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# Sarai

## One Year in the Public Domain



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Sarai ([www.sarai.net](http://www.sarai.net)) is an interdisciplinary program of research and creative experimentation with old and new media in urban spaces. It was launched in February 2001 at the Center for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi. This essay sketches the history of the Sarai initiative, outlines its primary concerns with urban cultures and city spaces, new and old forms of media practice, and research into the politics of information and communication. The text is also an account of the different kinds of energies—ranging from theory, research, media practices, public cultural intervention, publication, and online as well as offline discursive spaces—that animate the space of Sarai.

**Although Sarai opened** its doors to the public of Delhi only a year ago, the ideas that crystallized into the actual making of the space have a history that goes back to 1998 in Delhi. The 1990s had been a decade marked by doubt and rethinking on many fronts, all of which seemed to have come to a head for some of us during the summer of 1998. There was a sense of disquiet with increasing urban violence and strife, dissatisfaction with restrictive modes of thinking and practice within mainstream academia, the universities and the media, and a general unease at the stagnation that underlay the absence of a critical public culture.

At the same time, Delhi witnessed a quiet rebirth of an independent arts and media scene. This became evident in exhibitions and screenings that began taking place modestly in alternative venues, outside galleries and institutional spaces, and in archival initiatives that began to be active. Spaces for dissent and debate were kept alive by clusters of teachers and

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Author's Note: This article is based on a talk given by the author at Sarai, on the occasion of Sarai's second anniversary in February 2002.

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students in the universities. New ideas, modes of communication, and forms of dissent were being tried out and tested on the streets.

It was from within this ferment of ideas, rough and ready plans, and fragments of proposals that a series of conversations on film history, new media theory, media practice, and urban culture between Ravi Vasudevan and Ravi Sundaram (fellows, Center for the Study of Developing Societies) and Jeebesh Bagchi, myself, and Shuddhabrata Sengupta (the Raqs Media Collective, Delhi) was able to mature into the conceptual foundation of Sarai.

Sarai (the space and the program) takes its name from the caravan-serais for which medieval Delhi was well-known. These were places where travelers could find shelter, sustenance, and companionship; they were taverns, public houses, meeting places; destinations and points of departure; places to rest in the middle of a journey. Even today, the map of Delhi carries on it twelve place names that include the word Sarai. The Sarai Initiative interprets this sense of the word *sarai* to mean a very public space where different intellectual, creative, and activist energies can intersect in an open and dynamic manner to give rise to an imaginative reconstitution of urban public culture, new/old media practice, research, and critical cultural intervention. The challenge before the founding group was to cohere a philosophy marrying this range of concerns to the vision of creating a lively public space where research and media practice could flow into each other. We were interested in the way in which we could see the urban space we were located in begin to reveal itself to us as a dense communicative network.

We saw this network as a matrix within which new and old technologies and practices of communication—ranging from print to photography to film and the internet—were able to constantly renew a dynamic media ecology. It was evident that the network was kept alive by a technologically astute street-level creativity in the making and transmission of signs, through informal appropriations of new media forms. At the same time, it was besieged by powerful state and corporate media interests that sought to regulate access and act as gatekeepers.

Sarai was the focus of our desires to understand and intervene in this space of contested meanings and transmissions. It took two years (1998–2000) to translate this conception into a plan and then into a real space and to design a workable multidisciplinary program of activities.

Today, there are eighteen people working at Sarai on a range of projects. There are media practitioners, academics, designers, legal researchers, programmers, and cultural workers from a variety of backgrounds. We have an active fellowship program, and Sarai has visitors and interns working with us who come from different parts of India and the world. There are screenings, talks, exhibitions, and a calendar of seminars, besides the

media lab and the outreach program. All these activities only make us realize how much more there is still for us to do at Sarai.

What follows is an attempt at communicating some of the excitement of being in Sarai, and I hope that by bringing the reasons for that excitement into what we (ever since the first *Sarai Reader*) have grown accustomed to calling the "Public Domain," this text can suggest something of the many energies that animate Sarai as a space and as a cluster of activities and interests.

We have often been asked, What do you do at Sarai? Where in all the spectrum of activities and projects is the focus that animates Sarai?

I will try and answer this with a series of instances of the kinds of work and the processes that have been at play here. But before I do that, I would like to dwell on two terms—*collaboration* and *commons*—that have translated into key concepts for us.

