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Inhabiting Cyberspace in India

Theory, Perspectives, and Challenges

 Springer

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Inhabiting Cyberspace in India: Theory, Perspectives, and Challenges is an attempt to locate the digital presence within the locational boundaries of India. The understanding behind this project comes from a simple question can we read a phenomenon made available through economic globalization in a completely contained manner? Do the questions pertaining to digital studies transform when applied to a national context? This thought made itself apparent during the discussions and academic exchange that started in 2012 in a research seminar titled, ‘Cyber-ian Turn in Culture’, when research scholars were more interested in tapping the significance of digital presence in India. This book is an attempt to present a theoretical framework to locate a structure enmeshed with economic, social, and political index within a universalized and imaginary digital. Springer Nature helped us present these ideas in the form of this book, and we are especially thankful to Satvinder Kaur, Gowrishankar Ayyasamy and Arun Kumar Raviselvam. We hope that this book ruptures the binary language of the digital and germinate ideas for more rewarding sociocultural discussions in the future.

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Chapter 1

Introduction



Inhabiting Cyberspace in India: Theory, Perspectives, and Challenges

Simi Malhotra, Kanika Sharma, and Sakshi Dogra

In a recent survey on Internet users in the world, conducted in March 2020 by Internet World Stats, Asia tops the graph by 2300 million users and India takes about 24.3% of that share which is only second to China.¹

These numbers are descriptive of a phenomenon that we are widely aware of, i.e., the presence or rather the penetration of Internet in India, which is constantly growing and transforming the socio-cultural space and our interaction both as an individual and as a collective with it. This collection of essays tries to uncover the political potential of this very socio-cultural space by initiating discussions on identity formation, alter-collectivities and consumption practices, and aesthetics that germinate from studying cyberspace in India.

The definition and understanding of cyberspace have gone through a long line of negotiations from the envisioned science fiction model of William Gibson in 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, followed by a more coherent interpretation of that reality by Michael Benedikt in 1996 (Benedikt 1991, 1996). From then on, with every technological advancement and new innovation, both through hardware and software, cyberspace has ushered a redefinition of the rules of engagement with our immediate

¹<https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>.

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material reality. Cyberspace has become a diversified theoretical concept heavily grounded in the networked reality of virtual hyper-real environments and digital immersive systems. For instance, easily available VR headsets, Augmented Reality and Mixed Reality devices are interfacing with intuitive gestures and emotions.

Since the concept and the field of cyberspace are ever evolving, with more and more web pages indexed every minute, it is crucial that we be selective. The only node that remains a constant in these debates is the Internet, its resultant culture, and its multitude existence of information and communication networks. This then is also our focal point of interaction with cyberculture in this project of ours. In this book, we exclusively focus on cyberculture as it exists in India, both online and offline. We are interested in the interactions and engagements of people on/with the Internet. And instead of settling for a static and flawed bifurcation of reading cyberspace as either simply liberating or demonically oppressing, the book talks about instances of how physicality of the events hosted in India is important to redefine the generic understanding of cyberculture.

One cannot dismiss the presence of technology and the way it has shaped and continues to shape our lives today. But this ubiquitous nature is also marked with obscure elements of a binary language of coding and hardware, which makes it difficult to unruffle and connect issues pertaining to a socio-cultural collective that constitutes our cyber-cultural horizon today. The pervasive and ever-evolving nature of cyberspace often leads us to think of it as a digitized superhighway, devoid of any history or a specifically marked spatial terrain. However, through this work, we attempt to redefine this model of understanding in order to engage with questions of politics, class, gender, labor, sexuality, and culture in cyberspace.

Our conjecture is that questions concerning identity forces cyberspace to be envisioned with history and space, a history that is not just bound by teleological digital progression but by marking events that spearhead cultural movements offline. For instance, the more recent movements of digital activism from hashtag revolution, #MeToo, #Hokkolorob, #JeSuisCharlie, Arab Spring, Occupy Movement and #BlackLivesMatter to name a few, to more democratic, cooperative digital platforms, such as SomComuns, hacktivist organization Anonymous and the inventive app Periscope, all have been increasingly using the digital platform to bring about social change in their own ways. The targeted hashtag revolution goes beyond the culture of slacktivism and clicktivism, where individuals click on online petitions in isolation without concern for its political impact. These movements function on performing a collective action not just through the virtual space but through its impact on the streets as well. There is thus an urgent need to address the cultural space which entirely redefined communication, identity politics, aesthetics, entertainment, market, and questions of labor.

