

**BEYOND THE NATIONALIST PANOPTICON: THE EXPERIENCE OF
CYBERPUBLICS IN INDIA**

by

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In his now-classic text on post-modernism Fredric Jameson spoke of an “inverted millenarianism” which has come to characterise our time, where all anticipations of the future have been replaced by a sense of the end of various social imaginaries.(1992:1) Writing from a country that is located firmly within the periphery of late capitalism, there are many senses in which the old ideologies of 19th century modernity are in deep crisis - the great *promesse de bonheur* of nationalism and Marxism has failed to materialize in South Asia. What we are instead witnessing is a dramatic and simultaneous process of both de-territorialisation as well as territorialisation where received notions of order, based on historical associations of citizenship, borders, time, and history are being actively re-worked.

At the first glance, there seems cause for celebration. What Nietzsche called the “consuming historical fever” of modernity - the tendency to monumentalise history and to impose the burden of the millennium on all human practices - seems well behind us. But the world as we see it does not present a pretty sight - particularly at the margins of the metropolis. To take recourse to a Hegelianism, it is as if the World-Spirit, defeated at the final moment of self-consciousness, has enacted a terrible revenge for sacrificing its grand vision. In particular, for the Third World citizen, searching for identity among the ruins of the now-decaying artifacts of nationalism, it seems more and more clear that the storm of progress has passed on, with no promise of returning.

However here lies the paradox. At the very moment that modernity could free itself from its 19th century variant, the power of the West, which was *the* imaginative embodiment of the modern, seems more fragile than ever. For the first time since the 16th century there seems to be a secular shift in the centres of wealth from the West to Asia’s eastern frontier, and possibly China. The old state-system of modernity - based on secure borders and sovereignty has collapsed, in the west itself, canonical notions of subjectivity, representation, and freedom have taken a battering from which one suspects they will never fully recover. The great Western millennium, beginning with the violence of the Crusades and culminating in European power may end with the very idea of modernity seriously compromised.

What has this to do with the engagement with virtual spaces in country like India? In the first place, the dynamic of India’s movement into electronic spaces have occurred within the backdrop of the crisis of Western modernity and its product: the territorial state based on a particular concept of sovereignty. Further, it seems to me that it is the very *fragility* of the “West” that gives cyberspace a particular attractiveness for Third World users, at least in the case of India. This fragility of the Western imaginary in the real world contrasts with a certain efflorescence in virtual spaces. It is this disjunction that informs new modes of travel by Third World elites to the

West , through virtual space. These are modes that need to be addressed as occupying a distinct space which depart from the old borders that defined the Third World's relationship to the West.

It is here that the old Third Worldist/classical Marxist critique of "cyberspace" seems limited. Such critiques have focused on the museumisation of Third World cultures in the space of the Web, or the domination of multinational capital in the political economy of the information superhighway. There is a strong element of truth in both positions, but neither can explain the complex implication of virtual spaces in local/regional strategies for re-mapping *national* identity. In the event, while the relationship to an imaginary West is important to cyberpractices in India, this relationship by no means exhausts the complexity and local interconnectedness of such practices. What is needed when looking at cyberpractices in India is what Ernesto Laclau has called a "radical contextualisation", where the violent abstractions of "West", "capital and "nation" do not erase the richness and contradictions of initiatives into virtual space .

INDIA, CYBERSPACE AND THE PUBLICS

If one were to adopt a certain diffusionary model of the spread of cyberpractices in India, we would have to consider the following:

- a) The simple fact of India being a peripheral society in the capitalist world-economy: with one of the lowest saturation rate of telephones in the world; only a small minority of the population has electricity.
- b) India has no tradition of cyberpunk, in fact there is no indigenous science fiction tradition. Most existing cultural communities have remained ambivalent about technology. Historically, representations of science and technology have been state-sponsored and social-realist in form.

Despite this, a significant number of people are linked to electronic networks in India and the number is fast growing. For a Third World country with inequalities like India this is quite remarkable. The reasons for this shall be examined in the course of this essay. What is significant is that "cyberspace" has emerged as a significant term in public discourse in India, becoming the focal point of much coverage and speculation in the media . Behind all of this is the growing community of users. Till date anonymous, and lacking the "heroic" qualities of the old nationalist scientist, the contemporary user lacks any visible representation of his or her agency.

I have tried to map the "user" into three, overlapping cyberpublics. "Public" is used here very loosely, indicating a cybercommunity in the making, where mutual rituals of initiation and excursion are only now being invented. The three cyberpublics are those of the nationalist state, the transnational elite, and that of the space between the market and the state occupied by various

bulletin boards, and social movement networks. While the boundaries of all the three publics are fuzzy¹, they are also uneven in internal differentiation and modes of address. The cyberpublics are a relatively new phenomenon in India. What is attempted here is a very preliminary examination of these communities-in-formation, by mapping certain practices of the nationalist organisation of space, and its consequences for agency and movement.

Nationalist policies employed a certain social cartography which attempted to organise space, representation and identity. Maps generated ‘borders’ which sought to institutionalise identity, frame representations of citizenship, and mediate the relationship with the West and modernity(Krishna:1994). Mapping activities which were backed by the state’s monopoly of legitimate violence were also implicated in a particular version of post-war modernism . The metaphor of the map is also useful to highlight different strategies which emerged in the post-national period, which sought to re-organise space by dislocating it from territory, and posit new forms of identity.

CYBERPUBLIC 1: NATIONALISM

There is a general consensus among writers that the anti-colonial struggle in India produced a rich constellation of overlapping, contested visions of nation and nationalism. Given the wide range of social mobilisation, this was to some extent inevitable. For a long time competing discourses within the anti-colonial movement on issues of identity, modernity and “building the nation” remained dormant; it was only after the experience of development, following independence that some of the older questions and dissenting views, notably those raised by Gandhi’s practice, assumed greater significance.

The post-colonial period after 1947 saw a significant reconstitution of nationalism under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister. The new turn consisted in affirming the need for an accelerated transition to modernity through the building of the rational institutions of state order, which would functionally re-organise national space for the purposes of accumulation and industrialisation. In the event, the Gandhian cultural constellation was seen as dysfunctional for the needs of rational accumulation and state administration. What emerged is what Lefebvre (1991) has called the construction of an ‘abstract space’ - not accessible through ordinary experience, and the preserve of purposive-rational modernisers - the Third World *aufklärer*.

¹ The fuzziness of the publics militate against any attempt to “mirror” a particular public with a social/cultural group. The old logics of certainty no longer obtain here.

