

CHRONICLE OF SARAI'S PUBLIC INAUGURATION

The Public Domain

The panel on the public domain was designed to draw upon social science and historical reflections on the concept, and to provide an arena for dialogue about the place of media culture in the history of the public domain. Rajiv Bhargava (University of Delhi) and Geert Lovink served as panelists and DL Sheth (CSDS) acted as the moderator.

Rajiv Bhargava, responding to the positions formulated by the Sarai initiative in the Sarai Reader, suggested that most of these tended to skirt classical formulations of the public domain, or, more specifically, of the public sphere. The crucial issue here for Bhargava was how classical formulations, centered on the discussion of how institutions are generated to enable discussion and the exercise of public opinion still remain highly pertinent, for public opinion provides a crucial lever or constraint on the exercise of state power. Bhargava's very clearly articulated defence of classical concepts of public discourse elicited a variety of alternative formulations. But central to most of these was skepticism about the value of a generalized notion of the public good in present circumstances. A countervailing logic was that perhaps power itself had become dispersed, and was exercised from a decentred set of locations in the social fabric, requiring different ways of public mobilization. But an entirely different logic of power and public expression perhaps does not account for the continued significance of state institutions and their harnessing of a generalized notion of the public good. In different ways, DL Sheth and Jeebesh Bagchi both suggested that the notion had tended to be used in a manner that sought to entrench elite interests and to marginalize the voices of those without economic and cultural capital. A relevant reference point here are the Supreme Court rulings of the last decade or so, in which public interest litigation tended to argue the case of interest groups and privileged sections over those of groups who would be marginalized by processes of development and urban cleansing.

Geert Lovink suggested that perhaps the current generation, especially that emerging from the European experience, had grown up in circumstances in which the state and a classically formulated public domain had never fulfilled a democratic agenda. Shuddhabrata Sengupta seemed to displace classical formulations altogether in his suggestion that there were longer histories of marginalized publics and practices to attend to, arguing for the tracing of a different lineage for imagining a decentred set of public formations in contemporary life. If in a sense this set of discussions tended to revolve around the validity of state institutions and more formalized public forums, a different sense of public spaces and interactions were pointed to in Prabhu Mahapatra's suggestion that the bazaar provides another and very durable locus for thinking about the exchange of goods, services and ideas. In the panel on social justice and the city,

Mahapatra argued that the contemporary diminution of trade unions occurred at a time when working peoples had sought out a variety of strategies which emphasised mobility and circulation over settled forms of employment and formalized bargaining. Informal labour markets, networks of information about employment possibilities, the drive to re-locate in new skills, all suggested a dynamic of public formation rather different from earlier forms. Much of this was very suggestive for thinking about the way in which the contemporary media context has opened up possibilities in an informal, culturally makeshift way, in affording access to communication, and to new forms of employment in a very dispersed media industry.

In this context, Bhargava's suggestion that the history of public discourses had to be complicated by a sense of the multi-topic dimensions of their articulation stresses the need to connect different types of experience, located in different spaces and practices, in trying to formulate the nature of a contemporary public domain. His remarks seem particularly significant for thinking about the differentiated field of media practices and publics, harnessing as they do segmented forms, languages and audiences. Subsequent discussions about this panel expressed the feeling that there was inadequate attention paid to the nature of different media forms and the types of public investment they solicited.

The place, for example, of media publics, the variety of imaginary worlds they cultivate through the media, and the political force of such investments should, we hope, constitute an important area for future engagement.

New Media

The new media panel at the Sarai opening included presentations by Ravi Sundaram (Sarai), Geert Lovink (Society for Old and New Media), Shuddhabrata Sengupta (Sarai), Eric Kluitenberg (de Balie). The overall thematic of the panel was to examine issues in contemporary new media, which were not nationally specific, and which could reflect on the changes in the past three years.

In his opening remarks Ravi Sundaram suggested that the crash of the NASDAQ and the end of the spectacular period of the dot-com expansion signaled a new phase in the self-representation of new media. In South Asia, political and economic elites nevertheless focused on the IT economy as a substitute for failed development. This raised a series of tensions, between state control and pirate expansion on the ground, between spatial re-organisation and social conflicts in cities.

