law issues, dowry issues, how to fake an orgasm on your wedding night, conflict resolution, agony aunts. The portal for the mature middle-aged house wife - pickle recipes, spirituality and health food, and then portal for the corporate woman - how not to antagonize your boss, handling emotions in the workplace, the art of writing the perfect CV, etc.

Each of these portals has a section called 'Career' where women are told about how the brave new world of InfoTech will mean that now they can be even better 'good' mothers and wives, and also earn money by logging on to piece rate work from the home. The shadow work of logging on - pages per view, hits per day, the further creation of value. A new version of the putting out system by which you bought a sewing machine to supplement the domestic income by converting the home into a tiny production unit in a dispersed garment factory. "Smartbahu.com" (bahu=wife/daughter-in-law) is particularly interesting in the way in which it invites women to directly consider the options of entering the 'Call Centre' or the 'Medical Transcriptions' industries. These are really the reasons why the new information economy is being pushed in such a big way now in India.

The new economy in our part of the world is cantilevered on a fortuitous accident of geography and culture, and a long history of reading and writing in the English language. While the Internet for some parts of the world maybe 'virtual', its experiential dynamics for us are grounded on the geographical co-ordinates of the South Asian landmass which make

us a workday ahead of the offices and factories in many actual hubs of trans-national capital. Which means that your secretarial labour pool never ever sleeps, it only shifts longitudes. And so you have the emergence of the 24-hour workday, and the time stretched worker. This, more than anything else, is why there are projections of 4 million Internet users in India by 2003, and an exponential growth thereafter.

To give you a simple illustration. You could be calling a General Electric call centre in Britain, and the person picking up the phone at the other end could be a Sunita or a Madhu in our city. She would have been trained to speak in an accent that doesn't give away her location (space, time, ethnicity) and she would be working as a contract worker.

Similarly, transcription work is secretarial assistance at a distance. For example, at the end of the day in the east coast of the United States, a doctor in his surgery can record onto disc via the phone, and someone sitting in the mushrooming IT cities (Cyberabads, we call them) of Bangalore or Hyderabad, or Delhi would take the dictation off the transmitted disc, clean up records, and by the next morning the day's transcripts would be emailed and ready and waiting. Typically, a large number of the people who 'man' the terminals at call centers, at transcription factories, at software sweatshops and electronic assembly lines all over India happen to be women. Because they are cheap to hire, easy to fire. Because the insecurity of their lives as young, often migrant, single women in urban environments that are extremely hostile to young, single, migrant women means that their status can always be used to blackmail them into longer work hours, stringent production targets through keystroke monitoring, lower pay, and lack of job security. These are lives led in the shadow of the glamour and mega bucks of the new economy.

These online lives have their own metronomic rhythm. And this rhythm regulates the ebb and flow of labouring on the net to an extent that makes the net take on a character very different from the freedom that we may be tempted to ascribe to it. Just as the history of Internet navigation has been a series of collapsing interactivities as proprietary software and mega e-commerce portals reach out to try and guide every net event, every act of logging on, thus eroding the autonomy of the surfer, so too, if your primary online experience is one of finger cracking, eye straining labour, then that is the way that the net will trap you, and shape you. And as thousands, and in time, millions more log on to the Internet from home-based work places in India and China, and as many of these online lives become those of networked labouring women, the net itself will change shape. The money being made from mouse clicks will change the meaning of what it is to be online. This is not the future, this is happening even as we speak.

In such circumstances perhaps it becomes all the more important to reclaim the categorical imperative of pleasure, and *jouissance* and affinity for those women and men who labour on the net. If critical reflection in/on cyberspace can reveal the radical disjuncture between work and play in terms of different modes of interacting with the same technology, if it can advance protocols of subversive and transgressive pleasure in workplaces, then it will have reclaimed in some measure the utopian promise of the net. Interventions to take control of our online experience can have repercussions in a much wider arena than just the Internet.

III

We return to *Gargi* and *Yagnavalkya*, only a few pages later. And so to their conversation. If *Yagnavalkya* wrests the argument, he will walk away with all the modems, and set them to graze on the data-pastures of the net, make them big info-fat, live-stock options. If *Gargi Vacaknavi* wins, she will re-write every string of code and change the world. She will let loose the modems, set free the data-cows. Let us listen.