Gandhi's discourse had included a reassertion of 'place' as a site of genuine experience and action - consider his symbolic evocation of the village as a site of anti-colonial politics (Nandy:1996). This was in contrast to the abstract temporal cartography of colonialism which held out the developmental possibility of the railway imaginary as a means to overcome the 'village society'; colonial ideology further stressed the use of English as a passport to the cultural world-system and the virtues of colonial law as a *sui generis* means towards order and non-revolutionary evolution. Gandhi's evocation of the everyday and a new aestheticised anti-colonial strategy² (the innovative use of counter-commodities like *Khadi* or home-spun cloth) was viewed with skepticism by the Nehruvian inheritors of post-independence India - as such Gandhi was accorded a hagiographic status in official histories and marginalised.

While post-independence nationalists like Nehru excluded Gandhian economics from state-building strategies, they were quick to incorporate the growing discourse of *development* and make it an instrument of state policy. Much has been written on the post-war invention of 'development' as a necessary process to modernity held out by both Americanism and Sovietism alike - the attendant social and cultural disasters and the dislocation of millions from historic modes of living. (Escobar:1995). What interests us here is how the developmentalist state in India carried out a particular spatial mapping that would play an important role in the development of the nationalist cyberpublic.

In the first place, right from the 1950's onwards the space of the 'global' underwent a certain bracketing. The conquest of the national space and its consolidation was seen as a necessary pre-condition to a thoroughgoing incorporation into the world economy. In addition, the 'national economy' became a shorthand representational device for *the nation itself*.³ This deployment of the 'national economy' was, to be sure, the reaction to 200 years of colonial exploitation and India's peripheral status in the world-economy. What is important for our purposes is that the 'economy', as in Lefebvre's abstract space, was embedded in a matrix accessible only to a privileged and 'enlightened' class of modernisers. Further, the economy was conceived as a space clear of the cultural ambivalence inherent in the village, or "traditional community". The sociologist and thinker, Zygmunt Bauman speaks of Western modernity's great fear of ambivalence, which was inscribed into the project from the very beginning:

²One does not have to read Michel de Certeau to understand Gandhi but the former's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) throws interesting light on "sly" practices of resistance.

³As Deshpande points out, "The construction of the national economy very soon becomes synonymous with the nation itself. This enshrining of the nation as the synechdonic representation of the nation was perhaps one of Nehru's distinctive personal contribution to the nationalist cause." (1993:24)

The new, modern order took off as a desperate search for structure in a world suddenly denuded of structure. Utopias that served as beacons for the long march to reason visualized a world without margins, without leftovers, the unaccounted for....The visualized world differed from the lost one by putting assignment where blind fate ruled. The jobs to be done were now gleaned from an overall plan, drafted by the spokesmen of reason; *in the world to come, design preceded order.* (1992:xv) Emphasis ours.

What obtained says Bauman, was a *legislative* modernity where *soi disant* intellectuals/modernisers saw 'society' as a *tabula rasa* - as an object of gardening and the elimination of ambivalence. While developmental planning in India was based on securing nationalist economic development - it was also firmly embedded in the discourses of the 'gardening' state - where development, through the reduction of poverty and inequality, was the movement towards 'order'. The modernist grid of the Plan (borrowed from Soviet experiences) was invested with phantasmagoric qualities; plan=development=order was part of the utopia of development. Here development/order went hand in hand with what David Harvey has called the logic of space-time compression under capitalist modernity(1989). Here the annihilation of space by time due to the expansion of global capital has led to the 'disembedding of social relations' and the homogenisation of vast spaces of the world economy. Temporal acceleration was a significant part of the imaginary of developmentalism - this was inherent in the logic of 'catching up' with the core areas of the world economy by privileging a certain strategy of growth that actively delegitimized local and 'traditional' practices.

What obtained was an imaginary that was strikingly common to Bentham's Panopticon. The original Panopticon was conceived as a prison where 'rational' methods of confinement were deployed to ensure the visibility of all the prisoners to the warden's gaze, while he himself remained out of their sight. Here the residents of the Panopticon live an ordered, supervised environment committed to an abstract ideal of freedom. In the eyes of its innovators the political technology of the Panopticon had the great merit of imposing order while simultaneously preventing the oppressed from visualizing power. As Zizek points out⁴, it was the great "dark spot" as to who was at the center that gave the Panopticon its greatest use. For it was this abstract centre, that space of anonymity from the nation and the everyday that gave the Nehruvian developmental bureaucracy its greatest relief. Meritocratic, upper-caste and English-speaking, the state-managers of post-independence India cultivated an anonymity that was seen as necessary for a legislative modernity - an abstract vision that would transcend sectional, regional and religious claims.

⁴This is what Zizek says, "In Bentham's Panopticon one finds virtuality at its purest. You never know if someone is at the centre. IF you new someone was there, it would have been less horrifying. Now it's just an

Temporal acceleration, development and ‘order’ were, indeed the *focus imaginarius* of Nehruvian nationalism’s struggle for modernity. In terms of *historical* practice such an imaginary had to be mediated through the claims of a republican democratic politics. The periodic re-mapping of political/social space by political actors/movements through the regime of political representation meant that the claims of panoptical political technology were *continuously* contested. As we shall see, the rise of new social movements of oppressed castes by the late 1980’s seriously threatened the exclusivist vision of the Panopticon. This, along with the new globalism compromised Nehruvianism’s old ‘map’ of the national space .

Building the Network

Frederic Jameson calls architecture the privileged site of postmodern representation because it is able to speak best to the new spatiality of postmodernism. All 20th century movements have their iconography - Nehruvian nationalism included. As opposed to the Gandhian evocation of the Village, Nehruvian nationalism privileged the Dam. The Dam was the “temple of modernity”, it evoked the power of secular labour over nature. It was Nehruvian nationalism’s’ great dream of controlling and disciplining energy. In newsreels and in print, Indians were exhorted to ‘visit’ Bhakra Nangal -the first major post-independence dam site through a pre-virtual tour.⁵

As Deshpande(Ibid.) points out, the identification of the Dam(along with sites that produced steel and electricity) as a site of post-independence nationalist ‘journeys’ was based on privileging the ‘economy’ and production as markers of patriotism and national development. This privileging of the ‘economic’ was, by the 1970’s grafted to a highly centralised and repressive state whose self-representation was dynastic rule by the Nehru-Gandhi family. ‘Development’ was paralleled by state-sponsored compulsory sterilisation drives aimed at the poor⁶. This project ended in political defeat for Indira Gandhi and the Congress party. In the 1980’s the Congress was back in power - but the old nationalist architecture was in considerable crisis. A new ‘approach was put into place in the early 1980’s, actively encouraged by Rajiv Gandhi (Nehru’s grandson) who later became Prime Minister in 1984. This new constellation had two main components.