So what do these two words—*collaboration* and *commons*—mean when we deploy them to describe or qualify what we do, and also who we are? For us, collaboration denotes those encounters and processes that entail a synergy between discrete forms, practices, and cultures. These can be between media practice and media theory, between designers and researchers, between programmers and artists, between people in a *basti* (a squatter settlement) and people in a digital lab, between practitioners across borders and cultures in an electronic public domain, and between languages.

Typically, the city as a cultural form is the arena in which such encounters are played out to their fullest potential. A program such as ours that foregrounds the urban as a category for reflection in this sense mirrors the sensibility of the city.

Sarai renders these reflections public through a constellation of media practices ranging from print, video, and sound to the internet and digital art. All this contributes to, and takes place within, a notion of the commons—a metaphor taken from the ways in which resources and space have been held together through history and which is now deployed to suggest an accretion of cultural energies and materials that are openly available and that are built over time, through shared endeavors, in the public domain. The commons is the frame within which collaborations take place. This, we would suggest, is how the city, media, and the public domain hang together in our frame of things.

How then does this translate into actual practice? I would like to offer a few instances from the past year at Sarai. A residency that Sarai shared with Khoj, an artists network, to host Syeda Farhana, a photographer from Dhaka, Bangladesh, led to her creating a hypertextual photographic installation on Bangladeshi migrants in Delhi in collaboration with Joy

Chatterjee in the Sarai media lab (see [www.sarai.net/compositions/images/farhana/Html/index.htm](http://www.sarai.net/compositions/images/farhana/Html/index.htm)).

The work done by her constituted not only a stand-alone digital work but also the nucleus of a set of materials in the Sarai archive of the city. There are several levels of interaction here: between Sarai and another institution, Khoj; between Farhana and us at the media lab; between photography and digital media; and between art practice and an archival imperative. This is an example of the ways in which the word collaboration comes to mean what it does at Sarai.

One of our print media fellows—Frederick Noronha—is working on a documentary history of the free software movement in India. His research methodology involves an active posting mechanism. He posts his queries onto a series of electronic lists, and the queries and the responses, as well as what he writes in the form of notes, observations, and essays, are made available online. In this way, an archive of materials is formed out of the growing correspondence between him and his subjects, for all of whom the project that he has embarked on is essentially a collaborative venture to write their history together with him (see <http://opennews.indianissues.org> and <http://linuxinindia.pitas.com>).

There are nineteen other such grants; with academics, activists, independent researchers, and media practitioners working on a variety of projects ranging from histories of urban localities to soundscapes to graphic novels and reportage.

These various research and practice projects that are in a sense located outside Sarai are offset by a central research and theoretical agenda that animates a lot of the intellectual work that goes on at Sarai. This is the cluster of activities governed by a research emphasis called the “Publics and Practices in the History of the Present.” Work in this area is underway as a unique set of activities that involve practitioners, theorists, and researchers in a repertoire of explorations. Although on one hand it might involve photographic documentation of the lobbies of old cinema halls, or the electronics bazaar at Lala Lajpat Rai Market, and detailed ethnographies of media spaces, it also involves practitioners, researchers, and theorists at Sarai working together to arrive at conceptual categories with which to think through the very idea of what Ravi Sundaram likes to call the “messiness” of the contemporary!

Collaboration also informs the making of the *Sarai Reader 02—The Cities of Everyday Life* (see [www.sarai.net/journal.reader2.html](http://www.sarai.net/journal.reader2.html)). It has been from the very beginning a collective endeavor, with five of us at Sarai interacting closely with Geert Lovink from the Waag, now in Sydney, and then with us at the media lab working in tandem with Pradip Saha, the designer of the book. I think that in this case, the results of collaboration are very visible.

The richness of textual forms, and of approaches, and yet the clear presence of a focus on the city as an object of knowledge, interpretation, and reflection of this order is seldom possible to achieve without the coming together, the concert, of many energies, curiosities, and passions.