Geert Lovink agreed with the new periodisation after the NASDAQ crash, pointing out that intimations of this downturn had been building up from the mid 1990's onwards. Lovink pointed to the fragility of the current scenario, with phantasmal strategies being offered by players in the

field for market expansion. He illustrated his point by playing a video parodying 'free' Internet services. For Lovink the fragility of the situation offered openings for critique and which needed to be explored.

Eric Kluitenberg's presentation was thematised as "Media without an audience". He argued that part of the problem has been looking at the Internet as an extension of the traditional broadcast system, with an active sender-passive audience relationship. He argued for the critical force of alternative net-based communities which "are beyond utility" and issues of "quality", which communicate with each other using a combination of low -cost satellite communications.

Shuddhabrata Sengupta pointed out that the Internet allowed users in South Asia to emancipate themselves, albeit temporarily, from national boundaries and build alternative networks of communication. Further he argued that the free software movement opened up a space that goes against the logic of the commodity in new media culture. These are radical possibilities that the previous media regime could not provide.

While both Lovink and Sundaram concentrated on the links between the economy and cultural politics, Sengupta and Kluitenberg argued for counter-cultural strategies. There was animated discussion in the audience over the latter, with many skeptical voices. The panelists however, held on to their own views.

The City and Social Justice

This panel was designed to reflect on contemporary Delhi through an exploration of its more 'marginal' constituencies; examination of issues of urban transformations and equity; and reflection upon the worlds of the urban labouring poor. The invited speakers were Dr. Veronique Dupont from Research Centre for India and South Asia, Paris; Mr. Dunu Roy from Hazards Centre, Delhi and Dr. Prabhu Mahapatra from the National Labour Institute, Delhi.

The panel began with a brief opening statement from Awadhendra Sharan on Sarai's project titled City Lives, which focuses on technology, environment and representation of the city.

The first presentation was by Dr. Dupont who looked at the transformations in the housing sector in the industrial township of NOIDA. Neglect of housing for industrial workers and the consequent transformations in erstwhile rural houses of the area that now accommodate almost the entire workforce was effectively captured through slides. Two images in particular stood out - the large single room tenements in which most workers live; and the redesigning of rural houses that leave little space for lighting and circulation (of air and people).

Dunu Roy's presentation was on the environmental history of Delhi. Using a map (created at his centre), he outlined the significant milestones in Delhi's urban planning that have a bearing on the environmental mismanagement of the city. Among other things, he pointed out that the lack of effective workspaces makes it inevitable that industries would come up in residential areas. The fact that current environmental debate in Delhi is caught in the 'livelihood' versus 'pollution' impasse can thus be directly linked to the way Delhi's spaces have been imagined.

Dr. Mahapatra's presentation was more reflective on the possible research agendas that must be mapped out to enable a better understanding of the shaping of urban experiences, especially of the poor. Two issues in particular merited concern. First, the declining public visibility of the working people at a time when their population may be at its largest historically. Second, the need to rethink the question of movement, away from a static city to countryside migratory imagination to looking at issues of circulation (within urban centres and from one job to another).

Cinema and the city: Ravi Vasudevan, Ranjani Mazumdar, Abhijit Roy

In keeping with the Sarai programme's focus on the urban experience, this panel had presentations that ranged across Indian popular cinema history and its representations of the city, and sought to outline various ways of approaching the relationship. Ravi Vasudevan introduced the session with some reflections on how, as a mechanism of representation, the cinema could not in any simple sense be reduced to the object of representation. Film has its own, very specific history of styles, genres, and distinct ways of manipulating the perception of space and time.

While cinema has dominantly been an urban form in the Indian context, early Indian film genres drew upon older narrative forms relating to myths and devotional stories, and have constantly been involved in looking at the relationship between city and countryside in ways which have given value to 'pre-modern' forms. This stance has fed into a certain privileging of the reproduction of community life, and especially of poor urban communities, in counterpoint to those sophisticated in the ways of city life. A video screening of *Jamai Babu* (silent, Kalipada Das, 1931) was used to suggest that the spectator of films about urban experience in the early period was placed in an ambivalent location, invited both to enjoy the clownish spectacle of a rural gentleman disoriented by the rhythms and mores of the city and to regard this experience with a sense of pathos. Such pathos engenders a certain reflective moment, asking the spectator to turn back on herself and reflect not only on the comic as victim, but how remote or secure she herself is from the alienating experiences of the city and modernity.

