# Unit 18
# Indian Diaspora in Cyberspace

## Contents

**Learning Objectives**

After completing this unit you will be able to :

• Define virtual community

• Have an overview of the history of Indian diaspora and its relation to cyberspace

• Have an understanding of socio-cultural and economic issues at the intersection of the virtual and real in relation to diaspora online

• Begin to understand the implications of Indian diaspora online

## 18.1  Introduction

In this unit we will examine yet another aspect of interlinkages between diasporas, and this time we discuss connections between diaspora that happen in cyberspace. As we have mentioned earlier too the globalised world has made it increasingly amenable for the use of telecommunication and digital devices which make communications possible and communication that cut across time and space. In that sense the digital communications are different from face to face communications which happen in the same physical space. In this unit we will try and understand what we mean by cyberspace and virtual community and whether such communities are possible. We will then examine the specific case of Indian diaspora in relation to the online and cyber world and what space they occupy and how they articulate their sense of community through what actions. In analysing these concepts and phenomena we will be examining the relevant literature in this area as well.

## 18.2  Defining Cyberspace

David Whittle traces the origins of the concept to Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock*. Whittle writes that although the author of the science fiction work *Neuromancer* William Gibson is most often cited as the writer who coined the term cyberspace, "Gibson himself reportedly credits the concept to John Brunner, author *of Shockwave Rider* ," who in turn credits Alvin Toffler as the author who introduced the concept of cyberspace (Whittle, 1996).

> ## Box 18.1: What is Cyberspace?
>
> In the second edition of The *World Wide Web Unleashed*, John December and Neil Randall offer the following definition of cyberspace:
>
> *Cyberspace* refers to the mental construct a person generates from experiencing computer communication and information retrieval. The science fiction author William Gibson developed this term to describe the visual environments in his novels. Gibson described worlds in which computer users navigate a highly imagistic global network of information resources and services.
>
> The term cyberspace is used today to refer to the collection of computer-mediated experiences for visualization, communication, interaction, and information retrieval (1995: 328).

Much of the confusion and uncertainty surrounding the notion of whether or not there really is community online — whether or not "virtual communities" occur — has to do with the "cyberspace" fantasy and the false dichotomy between "real life" (what cybernauts refer to as "RL") and "virtual life". The cyberspace metaphor leads us to believe that our interactions online are separate from our everyday lives. Technically, all we are doing online is transmitting messages with the aid of a modem and the telephone connection. And yet we do not think of a telephone conversation as not being real. Perhaps the reason we think of cyber*space* as not only separate from our everyday lives and interaction with with-body, but also as "unreal" has to do with the fact that cyberspace as a concept is rooted in science fiction. In futuristic literature, cyberspace is physically inhabitable space. It is an "electronically generated alternate reality, entered by means of direct links to the brain." There is a body/soul split.

Following the literary notion of cyberspace, we think of our transmission of messages via the internet in spatial terms. Yet there is something about communicating online that gives us a sense of multi-dimensional space. There seems to be something about words and images that pop on and off computer screen - as when we send and receive messages and view websites - that leads to the illusion that there is some kind of life on the other side of the screen. Almost as if there is a "land" on the other side of the glass, from which something or somebody "talks back". As William Gibson, the science fiction author attributed with the coining of the term "cyberspace" writes, people who use computers and play computer games " develop a belief that there's some kind of actual space behind the screen, some place that you can't see but you know is there."

This illusion of space beyond the computer screen is perhaps the best and only "evidence available of the actual existence of cyberspace itself" (Whittle, 1996:6). Sandy Stone points out that "cyberspace" as described in literary fantasies does not as yet exist. In science fiction, cyberspace is a physically inhabitable, electronically generated alternate reality, entered by means of direct links to the brain - that is, it is inhabited by refigured human "persons" separated from their physical bodies, which are parked in "normal" space. The physical laws of "normal" space need not apply in cyberspace, although some experiential rules carry over from normal space - for example, the geometry of cyberspace is, in most depictions, Cartesian. The "original" body is the authenticating source for the refigured person on cyberspace: no "persons" exist whose presence is not warranted by a physical body back in "normal" space. But death in either normal space or cyberspace is real, in the sense that if the "person" in cyberspace dies, the body in normal space dies, and vice versa (Stone,1991) .However, cyberspace

as we know it today is a social environment "enabled by and constituted through communication technologies"(Stone, 1991).

