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Aswin Punathambekar
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Radhika Gajjala and Venkataramana Gajjala (eds), *South Asian Technospaces*. New York: Peter Lang, 2008. xii + 303 pp. ISBN 9780820481227, $32.95 (pbk)

Reviewed by ASWIN PUNATHAMBEKAR

*University of Michigan, USA*

Academic discussions of information and communication technologies in South Asia and other parts of the developing world have been dominated by a focus on questions of development and modernization. State institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and various supranational funding agencies have invested in a range of projects designed to harness Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D). Unsurprisingly, scholarly attention has focused on this domain and there is now a growing body of literature on the political, economic and cultural dimensions of ICT4D initiatives. With the exception of Sarai, the New Delhi-based research programme which has focused attention on various aspects of the relationship between information technology and urban culture, our understanding of South Asian ‘technospaces’ has been limited (see www.sarai.net). In conversation with the Sarai Readers, this anthology looks beyond the issue of digital divides and establishes the groundwork for more wide-ranging and in-depth explorations of technospaces in South Asia and other parts of the world.

*South Asian Technospaces* consists of 13 essays, and the editors’ decision not to organize them into sections speaks to the difficulty of isolating certain themes and issues. However, the editors do offer a useful overview of the essays and suggest one possible way to read them. Instead of a lengthy discussion of concepts such as virtual community and diaspora, they have contributed two chapters that situate the idea of diasporic networks in relation to political–economic developments in India over the past two decades (Chapter 2) and which problematize the notion of virtual community
from the perspective of South Asian diasporas (Chapter 3). Further, by
drawing our attention to the UK, where Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan and
Bangladeshi diasporic communities self-identify as Asian, Linda Leung’s
chapter (Chapter 1) shifts the focus away from Asian online communities in
the USA to underscore the importance of understanding how other diasporic
trajectories intersect with and complicate the US-centric narrative of the
high-tech South Asian (and often, Indian) diaspora.

Nabeel Zuberi’s chapter offers yet another perspective from which to
understand the relationship between ‘new media’ technologies and diasporic
formations. Examining the practice of digital sampling and South Asian-
inflected black music in particular, he urges us to consider how ‘the “black”
and “South Asian” converse and sound together’ (p. 49), and how popular
music serves as a technospace where cultural difference is articulated. Of
course, popular music in the South Asian context is connected centrally to
the cinematic, and Amit S. Rai’s chapter examines the implications of the
‘folding of cinema into various computer interfaces and across technological
platforms’ (p. 72). While Zuberi and Rai focus on transnational and trans-
media flows and convergences, the next two chapters invite us to consider
the relationship between new media and space from more marginalized
locations.

P. Thirumal narrates the story of a controversial internet campaign
revolving around the mistreatment of a Dalit employee of a reputed NGO
in India. Showing how the internet campaign raised questions about
technology, development and democratic politics in India, he argues that
the internet has emerged as a space where Dalits, marginalized by print and
electronic media institutions, are able to participate. In Thirumal’s view,
the internet does seem to offer the ‘newly emerging educated class of Dalits
a space to imagine themselves as a pan-Indian community’ (p. 105). Our
understanding of the role that new media can play in offering a space for
voices from the margins to craft and present narratives is enriched by Vinita
Agarwal and Patrice M. Buzzanell’s chapter on cybermohallas, a project that
seeks to ‘capture the ordinary events and relationships among people living
in transition in a temporary basti, or neighborhood, on the fringes of Delhi,
India’ (p. 123). Established by an NGO (Ankur) in collaboration with Sarai,
the cybermohalla project uses open-source software and low-cost media
equipment and involves an increasing number of youth in bastis across New
Delhi. Agarwal and Buzzanell’s analysis suggests that cyber-narratives can
provide several important insights into relationships that define the basti, a
locality that often is deemed peripheral.

While these two essays are concerned with questions of citizenship and
technospaces, Rohit Chopra grapples with this problematic more directly in
his analysis of online Hindu nationalism. Chopra situates his close reading of
two Hindu nationalist web resources – Hindutva and the Hindu Universe – in relation to two distinct models of the Indian nation-state articulated by Savarkar, an icon of Hindu nationalist political parties, and Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of independent India. Informed by debates on anti-colonial nationalism, Chopra develops a sophisticated account of how notions of scientificity and the ‘nation as cultural surplus’ serve as the ‘foundation of an imagined global Hindu Indian nation’ (p. 172). In so doing, Chopra also critiques and extends Benedict Anderson’s analysis of nationalism in order to deal with the complex relationship between electronic capitalism and nationalism in postcolonial and diasporic contexts. The question of national identity in an era of increasing global connectivity is taken up in the next three essays, which delve into the practices and politics of high-tech call centres in Bangalore and Gurgaon. Drawing on fieldwork at call centres and in-depth interviews with a range of professionals in this industry, the authors steer clear of both euphoric claims of a ‘flat world’ and easy dismissals of call centre workers as ‘cyber-coolies’. Paying attention to structural inequities that shape the call centre technospace and the burden of crafting and maintaining cybernetic identities, these chapters trace the impact of new work regimes on the personal and social lives of workers and their families.

Overall, every essay in this anthology is concerned with the political and cultural dimensions of information technology, new media and globalization. More specifically, they focus on how South Asians have come to inhabit and navigate technospaces in myriad ways. Using the term ‘technospaces’ to examine a wide range of sites and issues – from call centres and cybermohallas to Hindu nationalism and caste politics – the chapters here signal and move toward a problematic which cannot be approached or understood solely within the terrain of cyberculture, new media or diaspora studies. Together, the essays do fulfil the promise offered by new ‘maps of “South Asia” in relation to global technospaces produced through and as a consequence of economic globalization’ (p. 1).