It was argued, of course, that there may also be a dissembling quality to narrative constructions which emphasise a thematic of alienation and an identification with traditional forms and relationships. These may displace attention from the fact that the cinema also generates a sense

of exhilaration in its capacity to move amongst spaces and times, and to register the heady momentum of modern urban experience.

This was indicated in the presentation of Ranjani Mazumdar. Drawing upon *Ghulam* (Vikram Bhatt, 1998), she focused on the importance of language and performance in the figure of the tapori, 'part small time street hood, and part the social conscience of the neighbourhood', in negotiating a pathway of play and, ultimately, dignity and moral probity through the social hierarchies and oppressive dimensions of city life. For Mazumdar the tapori as urban sign is a compendium of gestures, speech acts, sartorial statements who becomes an expressive vehicle of a certain plebeian approach to the manichean high-low, rich-poor divides of city life. Contra the privileging of traditional identities and ruralist stances towards the city, this figure represents a sense of urban being which delights in a capacity to negotiate the thickets of the city. In Mazumdar's analysis, this new, unapologetic and popular urbanism draws for its armature on international and national icons and styles and binds them together into a distinctive sub-cultural stance within the city.

Abhijit Roy's paper focused on the new, globalized media context in which cultural hierarchies were being reformulated in Calcutta. Roy situated his argument within the longer history of bhadralok cultural ascendancy, especially through paradigms of literary naturalism and realism which had been carried on into the domain of the cinema. He argued that new media and consumer cultures had provided new challenges and opportunities for a reformulation of this cultural authority which had historically placed a particular value on the command over information. The escalating amount of information available through news channels made news itself a domain to exercise authority over, and through which to demonstrate a capacity to enter new domains of knowledge. One of the effects of this drive, in Roy's formulation, is to problematize the relationship between public and private in social life, the private in a sense opened upto scrutiny by the public gaze. Roy relates this reformulation of authority to a new consumer culture which has its ramifications not only in broadcasting but in print culture. Drawing out the implications of this new cultural situation for the cinema, Roy highlighted two key figures in recent cinema, Aparna Sen and Rituparna Ghosh who edit important magazines and have made films which heavily reference journalism and demonstrate a new drive to penetrate hitherto screened off private spaces for the refashioning of cultural knowledge and authority.

Free Software Demonstration

On 25th February 2001 we had a free software demonstration session. We had a machine installed with Debian placed at café zone. The ambience was casual and warm. Although many people didn't have much idea about free software, but a lot of them had a great deal of curiosity! At the machine Pankaj, Supreet, Ruchika and Jeebesh were busy in explaining the actual

meaning and concept of free software. Pankaj and Supreet with their wonderline, "free as freedom not free beer" raised much interest among people. We soon found ourselves very busy explaining and demonstrating different aspects of free software. Pankaj and Supreet explained the technical aspect of Linux operating system and other free operating systems. Then they discussed the level of choices available for desktops in Linux.

After they left, Ruchika and Jeebesh started explaining different user-friendly software available in free software domain. First of all we talked about Star Office, which is a very handy alternative to MS Office. Then we moved to another software called Gimp. Gimp is an image manipulating software like Photoshop. Particularly, since we had designers among our curious audience, we had to explain Gimp in detail and we all discussed its many positive and some negative aspects compared to Photoshop.

To fulfill the curiosity of the audience, we had to mention other utilities available in the free software domain like MP3 players, Flash plugin, image browsing software etc.

Overall it was a pleasant and mind opening session. Quite a few people left the session pleasantly surprised, some inspired to work on Linux. And a few people with doubts and more questions in their eyes...