“utterly dark spot,” as Bentham calls it. If someone is following you and you are not sure, it is more horrible than if you know there is somebody. A radical uncertainty.” (1995)

⁵ Architecture never played an iconic role in post-Independence India. Nationalism, unlike colonialism never sponsored major historicist buildings. It was content in importing some of the worst versions of International Style which replaced traditional methods of construction.. The only concession to the avant-garde was the invitation to Le Corbuseir to design the city of Chandigarh - surely one of the most soulless urban sites in post-independence India. For an interesting analysis of Corbuseir see Tafuri.(1976)

⁶ A national state of Emergency was declared in 1975, and all civil and political rights were suspended until early 1977. The emergency was in many way the denouement of the Panopticon, the beginning of the end of the old centralised state of developmental nationalism.

The first was to ensure temporal acceleration while at the same time perform the task of emancipating the state-managers from the everyday, the interaction with *place*. In other words the annihilation of space through time would obtain *without* the messy political problems that spatiality and its associated politics produced⁷. What was needed was a solution that would shift from old-style nationalist policies, seen by the elite as restricting initiative and growth. This was resolved by an evacuation of the ‘national’ space (‘globalisation’), a process that would accelerate by the late 1980’s and the early 1990’s. Under pressure from the IMF and the World Bank, the old import substitution regime was gradually dismantled and controls on domestic industry and transnational companies lifted.

The end-result of all these moves was a decisive reconstruction of the old nationalist imaginary in ways that would dissolve it to the point of no recognition. ‘Development’ remained an issue but was reconstituted as a problem of *communication*. The way forward was computerization, networking and a new visual regime based on a national television network. The computer soon became the iconic space around which almost all representation, both state and commercial cohered - the effect on nationalist discourse was incredible⁸. As opposed to the Nehruvian focus on 19th century *physical* instruments of accumulation (steel, energy, coal), state discourse after 1984 posed a *virtual* space where issues of development would be resolved. Through public lectures, television programmes and press campaigns, state managers simulated this new space, which though *unseen* was seen as transcending the lack inherent in Nehruvian controls.⁹

This new image of the computer was akin to pure reification - as the old critical theorists like Lukacs had described in *History and Class Consciousness*. Except this largely unseen object¹⁰ was also a simulation machine, generating a new form of abstract space (the network) which would accelerate the transition to modernity and the ‘West’. In the event, the old panoptics of Nehruvianism could not but undergo a subtle revision. The ‘national’ was re-affirmed but through a new discourse which complicated the notion of borders and sovereignty that were so central to the old visual regime. ‘Development’ was redefined, *pace* Virilio, as a problem of speed and information. The more accurate information you had, the better your chances in joining the West.

⁷During this period India was going through considerable political turmoil, with challenges from ethnic/regional movements leading to a cycle of political violence.

⁸Political leaders, led by the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi would insist on posing beside a desktop; most advertisements after the early 1980’s were sure to include images of computer as part of their sales pitch.

⁹Early efforts were focused on developing an local telecommunications production base. These efforts were centred around the Centre for Development and Communication (C-DoT). Led by the charismatic Sam Pitroda, C-DoT’s efforts were later subverted by a section of the bureaucracy sympathetic to trans-national capital.

¹⁰ Even though the computer campaign had started in the early 1980’s, this writer saw his first computer in 1988, when he had to submit his first assignment as a graduate student in a US university!

By the mid 1980's the state promoted the setting up of a national network which would connect all major district centres, state capitals of the country and process vast amounts of information relating to development and administration. This was the development of NIC - the National Infomatics Centre. The NIC had been set up in the mid 1970's to promote computerisation in administration, but really took off in the 1980's with the inauguration of a satellite linked network: NICNET. NICNET is easily the largest network in the country today. It links up all district, state and national centres, runs large databases on social science, medicine and law; it works all state research institutes in the country(1994). Apart from putting all these centres on the NICNET e-mail network, NIC provides users with web and Internet access. Internally, large research projects on artificial intelligence and CAD are being undertaken. Today NICNET has easily eclipsed India's other state network ERNET (Educational and Research Communication Network) to become a visible *public* presence.

NICNET was not just about more computers in administration and education - it intended to change the very technics of power. Hence its aggressive 'public' profile. Very simply, NICNET sought to mold a new state cyberpublic from the late 1980's onwards, through regular, well-publicised demonstrations on networking, e-mail and international connectivity. It was unusual for a state organisation in India to adopt such an aggressive public profile. This brought NICNET in conflict with other institutions of the state which argued for the older, more centralised bureaucratic forms of control¹¹.

NICNET was run by people who understood the need for a new panoptics of state power - the older methods of surveillance would just not work¹². While privately, NICNET administrators pooh- pooh any efforts to censor the networks, they have campaigned publicly for opening up the airways to "ordinary citizens". NICNET opened some of its airways for public access to put forth its case for ending old-style state restrictions on communication.

The NICNET experiment attempted to rework the old modernist grid of Nehruvianism which was based on representational realism, a production of identity based on Westphalia-style national borders and a model of development which privileged the 'economy' as a site of national renewal and subsequent transition to modernity. The networks that the NIC put into place did not *directly* confront the old model but instead sublated it, retaining elements of the old imaginary

¹¹ There were ugly public slanging matches between NICNET and the state monopoly which acts as India's international gateway - the Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited (VSNL).

¹²In a interview with this writer the Director of the NIC maintained that controls on the net were meaningless - and the state could do nothing to check the dissemination of pornographic and explicit material.

(development, a new 'nation', temporal acceleration). The crucial innovation was to introduce a simulated space which would *accelerate* that which was lacking in the old.

NICNET's new grid for the network was in effect a simulation of the earlier panoptics: each district connected to state capital, the latter connected to the national capital. District level campaigns retained Nehruvianism's old crusading vision. Reporting on the effort to set up a district infomatics centre in the Gurdaspur district in the state of Punjab in 1989 the NIC wrote:

The NIC Gurdaspur Centre first became operational in 1989. In the beginning was the toughest part. A new technology, a new way of doing things, a new way was being advocated. The people of Gurdaspur had to be made aware of the utility of infomatics, government personnel had to be trained in computers. Gaining acceptance was no easy task, but help was always at hand. Thanks to the support and co-operation of the district administration and the unstinted efforts of the NIC officials the Gurdaspur District Centre got off to a flying start....

Deemed to be an underdeveloped district, today Gurdaspur is well on its way to development. (1995: 8)

This language continues to play on 'development', deploys the old crusading language of Nehruvian modernity vis-à-vis tradition but adds the new simulated space of connectivity. This new panoptical technology is based on the allusion to a new space which would guarantee the unity of the national - the space of which is constantly threatened by internal strife and global incorporation. This phantasmic neo-national space is complicated by two factors. The first is the simple brutal fact of peripheralisation - *constant* network breakdown which militates against a seamless web of communication¹³. The second is the multiplication of networks : which cancels the monopolistic legitimacy of panoptic power.