The slow death of Indian cyber cafés in the last 20 years creates a perfect starting point to understand the presence of the Internet and its devices and the collective engagement it offered to a generation of users. The very first of these cyber cafés popped up in 1996 in Mumbai's five-star Hotel Leela, and another one followed in ITC Maurya Hotel, and within a matter of ten years about 200,000 of these cyber cafés had popped up across the country, where one would pay hourly and spend

what seemed like eons to wait for the dial tone modem to connect to the Internet and our first interaction with the world wide web began. These spaces that mushroomed in the country and served everyone from school kids, teenagers to old uncles and aunts, were essentially created for Internet surfing/browsing. From understanding chat rooms, playing games, checking exam results, booking tickets to watching porn, these spaces created a pocket in our social and cultural landscape. They existed and proliferated not only because the Internet access and its devices were expensive, but also the hardware and software were pretty unintelligible because of its coded language. Subsequently, with the mass availability of mobile phones and cheaper laptops, the disappearance of cyber cafés was inevitable. However, the appearance of the Internet on our social and cultural horizon determined the very modes of production, consumption, and distribution and also rules of engagement, be they economic, cultural, or social.

Even though not unique to India, the narrative of technological advancement was also attached to national development. As Punathambekar and Mohan write, “The growing prominence of the Internet and other digital media technologies was linked to a discernible shift in national imaginaries that saw governments and market forces in South Asia and across the Global South come to regard digital infrastructure as central to national development” (Punathambekar and Mohan 2019). Added to this is the mushrooming of call centers, geeky software developers and cheap software testing, and click-farms that dot the new reality in India. This image creates a stark contrast with the global digital movement, particularly in the Northern hemisphere. (2–3) More than the difference in experience, it is the entire socio-economic policy and the transformed cultural space which makes the investigation into the initial interaction of individuals with the Internet intriguing. Cyberculture in India thus provides an exciting and enriching space to interrogate formative movements offering a unique perspective.

This, in turn, posits a need to engage with theoretical works that understand these shifts as not just representative of a third world country and/or clubs important moments/movements with the discourse highlighting lack of resources of India but rather we should locate the groundwork for new theoretical models based on the spaces that are uniquely created, disrupted and reconfigured as a consequence of this shift. The current volume with its diverse collection of essays is important especially at a time when various digital humanities departments in India are formulating and are encountering the need to understand the locational presence of digital debates in our current context. Each of the sections of the volume attempts to raise issues to unravel the jargon around cyberspace and talk about the relational aspect of our interaction with it in India. The theoretical and philosophical events analyzed in this collection bring forth the questions of relationality vis-à-vis all aspects of cyberculture in the country, from the physical to the virtual.

The first section titled “Cyber-critiques: Of Exclusion, Surveillance, and Co-optation” opens with a very vital question of accessibility to the Internet against the backdrop of severe disparity in the socio-economic demographic of India. The section also talks about surveillance as a way to navigate and condition the digital populace and debunks the narrative of the success of the IT industry in India as a milestone in

national growth. The section largely focuses on how cyberspace in India is far from the notion of an inclusive and emancipatory space it is usually made out to be. From understanding this lack (both structural and cultural) which is unique to a stratified country like India, the second section titled, “Cyber-politics: The New Media and Alternate modes of Resistance” explore the political participation that the Internet enables. Despite its problems the Internet creates “alternate spaces” for identity formation and alter-collectivities whether they be in the form of feminist movements such as formative cyber activism that started with the Pink Chaddi Campaign. The success of these movements stands testimony to a complete redefinition of questions of gender, identity, and politics. The third section, titled, “Cyber-aesthetics and Narratives of Leisure” explores the spatiality of the medium through which a user navigates the space. The ever-evolving platforms of entertainment and leisure, that cyberspace offers become an interesting study of changing modes of produsage in the domain. The section discusses the asymmetrical relationship between individual agency and collective productivity vis-à-vis online consumption practices such as watching pornography, listening to popular songs, and producing memes. The concluding section titled, “Cyber-narratives: Roleplaying, Interactivity, and Authority” take this discussion forward and tries to locate the agency of the individual in cyberspace through the inception of immersive digital technologies and Electronic literature. Moreover, the continued engagement with cyberspace reveals that is not just changing our understanding of socio-cultural identity and expanding spaces of participative politics but is also creating new digital formations that are altering the identity, market, and consumption models like never before.

Cyber-Critiques: Of Exclusion, Surveillance, and Co-optation

We have always bought into the initially marketed idea of the Internet as a neutral ground, enabling progress and global avenues for growth, but the first section shows how this insidious nexus of information society and technological progress is nothing but a realignment of new channels of capital inflow and opportunities. The book begins with a criticism that is often omitted when discussing the inundated idea of cyberspace as ubiquitous and offering illuminous potential to humans through information technology. This criticism gives us a perfect start to understand how cyberspace when read vis-à-vis specific geographical location (for us it is India), provides an insight into a sense of unique and contextual challenges. These include a catalogue of exclusionary politics, digital colonialism, and most importantly, currency of access enabled and surveilled technology whose distribution is incumbent on class-based structures.

The first paper by Satadru Chatterjee, “Finless Fishes in the Cyber-ian Sea: Internet and Exclusion in India”, looks at access in terms of affordability or the lack thereof. He argues that in the discussion of the digital divide both within and outside of