Contemporary New Media Arts

The Sarai opening featured two panels on Contemporary New Media Practice. These featured speakers and presenters from Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, India and the United States. In the first panel the speakers were, Erik Kluitenberg (de Balie, Netherlands), Samara Mitchell (Australian Network for Art and Technology, Adelaide, Australia) and Meena Nanji (Los Angeles, USA). Erik's presentation focused on the intersections of television and the Internet, and showcased a series of interventions by video artists and multimedia practitioners in web simulatory television ambiances. Samara's presentation focused on the inter-disciplinary discussions and collaborative practices between artists, practitioners and philosophers/theologians in Arcadia - an ANAT supported project on human machine interactions. She also presented some examples from recent new media works in Australia. Meena Nanji's presentation focused on her usage of the strategy and language of music video to reflect critically on the experiences and subjectivities of young Muslim women.

The second panel featured Nina Czegledy (Hungary/Canada - chair Inter Society of the Electronic Arts), Amanda Macdonald Crowley (Adelaide festival for the Arts 2002, Australia) and Monica Narula (Sarai/ Raqs Media Collective, New Delhi). Each of these presentations presented cutting edge work in new media practice with specific focuses on the body in the digital realm. Nina

Czegledy showcased a project curated by her - "Digital Bodies" which provided a telling glimpse into the intersections of Art, Science and Technology.

Amanda Macdonald Crowley presented a selection of new media arts from the last decade in Australia with a special focus on cyberfeminist interventions, specifically the work of the VNS matrix collective, Francesca De Rimini and Josephine Starrs. Monica Narula showed the recent work by Raqs Media Collective - "Global Village Health Manual" which juxtaposed nineteenth century popular print making from Calcutta with materials from the Internet to pose a series of questions on the body in cyberspace.

Both panels attracted considerable interest and discussions after the presentations centred on both the new modes of address and rhetoric as well as the ways in which crossovers between different practices characterize new media art.

On the Public Interface

It grew up, lived and took it's shape in the Sarai media lab, and Version 1 was on the public terminals for visitors from the 22nd of Feb., 2k1 - The Sarai offline public interface proved to be a delight for anyone who was interested in looking at good creative work and information.

The visitors, in between sessions, would visit the interface zone and the café in the basement, read through the archived material, look at interesting multimedia work and photographs, sometimes even email some material to themselves from the Interface. Sometimes they would be plain amused, and appreciative, of the animation and soundscape which comprised the basic home of the Interface. To give you a brief sketch, the Interface has various sections like the Academic resources, Archive, Gallery, Free Software, Encounters, Calendar, Search etc., where visitors were seen enjoying interviews by famous cinematographers, essays and even information on free software.

Another thing that people found interesting was that they could contribute their thoughts or responses to the Interface through various sections. Apart from the public terminals, the offline Interface was also available on a computer in the café, where visitors/ students could browse through it with some coffee and music, but, sometimes, email and net surfing proved to be a stronger attraction. All said and done, we would say that it was quite an informative and interactive experience. But to be honest, it is impossible to really understand and imagine all that it does without actually spending time on it - so we invite you all to come have a look!

Media: Access, Censorship and Freedom

This panel took up issues of access, freedom and censorship across various media forms. The discussion sought to look at censorship in its various overt and covert modes. Along with the vast

terrain of overt censorship, which the state carries out, there is a whole grey area of censorship within the media forms that is not very visible. This can be self-censorship induced by the logic of the market on part of a mainstream newspaper, censorship induced by sheer inability to access information, or contrarily by ignorance of the various channels of information available. The idea of the panel was not to provide definitive answers, but to open up a debate on these issues.

Siddhartha Varadraj, journalist *Times of India*, looked at the way news is produced and the way the very logic of news production in a mainstream newspaper spawns self-censorship. He also spoke of the constraints and pressure that print journalists face when tackling apparently sensitive subjects, and how it is possible to find some space even in this straitjacketed and regulated environment.

Arun Mehta, Internet activist, and president of the Society for Telecommunication Empowerment, pointed out that the ways in which new media is an arena which is incomprehensible to the government. The result is draconian legislation. Dr. Mehta, however, offered that the sheer expanse of the internet ensures a "bypass" that circumvents censorship, just by virtue of the multiplicity of sites and volume of information traffic. He also advised a serious use of audio, as sound by its very nature is accessible to all, allows for all kinds of languages to travel but is very difficult to store, retrieve and scrutinise by a censoring body.