The trope of the journey

In many ways cybertime in a peripheral society like India can be seen as radically revising the idea of the Journey. Traveling was the basis of knowledge about others in pre-colonial civilizations - including that in South Asia. The great temporal community of the traveler was largely oral, and based on sustained interaction with other communities. In the world of the *Dar-ul-Islam*, which dominated the pre-modern world, traveling was the duty of every Muslim either on the Haj to Mecca at least once a lifetime or to learn about other Islamic states in the realm. These were not the journeys of the Creole intelligentsia in the period of print-capitalism - a premium was placed on *oral* interaction with fellow Muslims. This was a journey without frontiers - the traveler was constrained only by physical limitations. Time operated through different registers - there was no temporal compulsion on the travelers return: travelers came back after many years.

¹³Even in Delhi, the average period that this writer has manages to stay on-line is 20 minutes! The simple facts of Third World connectivity: phones break down, as does electricity.

The nationalist journey was the great invention of Gandhi. The Gandhian journey began with a paradox: it used the railway network - a network that Gandhi had denounced as having destroyed the pre-colonial narratives and experiences of the Journey. For Gandhi:

The railways disrupted the Indian body politic, which Gandhi saw as a huge body digesting and assimilating different cultural elements. He then showed how the two technologies, reflected in pilgrimage on foot by rail, represented memory and erasure respectively. The pilgrim's progress was an act of faith. The arduous act of pilgrimage to different corners of India gave the pilgrim a sense of both neighborhood and nationhood, helping him to internalize both similarities and differences. The mechanical negotiation or 'ingestion' of territory through rail travel erased the sanctity of places and turned them into physical spaces. (Nandy:1995:181-2)

In fact, Gandhi's privileged journey was that of foot-travel. The practice of walking meant a different language of interaction, of knowledge. It was only through walking that humans came into interaction with different cultures and peoples - which the abstract motions of locomotion could not provide. The allusion to the pre-modern traveler/pilgrim could not be more direct.

However Gandhi *did* use the railway extensively during anti-colonial agitation. To counter his own ambivalence vis-à-vis the industrial capitalism that the railway represented, Gandhi carved out an area *within* the train - the Third Class compartment - a *simulated* space where the people 'entered' the train as with the humility of the pre-modern pilgrim. Gandhi's innovation was to transform the Journey as a vehicle to politically re-map the nation. This was also a journey-as-dialogue, with conventions of public interaction, anti-colonial agitation and spectacle. In a typically Gandhian way, the railway grid (colonialism's most ambitious disciplinary structure) was subjected to a series of inversions. This was despite Gandhi's own ambivalence vis-à-vis modern technology¹⁴. The Gandhian journey was also a *public* journey, with the attendant modes of representation. constructing an imaginary community of nationalism¹⁵.

Colonialism had introduced the political technology of the modern state with the attendant modes of political control. The Frontiers of old became Borders, and modern citizens in post-colonial India were subject to new mechanisms of political identity in the republican order. The Journey was now governed by clear notions of sovereignty, passports became a necessary pre-condition for travel abroad. Indian Nationalism was always suffused with a kind of cartographic anxiety (Krishna:1992) - a phenomenon made worse by the Partition of the sub-continent and the wars with Pakistan and China. Further, state-sponsored import-substitution industrialization drives regulated the import of foreign consumer items -what obtained was a kind of physical separation of

¹⁴This was in contrast with Marx's optimistic view. Marx tended to see the role of the railway in India very much as Buadelaire saw Baron Von Haussmann's reconstruction of Paris in the mid 19th century - the process of destruction being creative and opening up imaginative modes of social action.

the 'everyday' from the West for about 20 years. Filiality to the border became a marker for citizenship with state campaigns against smuggling intensifying during the authoritarian period of the 1970's. The state's claim was that of a monopoly over identity formation, citizenship and national representation.

While the state-centered social space of the 'national' climaxed in the mid-1970's, the journey was being mapped out in different ways in the popular realm. From the 1950's onwards popular cinema generated a series of films where a large part of the narrative unfolded in the West - with Indian characters. While the melodramatic structure of the films were based on a final resolution at the point of origin (India), what is interesting is the visual mapping of the 'West' simulating a virtual tour of that geographic space for millions who had been denied that chance. This substitute travelogue, though mediated through the foundational myth of nationalism (the return to the ordinary soil in the end) nevertheless speculated on the space 'outside' the border, which remained mysterious to the vast majority of citizens¹⁶.

Nationalism operated within the framework of a representational realism: an affirmation of corporeal identity through a framing of the 'real' : which in turn was referred to a particular place: the Nation. The Journey of late nationalism has begun to be eclipsed by the implications of a journey through virtual space, raising profound implications for the existing forms of identity.

James Clifford has written that " a journey makes sense as a 'coming to consciousness' its story hardens around your identity. (Tell us about your trip)" (1988:167) The journeys into virtual space have allowed for the de-stabilising of this 'hardening' of identity Clifford talks about - it has generated new 'boundary stories' about virtual cultures in India. For one, the idea of the Border, so central to state-nationalism is transcended. The new experience of cyberspace that allows the citizen to "arrive without having set out" disrupts the old realist confines of the Journey: for the first time in the history of the visual regimes set in motion by the west, the Third world is allowed entry into hitherto prohibited spaces.

This journey is nevertheless embedded in new networks of power: which seek to emancipate the self from the space of the nation/periphery, from the political sphere. and re-make the lost community in cyberspace: through the deployment of new landscapes - the ethnoscaapes of

¹⁵A comparative journey though more focused in time and space is the Long March undertaken by the Chinese Red Army in 1934-5.

¹⁶ The exhibition mode had a limited presence in India. The great nationalist exhibition was Expo 72 at New Delhi in 1972. In a space specially built for the purpose various Indian states and more important, foreign (mainly Western) countries put up halls for visitors. This was the Third World and Nehruvian version of Crystal Palace - and was a huge success at the time. Since then exhibitions have tended to be more focused, concentrating on commercial and business interests rather than recreate the spectacle like quality of Expo 72'.

post-nationalism (Appadurai:1993). In effect, the old nationalist landscape went through a double process . The first was a certain de-territorialisation of the old nationalist space, confined by the Border. At the same time a process of trans-national territorialisation was underway, where India was being invented in virtual space by sections of non-resident Indians. This was a process that was actively promoted by the Indian state.

The state actively pushed a new category of identity in cultural/political discourse - the figure of the diasporic citizen, also known as the NRI or non-resident Indian.

The invention of the 'NRI' served to re-work the old cartography of nationalism where identity formation was possible only within the Border. With the NRI, the border was extended to those spaces outside national sovereignty where the diaspora lived. In the old nationalist imaginary people left the home of the nation only to return -sometime. This was not to happen with the vast masses of Indians who migrated to the West from the 1950's onwards. The discourse of the 1980's restated the idea of the emigrants 'return' - only to make it temporally indeterminate. The 'natural' affinity to place in the old nationalist discourse was reworked in the 1980's with growing globalisation and the emerging space time compression. The NRI was now seen as forming part of a 'national' community - yet emancipated from the 'place' of the nation.