## 18.3 Understanding Virtual Community

At what point in our use of interactive computer systems do we come to believe in "virtual communities"? Do all people who interact on e-mail lists use internet relay chat systems and web-based multi-user systems consider themselves part of some sort of community that exists "in cyberspace"? It is suspected that it is when there is some strong affective and/or material "real life" leak, spill-over and connection that the people who use systems of interaction online begin to feel the existence of some sort of "community".

What then is a "community" on cyberspace? In whose imagination does this community exist? How is it different from Real Life community? How is an online "culture" different from a Real Life culture?

---

**Box18.2 Some Definitions of Virtual Community**

Howard Rheingold is credited with publicizing the notion of *Virtual Community*. This was a concept carrying much hype - yet also much discussed and argued about in the early 1990s when the Internet became more available for commerce as the "world-wide web" with increased access and use around the world. Simply put, we can say that the term virtual community refers to individuals with some common goals and interests networked through various online technologies.A commonly cited proponent of virtual communities, he defines virtual communities as : "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on... public discussion long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold,1993:5). Another scholar defines virtual communities as: incontrovertibly social spaces in which people still meet face-to-face, but under new definitions of both `meet' and `face'.... [V]irtual communities [are] passage points for collections of common beliefs and practices that unite people who were physically separated" (Stone,1991). Therefore, "space" in cyberspace is "predicated on knowledge and information, on the common beliefs and practices of a society abstracted from physical space" (Jones, 1995).

---

While Rheingold's definition suggests something like a group of people gathered around a village well, Stone's definition suggests separated soul-mates "meeting" beyond the human body , overcoming limitations or physicality, in these cyberspatial "passage points".

Despite the fact that these definitions above appear to implicitly romanticize virtual interaction, they are not totally wrong in their descriptions of a community online. Creating and feeling a sense of community online does depend on the continuation of "public discussion long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace"; on "collections of common beliefs and practices"; and "new definitions of both `meet' and `face'". Virtual communities are indeed "social aggregations that emerge from the Net" and "passage points for collections of common beliefs and practices of a society". However, while the nature personal relationships is no doubt different online than face-to-face, I would not say that they are completely abstracted from material reality.

In his article *Why We Argue About Virtual Community*, Nessim Watson finds fault with the use of the phrase "virtual community." He argues that using the label "virtual" community for groups of people interacting with each other online makes it seem as if the community "is not actually community."

The distinction between "virtual" community and "real" community is unwarranted. The term "virtual" means something akin to "unreal" and so the entailments of calling online communities "virtual" include spreading and reinforcing a belief that what happens online is like a community but isn't really a community. My experience has been that people in the offline world tend to see online communities as virtual, but that participants in the online communities see them as quite real (Watson, 1997:129).

Watson admits that communities online are different from communities offline, but he argues that they are communities nonetheless. Watson also examines the uses of applying or denying the metaphor of community for groups of people interacting online. He discusses Neil Postman's critique of the notion of virtual community which is centered around the notion that online groups enable the separation of the "real" from the "virtual". Postman objects to the use of the term community within online contexts because online groups "do not contain the stake that exists in `real' communities......they lack the essential feature of a common obligation. More accurately, online communities lack the consequences of not meeting or participating in the common obligation of most communities" (Watson, 1997:122).