Rehan Ansari, freelance media critic and writer from Karachi, presented a photographic view of Karachi, and talked about how the elite and non-elite areas of the city exist in mutually exclusive zones, and how the people in the city live in the shadow of terrorist group Lashkar-i-Toiba. This aspect is completely unknown to Indian audiences, due to the fact that this kind of information rarely filters through. Rehan also showed the website www.chowk.com, an online space for diverse people from India, Pakistan, and the diaspora.

Shuddhabrata Sengupta, writer and member of Sarai followed this strain further. He read out stories/letters which he encountered on the web while surfing during the Kargil war. The web here once again offered a space which was able to bypass nationalist warmongering on both sides of the border and questioned the basic premises of this manufactured conflict.

Deepika Mogilishetty and Debashish Shankari, associated with the Rights to Information project of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, put the issue of access to information in another perspective. They questioned the outdated Official Secrets Act, which is used by government to cloak and often engender corruption and bypass accountability. Information blockages, whether by the government, big transnational corporations or the private sector are a form of a violation of basic human rights and the public should be aware of it as such. The issue is not just about the

media's right to information, but of the expansion of this right to include members of the public. The activists for the right to information should then base their claim on the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression.

Literary evening: "Writing the City"

The literary evening on the 24th was meant to double up as the opening of the Sarai Café as well - an informal space to hang about and chat over cups of varieties of coffee served by Mukul and his friends. So the three invitees to Writing the City - Rehan Ansari of www.chowk.com from Pakistan, Anish Ahluwalia, painter, photographer and as we discovered, poet from Bombay and Sanjeev Kumar, storywriter, critic and scholar, Delhi refreshed the small but committed audience scattered around the café. Rehan recited fresh ghazals, Sh'ers (Urdu couplets) and Nazms of famous Pakistani poets. Anish Ahluwalia, whose installation for the Opening had already won the hearts of the visitors, demonstrated through some exquisite Hindi poetry what a powerhouse of creative energy he is. Now it was time for some poetry in Prose. Sanjeev traveled down memory lane to excavate sweet-sour and naughty tales from what is now the rubble of the Vaishali Cinema hall in Patna. Sanjeev and his group of friends grew up with hopes and aspirations associated with the prospects of the construction of a theatre in the neighbourhood. Their dreams- going through a roller coaster ride along with the uncertain career of the hall's construction - were partially fulfilled when it was ready and open for the public, but were ultimately frustrated when it was finally closed down amidst rumours of property disputes. In this biography of a theatre in a not-so-big town, Sanjeev managed to weave in anecdotes about particular films, popular digs at the so-called art cinema, and viewing experiences, including the perils and pitfalls of non-adult cine-going.

The session ended with the literally sweet tasting dinner from the nearby Gujrati Samaj.

Vishwayan aur Sanskriti: Badalta Manzar (Globalization and changing cultural realities)

This panel was organised in Hindi. Sudhish Pachauri, noted literary and media critic, in his reading, celebrated love in the age of Valentine's Day and juxtaposed it with the culture of intolerance around representation. A normative fixing of 'proper and pure' will keep running into the popular eclecticism of taste and behavior in a globalized and 'open source' environments, he said.

Aditya Nigam, scholar and activist, interrogated the belated and inadequate responses of the Left to the challenges posed by the globalizing process. Radical groups in India are fighting a defensive battle (witness the 'Save' campaigns) and are yet to lay down a positive agenda for the times.

Abhay Kumar Dube, writer and translator, was unwilling to go the whole way with Sudhish Pachauri and advocated a guarded response. Alok Rai, writer, underlined the ironies of representing the other in the programmes of channels like Discovery and endorsed caution about their efforts to 'Hindi-ize'. He also seemed to suggest that Sarai had come to propagate a kind of technological Utopia, a point often made in some of the informal conversations. The clarification to the contrary perhaps surprised and disappointed him and he called it 'dystopia'. Anyhow, a lively discussion emerged around big dreams, small dreams and technology and web culture and language. An important fallout of the panel was an article written by Sudhish Pachauri in his Rashtriya Sahara column the following Sunday in which he spoke, happily for us - positively - about Sarai.

This panel in the course of the afternoon, seemed to have taken on a life of its own and carried on and on, and finally had to be stopped!