In the 1980's the figure of the NRI was evoked as someone who would help in the new-style development process . As the NRI had a natural affinity for the Home, any capital he/she brought in to the country would be motivated by patriotic feelings in contrast to say, multi-national capital. In the 1990's however, as national development receded the NRI began to play a prominent role in the new virtual spaces. The idea of the Return now became less relevant - it was achieved in pure space.

CYBERPUBLIC II The New Elites and the Diaspora

By 1995, both state and private networks had spread to connect around 120,000 users in India¹⁷. Though this number may seem small in comparison with the West, it represents one of the largest figures for a Third World country. There is also every possibility that this number will rapidly accelerate in the near future. ERNET, the main state network after NICNET, plans to network around 8,000 colleges - in addition to the 6,000 institutions it already connects¹⁸. Various problems dog the existing networks. While the networking market has been seeing a steady hundred percent yearly growth, the area of Wide Area Networking (WAN) suffers from poor infrastructure which is still inadequate for high speed connectivity.

¹⁷The state networks (NICNET, ERNET, VSNL) have around 100,00 users and the private providers (Axess, RPG-SPRINT, Dartmail, UUNET) have around 20,000 between them. This is an approximate calculation. We must also bear in mind that accounts, particularly in research institutions, tend to be shared by a group of users.

¹⁸ See, "Boom Time for Computer Networks" *Pioneer* , 4/5/95.

A quick profile of users in India will help us understand the kind of cultural practices centred around the net. While individual users who use dial-up connections from home are growing with the expansion of private networks, large numbers of network users still work from offices, research institutions and from public terminals. As expected, most users are male and come from the middle and upper strata both in economic and social terms of community and caste. A large proportion of them are from research institutions and universities - though private networks may soon equal the share of the state networks once the telecommunication policy is liberalised.

What has the rapid spread of virtual space through the networks meant in terms of *public* discourse ? The coming of the Web and discussions on the information superhighway in the US has reached India with such a force that it is difficult to pick up a newspaper without reading an average of two stories a day on 'cyberspace'. The term 'cyberspace', coming in the context of increased globalisation and the dismantling of the old nationalist regime speaks to a variety of discourses and practices - which posit a new virtual landscape. This new landscape is being actively created by a complex intersection of various practices which seek to map new borders of identity- formation. Here the old landscape of the nation, the citizen and the political are being re-written through new Journeys.

In the first instance, discourses on the Web seem to reproduce old nationalist tropes. Most commercial providers have sought to pose their web strategy as providing a window for 'Indian' capital to the 'world'. In this reading, Indian company sites on the web have the best possible chance for "national" development. It is in virtual space, where emancipated from the territorial limits of old-style capitalism (which was inherently biased in favour of the West) Indian capital could take its message. The Web's great advantage for Indian companies says one of the commercial providers, is "that (here) even smaller players get world-wide publicity."¹⁹ The discourse here is very different from the allusions to the Frontier myth that dominated early Western representations of the Web. In the Indian case the commercial message is clear : to be a genuine 'national' capitalist, you must transcend the Border and enter virtual space. For it is here that the peripheral status in real-time will be transcended.

Behind the impetus towards virtual space is the retreat of large sections of the old upper-caste, anglicized elite from the political sphere. It is important not to be crude in speaking about this phenomenon, but since the 1980's the cartography of the political public is being actively re-written, with the emergence of new social movements of oppressed castes. The rise of these movements have had the effect of challenging the old panoptics of the state which was predicated

¹⁹"What's on at <http://www.indiainc.com>" by Sudha Nagaraj, *Pioneer*, April 26, 1996.

on a homogenising legislative modernity, led by an enlightened elite of modernisers. The symbolic space of this elite lay in the abstractions of national development and the ‘economy’. The rise of the new movements has initiated a process that may effectively unseat the old elites from the political sphere; the certainties of the old nationalist journey no longer obtain.

For the old elite the state is no longer the *secure* kingdom of cultural hegemony and identitarian certainty²⁰. In the event The social landscape has undergone an effective Haussmannisation marked by upper-caste retreats from the old grid of politics and abstract nationalist identity. The large metropolitan centres are being re-configured to accommodate a re-invented suburbia free from subaltern intrusions: these are simulated landscapes of designer villages, transplanted American post-modern designs and private security. But what of the nationalist journey? My argument is that for this elite-in-retreat, the old journey is being transcended by the encounter into virtual space. In its place new practices have emerged which have sought to both overcome the corporeality of the nationalist border, while at the same time attempt to create new “nationalist” electronic communities conforming to a ‘Hindu’ imaginary. (Since the mid-1980’s an aggressive Hindu nationalist movement has grown in India, seeking to re-build nationalism around themes of a threatened religious identity, majoritarianism: where the state acts in interests of the majority community, and violent attacks on the Muslim minority.)

The second cyberpublic is therefore *doubly* coded by practices that seek to map out a new conception of space beyond the nation, while at the same time attempting to inscribe a new Hindu nationalist community in virtual space.

At the centre of this new landscape have been the growth of new technologies of representation which have had the effect of disrupting the old tropes of anti-colonialism and Nehruvian nationalism. If the village and the ‘economy’ functioned as a representational shorthand for the Gandhian and Nehruvian imaginary respectively, the new cultural landscapes in the 1990’s saw a complex of initiatives centred around new narratives of consumption and desire which resist easy historicist classification. These new practices have centred around the rapid growth of television, video, music and one of the world’s largest film industries. Foreign satellites now beam images to India, effectively breaking the state’s monopoly over television; India now produces one of the world’s largest video and audio-cassette industries, largely centred around the film industry.

The new cultural space is criss-crossed by a fluidity of national/regional/global cultural styles mediated by the recognition of a new agent - the “consumer-subject”; the old moral codes

²⁰ The political wagers of the upper-caste elite have shifted from the state to the Hindu nationalist movement; yet other sections support the Congress party.

regulating desire are being reconstituted and a new Hindu nationalist imaginary attempts to cannibalise all these new practices for its political project. There is no doubt that for the time-being at least, the claims of a legislative modernity are suspect. The panoptic vision of a regulated cultural practice, while voiced periodically, lacks the authority and legitimacy as in the past.²¹

In this liminal space mediated by various cross-practices, the elite cyberpublic occupies a hybrid space which attempts to emancipate itself from the nation, its Border and its political public. The modes of representation allude to a fluid space where the nation is present yet thoroughly displaced, informed by a hybrid language, styles, and volatile mixture of both presence and absence.