Then *Gargi Vacaknavi* spoke: *"I rise to challenge you Yagnavalkya. The things behind the terminal screen, and the things between data and the body, as well as all those things people here refer to as programme, memory, and labour. On what Yagnavalkya are all these woven back and forth?"*

He replied: *"That, Gargi, is the imperishable. And Brahmins refer to it like this. It is neither coarse nor fine, it is neither short nor long, it has neither blood nor fat, it is without shadow or darkness, it is without contact, it has not taste or smell, it is without sight or hearing, it is beyond measure, it has nothing within it and outside of it".*

She responded: *"All honour to you Yagnavalkya. You really cleared that up for me. What then is this imperishable?"*

Then *Yagnavalkya* said: *"This is the imperishable Gargi on whose command seconds and hours, days and nights, fortnights and months, seasons and years stand apart. This is the imperishable Gargi at whose command monies and meanings flow in their respective directions, some to the east and others to the west. This is the imperishable Gargi on whose command people move between worlds and gods and governors are dependent on sacrifices, on ancestral demands and living offerings.*

This is the imperishable which sees but can't be seen, which hears but can't be heard, which thinks but can't be thought of, which perceives but can't be perceived. Besides this imperishable, there is no one that sees, no one that thinks, and no one that perceives.

On this very imperishable, Gargi, space and cyberspace, the space between the terminal and the body, the space between control and enter, abort and retry, are woven back and forth. This, Gargi, is the integrated circuit of Capital".

Thereupon *Gargi Vacaknavi* fell silent.

Today, as larger swathes of industrial manufacture become a matter of dispersed assemblies, fluid inventories and just-in-time delivery, the proportion of networked key-strokes that will assemble everything from automobiles to GM foods to fabrics will rise. And, alongwith, will rise a new global proletariat of cyborg-women-men, with prosthetic arms that marry robotic speed and involuntary movement with human faculties of discrimination. So much so, that the cyborg will be worker and supervisor split within herself, with instructions from a networked-command-control-communications and intelligence node delivered via the Internet and made to interface with her own neuro-muscular co-ordinates in order to create a complex matrix of voluntary and involuntary movements on the virtual assembly line.

In a few years time, prosthetic arms will very easily find favour in the factories that ring our cities, and they would re-problematize *Gargi's* nagging questions about the relationship between discrete sentient entities and transcendent consciousness, between the resistance of the self and the tug of the other on the prosthetic arm.

Imagine tissue farms in South Asia producing bio-technological products and organ

supplements from a dispersed assembly line of networked female bodies. The invasion of microchips into the human body may have begun at the intersections of digital arts, fashion and cybernetics, but it could with ease find suitable industrial applications, giving rise to factories of fertile women who will have to tap their key boards, monitor their fertilities, and enter, enter, enter data. Is this a scenario that a migrant will be soon be leaving her home to enter? A recently uploaded website already offers people payment for contraceptive usage, and we know of the website that sells eggs from comely, ethnically classified women (www.ronsangels.com). How far is it in the future that we will witness the booming marriage of convenience between e-commerce, genetic engineering, eugenics and assisted reproduction? In the place where we come from, the take up rate for technological interventions in reproduction has always been high, and female foeticide and the availability of ultra-sonography have had a close statistical relationship. How much longer will it take for websites that advertise and guarantee male embryos to get into business in the backstreets of Delhi?

A migrant in the real world remembers 'home' with longing and therefore participates in a parallel economy of gifts, remitting letters and new found resources back home. But is it that instead of remembering and remitting, much of our online being is lived out in evading the home where we came from? Is the condition of migration into cyberspace already becoming a condition of exile? Many of us endow the cyberspace we are migrating into with our longings and desires for a better world, but this is a journey that we undertake not once or twice in a lifetime but once or twice or many times a day. What are the letters and gifts that we will send back from these journeys?

There is a lot of money and meaning being made in this world between the keystrokes. Money and meaning that imprisons women and men, hardware and software, machines and codes. And consequently, there is a lot of work to be done to reclaim online presence from the territory of an exiled imaginary, and invest it with meaning in such a way as to make it mean real things for most real people and for some cyborgs.

We believe that we must ask the 'too many questions', even of our own assertions, as *Gargi* has always insisted on doing, even if this results in a systems crash, in a shattering of our heads. In that shattering may well be unleashed a whole new repertoire of things that we might become - incomplete, fragmentary, neither men, nor women, nor machines, and yet find ways of situatedness and connection more fulfilling than the binary oppositional units that we are accustomed to inhabiting.

To lapse into even ironic silence is to be lost to the possibilities that await us.