What is even more interesting is that it is clear to us that the book in its print form is very much something that emerges from those aspects of new media practice that interest us at Sarai. This can be substantiated by the fact that this is a copyleft work and is produced through a collaborative editorial arrangement. But I think that this new medianess is true even of the form and argument of the structure of the book. The texts that constitute the book may be arranged sequentially, but they follow a hypertextual logic (and can be read through each other in a way that a linear arrangement of texts may not be) that is also a result of our increasing online engagements. Take, for instance, the online dialogues culled from the Reader List. The list itself emerged from the publication of *Sarai Reader 01: The Public Domain* (see [www.sarai.net/journal/reader1.html](http://www.sarai.net/journal/reader1.html)) as a loose discussion group that wanted to look at the contents and themes of the first reader. Over the year, it has grown into an active discursive community, and many postings made on the list have now entered this year's book in print form. A book gives rise to an online community, and the online community gives rise to content for a book (e-mail: [reader-list@sarai.net](mailto:reader-list@sarai.net)).

Public engagements that have found their way into the book are not only online ones alone. An important section in the book emerged out of the workshop on cinema held at Sarai, and Ranjani Mazumdar, Ira Bhaskar, and Moinak Biswas, each of them independent film scholars (Ranjani in Delhi and New York, Ira in Delhi University, and Moinak in the Department of Film Studies at Jadavpur University, Calcutta), have had their insights relayed into the book via the workshop. Another example of this process at work is the way in which a set of film screenings can animate a discussion that feeds into a text for the Sarai Reader. Nitin Govil (film studies, New York University) curated a set of science fiction films at Sarai last fall, and the work that he put into contextualizing the films to a Delhi audience also translated itself into an essay on the city in science fiction for the second reader.

This model of creating works and processes that embody an encounter between different communicative practices is something that we have been able to arrive at over the past year, and we have been able to do so because the work we do at Sarai is multidisciplinary. It is an assemblage of practices and discursive acts, of an interweaving of different rhetorics, of different modes of address, of diverse technologies of communication.

Another instance of this process at work is the experiences we have had in actualizing one of our core Outreach activities—the Cybermohalla Project (see [www.sarai.net/community/saraincomm.htm](http://www.sarai.net/community/saraincomm.htm)). The Cyber-

mohalla Project is an experimental initiative for the creation of nodes of popular digital culture in Delhi in collaboration with Ankur: Society for Alternatives in Education, a Delhi-based nongovernmental organization (NGO). The word *Cybermohalla* suggests a hybrid location that has the open-endedness of cyberspace, qualified by the local specificities and intimacy of a *mohalla*, or a dense urban neighborhood.

The project works with young people living in slum settlements and working-class neighborhoods who are disadvantaged by lack of access to cultural and social resources. The project brings together the energies of community-based social intervention; creativity with texts, sound, and images; and innovative uses of computers and digital technology while remaining alert to the imperatives of social and cultural specificity and autonomy.

The Cybermohalla Project was one year old in May 2002. In this one year, we have witnessed the confident articulation of the visions of a group of fifteen young people, primarily young women, from the mainly Muslim settlement of the Lok Nayak Jai Prakash (LNJP) Basti, Ajmeri Gate, Delhi. They have acquired considerable technical skills in handling computers, digital cameras, audio recorders, and scanners and have created wall magazines and basic hypertext markup language (HTML) projects using computers and free software applications. Excerpts from texts written by the young people have been published in the *Sarai Reader*. We have also produced a separate bilingual book *By Lanes*, which is from the texts, images, and drawings created by them. The book was published in July 2002.

Making our work public, whether on the web site or through print, is an important part of our activity. With two *Sarai Readers* already published, and a *Sarai Hindi Reader* as well as a book dedicated to the Cybermohalla project, it is possible to say that Sarai is as much about print as it is about other media technologies. If one takes the second reader as an example, it becomes evident that the coming together of forms and practices has pushed open possibilities of what the pleasures of making a book can be. This is why the term *new media* for us is not so much about the novelty of computers, multimedia, and the internet as it is about new forms and strategies of practice, about innovative recombinations between old and new media, between and across print, film, video, television, radio, computers, and the internet.

We are keen to effect crossovers and transgressions that displace both old and new hierarchies, which privilege neither tradition nor novelty for their own sake, and give rise to a more layered and agile form of media practice that is more reflective of the contemporary in our spaces. This means being as invested in the making of print objects, visual works, and soundscapes as in the creation of web content and looking for ways in which practices and objects can straddle offline and online trajectories.