In this context, the Web offers the phantasmic possibility of playing with an identity that recognises dis-placement. The Journey into virtual space is the journey beyond the nation. For the web traveler, a typical member of the displaced elite public in India, the West is recreated/simulated as a *simultaneous* presence. There is a certain experience of web travel when logging on from the Third World, that almost evokes Benjamin's analysis of Baudelaire's *flâneur*, or the stroller in Second Empire Paris. The web-traveler in the elite cyberpublic seeks out the virtual space of the web to experience the "shock of the new", which Benjamin calls the distinctive feature of modernity. The images of the web, like the city in Haussmannised Paris are shot through with a phantasmic space where exist dream worlds of desire and consumption - the arcades in Benjamin's story and the web sites for our traveler. The city for the *flâneur* has a labyrinthine character, with secret passages, a web of experiences and unknown dreams which is sought out by the stroller.

This is where Baudelaire's *flâneur* - the mythic hero of modernism - and the late 20th century Indian web traveler part. For the *flâneur*, the crowd was the great veil between himself and the phantasmagoria of the city. For the web traveler of the elite cyberpublic, the journeys into virtual space perform the opposite function - of an emancipation *from* the "crowd" of real time.

Web strolling from India is an entry into a space whose virtuality enhances the feeling of being in the "West". In the context of other experiences of space-time acceleration brought about by the television revolution of the 1990's this feeling is magnified. This is an entirely *new* geography of desire, almost exclusively centred around sites in the West²². This is quite distinct from the new ethnographies of travel in the West.

Writing from a Western setting, James Clifford points out:

²¹This refers to periodic calls by groups for censorship of films with explicit sequences in the name of moral order. Most state attempts at widening censorship guidelines have been ineffective. In fact a recent Supreme court judgment struck down the verdict of a lower court preventing the screening of the controversial film *Bandit Queen*.

²²Sites located in India have almost no popularity with travelers who live in the country. Almost all the "hits" for Indian sites have been from abroad. See *Times of India* 22/5/96.

An older topography of experience and travel is exploded. One no longer leaves home confident of finding something new, another time or space. Difference is encountered in the adjoining neighborhood, the familiar turns up at the ends of the earth...

For the Indian web traveler, the incursions assume a search for a mythic space of modernity, where “newness” is emancipated from *territory*. Like Baudelaire’s *flâneur* who sought out the crowd in his search for ‘ever-new’, the web traveler journeys on the highway to look for the new. The web sites constitute a simulated exhibition (‘places of pilgrimage to the fetish commodity’-Benjamin) where the traveler-consumer, like the visitor to the 19th century site, is asked, “ look at everything, touch nothing.” (Benjamin in Frisby: 254:1986) These pilgrimages have the effect of an experience of modernity (shock, ecstasy, entry into power-knowledge spaces) hitherto unknown in the periphery - even for the elite. Yet they are fleeting experiences - burdened by real time constraints²³. For the web traveler the fleeting experience of transcending the Border, rather than long-term immersion into virtual space is the norm.

As mentioned before, web journeys are informed by a double-coding: one side of which is the elite cyberpublic’s emancipation from the old nationalist grid. The other side is the creation of a naturalised space of “India” on the web - initiated largely by Indians in the Diaspora. Dominated by expatriate Indians sympathetic to Hindu nationalism, these web sites²⁴ pose Hindu identity as isomorphic with India : a space purged of ambivalence²⁵. It is almost as if the old legislative modernity of the Nehru period has been transplanted to virtual space, purged of its democratic political sphere²⁶. In the virtual space of ‘India’ on these web sites ‘Hindu’ identity becomes an *artifact* - a contestable process is replaced by a reified boundary. For the NRI, the virtual space of India finally replaces the actual pressure of the Return. The Journey is now a sanitised one - no longer fraught with tension - the shock and complaints of peripheral poverty, the perplexities of cultural self-questioning. Here the web sites act as markers of homogenised spiritual space, with rigid cultural borders, where “India” functions as a virtual museum for those for whom Hinduism can fulfill the great unfulfilled dream of legislative reason - a world without ambivalence.

Both practices discussed in this cyberpublic are, in the old Marcusean sense, affirmative. In the first instance journeys into virtual space function as either a new post-national hybridity

²³Once again very few telephone connections manage to stay on-line for more than 20 minutes.

²⁴To be sure alternative sites set up by dissenting members of the expatriate community do exist. However these sites cannot compete with those of the right wing.

²⁵The web site of the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, which puts out an aggressive brand of nationalism based on majoritarianism and anti-Muslim rhetoric is, in fact, operated from the US! The irony of this was entirely lost on the leadership of the BJP.

emerging from the new elite enclosures of India. Here “hybridity” seems to have a very different function from the heroic status accorded to that term by post-colonial intellectuals in the West. In the case in point hybridity emerges from the new liminal cultural landscape of 1990’s India but also performs an act of closure vis-à-vis the popular-political. The aporetic position of this elite cyberpublic vis-à-vis the national through its new cyberjourneys is compromised by its complicity with the power of both local and multinational capital. On the other hand, the Hindu nationalist attempt to territorialise virtual space with its rhetoric of origins, of contamination, and of naturalisation remains the most reactionary attempt to invert the old Journey.

CYBERPUBLIC III Bulletin Boards, Activists and the search for Alternatives

The third cyberpublic remains the most ambiguous of the three domains of cyberdiscourses in India. Existing in the fluid space between of the state cyberpublic and the elite domains of the web, this cyberpublic contains within it a wide range of actors seemingly unconstrained by either the state or the transnational market. The map of this cyberpublic is typically rhizomic, a constantly-shifting zone of activist networks, small bulletin boards and dissident scientists. The borders of this cyberpublic are, once again fuzzy, sometimes operating within the grid of the national state network, sometimes playfully intruding into the more privileged web space dominated by private/multinational capital. Less hybrid than experimental, this public speaks to the possibility of radical reconstitution of electronic space as one which touches real time through its myriad surfaces.

In the opening up of electronic space beyond the frontiers of the state/market dichotomy, bulletin boards (BBS) have played a crucial role. Numbering just a few score until last year BBS’s have mushroomed not only in all the major metros but also in small towns all over India. Led by a combination of small business persons, computer/telecom graduates and those with skills acquired in the trade the BBS’s cater to a sector of the population who find both the web and the state networks inaccessible either due to prohibitive costs or lack of an imaginative space.

Initial BBS discussions concentrated largely on the computer trade - reflecting the users immediate concerns. Recent discussions have been broader, concentrating on politics and sexuality. The latter is a topic that most System operators tend to be wary of (most discussions are not yet on-line), but this has not prevented frank discussions of issues that have hitherto remained invisible from the public sphere. The BBSs have to walk a fine line, with recent media stories about

²⁶It is important to remember that despite all the authoritarian and disciplinary initiatives of Nehruvian panoptics, the relationship to the democratic political sphere prevented the realisation of a “totally administered society”.

sites offering explicit pictures for free downloading. State regulation is also a threat, with recent legislation threatening to tax the BBS's heavily - this threat seems to have receded, for the moment.

The BBS's are a recent phenomenon in India, and one is yet to see even the kind of experiments that the CommuniTree group initiated in the United States in the 1970's. However any comparison, or even the suggestion of 'fitting' India in an evolutionary schema based on the development of virtual systems in the West would be wrong. For a very, very, long time to come electronic space will be out of the reach of the majority of the urban population, let alone the those who live in the villages. The importance of the BBS's remains elsewhere.

Existing between the space of state control and the power of global capital, BBS's offer a novel form of agency *within* the discourses on virtuality. To sections of the urban population disembedded by globalisation and subject to the shock-like experience of the new Haussmannised city, the BBS's offer an important zone of engagement and the possibility of a new performative space. I use the latter with some economy. It is the very novelty of the BBS, along with its semi-underground status which opens up the possibility of experimentation - a process which has just begun. As sites proliferate, so will the variety of experiences, the inventiveness and technosocial practices. Women, hitherto a marginal voice in the BBS community, are slowly making their appearance. Strategies of self-representation remain dominantly realist, with users only using different 'faces' when discussing explicit issues. The historical identity of realism and scientific practices was hammered into the popular space by nationalism - hence the tendency to stick to a realist mode during the *initial* moment of initiation into technoculture by most novices. It seems to me that the time for a genuine *aufhebung* to a new non-realist mode of representation is already on the agenda of the BBS community.

Social movements, nationalism and technoculture

Most social movements in India have as their point of departure the cartography of the post-independence nationalist state. As pointed out earlier, the state privileged a model of development, iconised the dam and the steel mill as the imaginative reference points of development. The official discourse on science and technology remained within the framework of the developmental modernism imposed on the periphery. Here science and technology were opposed to culture, abstracted from notions of play, creative tradition and aesthetic experiment.

What is important is that the sites of nationalist science were symbolised by the magnified products of developmental modernism - the dam and the steel mill. The new social movements that emerged after the 1970's generated a critique of the technological/developmental imaginary of nationalism, stressing a range of alternative practices. The various movements (those of women,

untouchables, anti-dam) did not pose a cohesive alternative, their opposition to state-sponsored technological practices was generally uniform.

Thus when the computer was initially introduced in the 1980's as the neo-modernist successor to the dam, the hostility of both the new social movements and the old Left was total. They parodied the utility of the computer in a peripheral society like India, a critique that generally echoed then prevalent notions of utility, sustainability and concerns about workforce cutbacks. The fact that the computer was introduced with the old-style developmental rhetoric made the movements even more suspicious.²⁷

Today in the 1990's, the movements have come to not only accept the computer but also the creative possibility of networking. This is a dramatic change, for which a number of factors have been cited. In the first place the old movements are in a crisis - many have disintegrated and joined the NGO sector. The crisis of old-style nationalism and Marxism have reshaped the old reference points for the movements. The fast-growing NGO sector is linked to global donors, the sector's incorporation into global electronic space is only a matter of time. It seems to me that these factors are a necessary but not sufficient explanation for the widespread acceptance of electronic networks among the movement-community. At the heart of the transition are hidden issues of desire and identity which have been brought into play.

The old sites of the large-dam and the steel mill were enlarged symbols of the nationalist will-to-power, generating the violence of displacement and the destruction of local communities. As violent symbols these 'sites' are still the focus of large movements. On the other hand, the world of virtual space that exists 'behind' the computer lacks any corporeal violence associated with developmentalism. It seems to me that virtual spaces began to evoke a world of pleasure and initiation for individual activists, without the violence of developmental modernism. A certain aesthetics of experimentation had already been experienced by activists in their search for alternatives to developmentalist disasters. With the coming of e-mail, the Internet, and later bulletin boards a liminal space emerged, where utopian desires for modernity, the possibility of experimentation "without destruction", overlapped with the pleasures of initiation rituals into technoculture. Further there is the possibility of a dialogue with the self : the more rounded forms of identity in the nationalist period mistrusted ambivalence. In every sense new boundaries of imagination and agency have been created.

²⁷In addition the computer introduced was the old IBM PC with a rather unattractive modernist architecture. Macs were too expensive since clones did not exist.

To be sure, only a very small minority of activists are still connected . Those who are either urban, relatively affluent, or have access to global funds. But what is remarkable is the widespread legitimacy of electronic space among dissenters and activists, who would be equally critical of the technological monuments of nationalism. It could be argued that the entry of virtual spaces posed technology as a cultural practice in a way that the developmental modernism²⁸ of the Nehruvian period (with the singular emphasis on *monuments*) could never do. It anticipates a new situated technosocial space, perhaps a ‘cyborgness’ for the periphery. I use these terms with considerable hesitation, for reasons that will be spelt out later. But following Donna Haraway’s call for “situated knowledges” we can argue that new sets of practices could emerge in India which may mark the transition from the binary spaces of developmental modernism.

Developmental modernism operated within a Third World version of what Foucault has called the blackmail of the Enlightenment. Foucault uses this formulation in his famous essay on Kant’s “What is Enlightenment” to refer to the violence of the philosophical choices presented by the Enlightenment: “you either accept the Enlightenment and remain within the tradition of its rationalism...;or else you criticize the Enlightenment and then try to escape from its principles of rationality...”(1984:43) There is, says Foucault, simply no other choice: *no tertium datur*. In the Indian case, the canvas was less Olympian: it operated within the rather simplistic oppositions of development/science/progress versus tradition/reaction/stasis. For many decades the first triad was overwhelmingly hegemonic, based on the state’s monopoly of power and violence and even extending to old -Left oppositional movements. It is only in the recent decades with the rise of the new social movements, that elements of a genuine *aufhebung* have emerged. The old oppositions do not hold securely anymore - a discursive space of questioning has emerged, energising new exchanges on technology, tradition and popular experimentation²⁹.

The current generation of activists have been reared on this new diet, where opposition to large dams and displacement could go hand in hand (wherever possible) with ventures into virtual space. This transition is so significant that it is remarkable that it has gone unnoticed³⁰.

²⁸Developmental modernism does not entertain any dialectical doubt that was possible in Europe. Here the emphasis was more on functional mapping of space based on the triad development/science/nation. The pioneers of developmental modernism were neither artists nor philosophers but what Rabinow in his work on the French modern calls “technicians of general ideas”(1989); anonymous state managers who painstakingly built the model.

²⁹The demise of the aura of technology has also its flip side : the emergence of a technopia of global consumption which has as its main address the elite of the second cyberpublic.