We are also working on a number of new media projects that examine questions related to claims and contests around issues of space and access in the urban environment and explore the idea of a so-called digital commons. We hope to realize at least three to four major new media projects around these themes this year on a variety of platforms—on the internet as installations, and in the form of publications. Significant among these is the “Co-Ordinates Delhi” (authored by Raqs Media Collective at the Sarai media lab), which will be shown at Documenta 11, Kassel, and the parallel online environment—the OPUS project, which is an intermedia platform for locating media and art practice within a digital commons. OPUS will be a space in which old and new media can meet online and create hybrid works through dispersed authorship. It is inspired by the basic principles of openness and collaboration that animate the free software milieu and bring them into the field of general cultural practice. This presumes the cultivation of a sensibility of creative and intellectual sharing, collaboration, and free exchange. The OPUS project has benefited enormously from the contributions of Silvan Zurbrugg and Bauke Freiburg, both students of digital media (from Zurich and Amsterdam, who have been in residence with us) and have worked alongside the rest of us at the Sarai media lab.

A central thread running through our work is the politics of information and communication; the question of, Who can access which tools to say what to whom, who can know what, what is openly knowable, who is the object of knowledge for whom . . . and so forth. Hence, our engagement with technology as cultural form and as the crucible of a new contest of power is the point of departure of a series of ways of thinking through issues related to the building of a new creative commons and an information commons.

It is this emphasis on realizing a concrete practice located within a space of the sharing of knowledge and creative resources that explains the key importance of free software at Sarai. We are interested in free software not only because it makes economic sense in an Indian context to not spend a lot of money on expensive proprietary software but also because we believe there are crucial issues of cultural freedom and creativity that are at stake here. And the insistence that access and control over the technologies of communication and information must be opened out is central to democratic practice of culture. We want to contribute to autonomous, collaborative energies in the field of software, culture, and communication technology, which are conducive to diversity. That some of these energies challenge, or at least are skeptical about, the commodification of digital culture across the globe is something that we would like to see foregrounded in a lot of the work that we do.

The emphasis on creating a more democratic notion of knowledge practices has also involved thinking about enhancing public access to cultural



materials and intellectual resources. Sarai encounters these issues by working toward a public-access digital archive of contemporary urban culture by participating in a network of emerging archival initiatives by creating a free space for exhibition and dialogue at the Sarai Interface Zone, and also by initiating an Academic Resources Project that hopes to enable greater access to key texts and documents for the humanities and social sciences to the university community in Delhi and to independent scholars and researchers by inviting writers, researchers, and publishers to locate their work within the public domain.

The thrust on the politics of information in *Sarai Reader 02* and a successful workshop on law, surveillance, and the possibilities of thinking through the ideas that might animate a notion of an infocommons have resulted in the need for a sustained engagement with the legal regimes that surround the domain of information, communication technologies, and culture. The workshop itself (held immediately after the launch of the *Sarai Reader 02*) featured discussions and presentations by activists, media practitioners, and researchers on surveillance, censorship, free speech, free software, cyber laws, and the right-to-information campaign in India. This workshop helped lay open the ground for a public debate on the politics of information, as well as the domination of the media and communication technologies by entrenched interests.

A direct result of the workshop has been a new Sarai research engagement with the legal universe that surrounds the assault on the idea of a cultural commons by the regimen of intellectual property rights. A legal research project to look at the law, commons, and intellectual property has recently been inaugurated at Sarai. This project will be coordinated by Lawrence Liang and Sudhir Krishnaswamy from the Alternative Legal Forum, Bangalore. It will involve analysis of constitutional provisions, case laws, comparative legal histories, legal philosophy, and documentation and comment on current matters. An online discussion list—[commons-law@sarai.net](mailto:commons-law@sarai.net)—has also been initiated to facilitate greater dialogue and discussion on these questions and to build a community around this research.

Sarai is interested especially in those media cultures that lie in the shadow of technological and social elites. We are interested in speaking to critical voices that produce and live the new media, which may exist in the street, the software factory, the worlds of the local *videowalla*, the neighborhood Public Call Office/cyber cafe, the gray markets in music, computers, and other mediaware. This is the electronic everyday, which resides in the shadows of the spectacular media space conjured by the media empires in South Asia and will be very much an area in which Sarai's work is slated to grow in the near future.



I hope that all this gives a sense of who we are and what we have been up to in the past year. It is evident, but I will say it regardless: We are busy, we are public, we are open, and we intend to stay that way.

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