³⁰The rapid rise of a mass consumption culture in the urban areas has removed the older aura around “technical” articles of consumption. Articles which the urban mass public previously saw only as exhibitionary items (where as Benjamin pointed out , “you could see, but not touch”), are now available for daily use. These include(public and private) telephones, televisions and, for the more affluent, VCR’s and

Nevertheless, despite the richness and potentials of the third cyberpublic in negotiating a space between the market and the state, the access to virtual space still remains a *privilege*. The plans of the state network ERNET to connect 8,000 colleges and schools will undoubtedly expand this public, however there is an urgent need to fight for cheap, publicly accessible networks. The current neo-liberal mood of the ruling elite is hostile to any public space in the electronic media, a long battle is ahead for activists³¹.

Conclusion: Artificiality, modernity and alternative futures in the periphery

We can now go back to Jameson's characterisation of our time as an inverted millenarianism. It cannot be denied that for the spectacular nineteenth century ideologies: marxism, liberalism and nationalism, the logic of disillusionment is complete. The great *aufhebung* has, in fact not obtained - the rather the idea of the *end* confronts all. The grand social subjects of the 19th century (the proletariat, the middle-class, the nation) have been confronted by a landscape of *death*. We are faced with the death of the social, the death of the subject, the death of the author, the death of the real, the death of the nation etc., etc. It is as if Adorno and Horkheimer's gloomy prognoses in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* have come true : modernity has become a giant graveyard.

Yet it is important to caution against premature burials. The punctuality of death is not a useful metaphor in social theory. It may be important to listen to Nietzsche's savage warning, "The destruction of an illusion does not produce truth but only one more piece of ignorance, an extension of our 'empty space', an increase of our 'desert'" (1967:327) It may not be necessary to go all the way with Nietzsche, but living in a country at the periphery of the great centres of capital accumulation, it may be useful to point out that an unmediated celebration of the "new" is not just not feasible, nor very interesting. Every historical appearance of "newness" in South Asia, right from colonialism to developmental modernism has been embedded in violence and domination. No amount of dialectical sophistry on modernity can erase that history.

At the same time it is not necessary to take adopt the position of a 19th century *Kulturkritik* in denouncing the cultural social landscape of our time and deny that fundamental re-organisations in the terms of representation, subjectivity and the old boundaries of Western modernity are taking place. In this sense Benjamin's classically modernist notions of the present as "eternal recurrence"

refrigerators. Though many activists who are into" cyberspace may be ambivalent towards the new consumption space, this a world where they work and struggle.

³¹Given the situation of widespread income inequalities of a country like India, some form of state funding is vital for the development of alternative networks. Private and multinational capital has shown little interest in developing alternative spaces - there is every likelihood this attitude will continue in the near future. The struggle must be however to create a genuine public space where access to networks is made as open as possible, without state controls.

or the “present as new” have little use in a world where old-style homogenisation of consumption spaces under capitalism have little for new strategies of capital accumulation. (Huysen: 1995:26)

For India, cyberspace and the cultural experiences that it evoked arrived as a representation of the “new”, in ways that were complexly coded³². A number of loose cyberpublics emerged: reflecting in diverse ways state, neo-elite and popular strategies to negotiate the crisis of the old Panoptical grid of nationalism and the supremacy of the Border.

Cyberculture also came to India within the framework of a new package of globalisation which contained within it a potent mixture of pleasure and danger. If on the one hand globalisation has unleashed a new discourse of consumption which unsettled the old nationalist/marxist denial of the consuming public, the ‘global’ also comes on the backs of the power of transnational corporations with their tremendous power and contempt for popular participation. As Virilio points out,” that the new communications technologies will only further democracy if, and only if, we oppose from the beginning the caricature of global society being hatched for us by big multinational corporations throwing themselves at a breakneck pace down the information superhighways.” (1995)

To be sure, the inherent feature of “newness” is contingency which may contain the possibilities of its demise. Says Huysen, ”our fascination with the new is always already muted, for we know that the new tends to include its own vanishing, the foreknowledge of its obsolescence at its very moment of appearance. The time span of the new shrinks and moves towards vanishing point.”(1995:26) The problem is, as I have mentioned above, the “new” does not reproduce itself globally in fundamentally similar ways. Despite all the fantasies of virtuality, “newness” is inscribed in a different set of overlapping imaginaries when it reaches a “Third World” country like India. *Contra* Virilio speed has many faces, and shall continue to do so for some time to come.

What is needed is an approach that is sensitive to the situated character of knowledge-formations and cyberpractices in the Third World, where narratives of critique and fluidity in the West may have entirely different consequences when re-presented in a country like India. Consider for example the emergence of new techno-practices in the West which have led to the blurring of the historical distinctions between nature and culture, between the body and the machine. As a number of writers (Haraway: 1991; Rabinow:1992; Stone: 1992) have pointed out, the overlap of

³²Even as perceptive an observer like Paul Virilio tends to miss the mediated character of this transmission. Arguing that cyberspace, heralds a new global time which is going to lead to the end of local times Virilio writes,” For the first time history is going to unfold within a one-time system: global time.....(I)n the very near future, our history will happen in universal time, itself the outcome of instantaneity -there only.”(1995) Virilio counters this bleak scenario with possibility of the “accidents of accidents” - the cyber-accident, when networks crash and capitalism ‘collapses’.

technology, biology and culture have led to a situation where the old distinctions between organicity and technology, between culture, experience and science, (where one or the other was privileged,) have lost their old categorical fixity. This involves a crucial transition from the old Enlightenment oppositions of nature and culture from which flowed the representations of human praxis and subject formation. As Rabinow argues, that while nature is being remodeled on the model of culture, the latter is re-constructed on the basis of nature.(Ibid)

What happens to this transition when it reaches the periphery of world-capitalism? The new biosociality is surely implicated in the plunder of plant species from the Third World and their re-location to the West; technoculture is a clear part of the new expansion strategies of multi-national companies in the periphery. Technosociality in India speaks to elite strategies of withdrawal and re-occupation of the national, it is also implicated in a culture of distinction and distance from the lives of the underprivileged.

My point is not to score old-Left polemical points against the new cultural constellations emerging in the West. The issue is that these constellations are part of a new flexible system of accumulation on a world-scale where “ a dizzying sense of bodily freedom” for one may mean displacement, and loss in another part of the world we live in. To neglect this would not just be unreflexive on the part of all of us who ‘live’ and enjoy the pleasures of virtual space - it would be connivance with the new grammar of power emerging on a world scale.

However boundary stories do matter, even on the periphery. The stories have been less about the individual body-space of the citizen as of re-writing new maps of the national, where cyberjourneys have punctured the old Panoptic Border. From the point of view of situating knowledge we can rewrite Haraway’s , brilliant statement on the idea of ‘nature’: “ The certainty of what constitutes the *nation*...(that is, as) a source of insight, a subject for knowledge, and a promise for innocence - is undermined, perhaps fatally “ (1985)

(Discussions with Ranjani Mazumdar, Shiv Visvanathan, Ashis Nandy, and Ravi Vasudevan helped clarify various issues in this paper. The responsibility for errors remains mine)

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