The statement that online networks do not have a stake in RL communities is contestable. As I indicated earlier in this chapter, communities are made up of group practices, discourses, structures, hierarchies virtual communities (online networks) are imbedded within these very power structures and ideologies. While characterizing Postman's notion of community as noble, Watson dismisses the criticism of virtual community as "nostalgic". He suggests that a closer look at the way online interaction forms and transforms community structures might help internet scholars "make an important contribution to the improvement of democratic representation"(Ibid).

Waton's discussion on virtual community is a necessary intervention into the ongoing debate about the existence of community online. His study of the online group Phish.net sheds light on many issues relating to the formation and structuring of online community. However, Watson's optimism with regard to virtual communities and possibilities for restructuring power relations and the revitalization of democracy is problematic, as is. Postman's view regarding community and obligation is nostalgic. Personal, political, social and economic obligations are a very important part of community life. Neil Postman's objection to the use of community while describing online groups might suggest that the discursive formations online cannot significantly change our material reality, since the online collectivities lack a sense of obligation to real community. Watson points out that even today's "real" communities lack the sense of common obligation that Postman is referring to. According to Watson, Postman's work compares what we call community today to the community which humans had during the nineteenth century era of cottage industry and small village life (Ibid:123).

Therefore, Watson goes on to argue that the term, as Postman uses it, is nostalgic, since "so little of the present-day world fits the metaphor" (Ibid). However, as those of us who have lived online connected to various digital diasporic communities can attest, the term "community" in relation to online groups of diasporics is applicable since we see that they do indeed have a common obligation to the "real" community that they are part of, whether or not they admit to this obligation or connection. While mainstream ideology behind the whole "global information highway" encourages the formation of niche virtual communities ,where the participants try to distance

themselves from the problems of "their lagging and disadvantaged countrymen, regions, states," (Schiller,1995) it is also a fact that social relations and interpersonal exchanges within virtual communities cannot escape their connection with "RL" political, economic, social and cultural material practices. Thus we see that Watson's and Postman's views on virtual community highlight an existing binarizing of "virtual" and "real" that is based in utopic and dystopic views of being online. Written in early years of emergence on virtual community – these discussions reveal to us the assumptions that lie behind how community is viewed and how the newness of the use of any kind of technology leads to debates that yet keep drawing us back into technological determinism. More than a decade after the internet became globally available (at least in theory), now, we can see these arguments constantly surfacing in all arenas of discourse – in business, in academia, in activism, in non-governmental organizations and so on. However, in practice, many of us do not subscribe to the binary.

Those of us located in a certain socio-economic class with access to language, education, skills and material necessary to be connected, in addition to being in work-environments that give us no choice regarding whether we use internet connectivity and access online available information and social spaces or not, have begun to take the community formations online for granted. As easily as the radio, television, telephone and mobile/cell phone has been a necessity for our daily functionality, being online has also become a part of our everyday practice. For instance, where my father's generation living in diaspora (in my childhood) we would as a family connect to All India Radio via radio as they sipped their early morning coffee, today we connect with Indian news via online environments through wireless networking – each to their own laptop, or through satellite TV in front of a commonly shared screen. In all these instances – our offline/unconnected social practices result in further discussion in face-to-face environments and continuing community formations in physical spaces.

The celebration of freedom and the lack of boundaries on cyberspace assumes that cyberspace is a possible Utopia for the privileged classes which is separate from the reality of everyday suffering and deprivation that the less privileged of the world have to endure. Increasingly, cyberspace is marketed as a wonderland where gender, race and all such markers of otherness will be erased and melted down as we transform ourselves into texts and images online . Thus the binary that positions virtual community as not real (implicit in both utopic and dystopic views) and as distant from the reality of the offline everyday also misrepresents. Further, what is implicit in the rhetoric is the assumption that community formation starts with the individual and is rooted in the individualist rhetoric that pervades the technological imaginary. What the Utopian and Dystopic visions of cyberspace and online technologies overlooks is the fact that the individual is embedded within the practices, structures of power and discourses that make up the community. Nancy Baym writes, "Although in many ways research has become more sophisticated, the continuing debates over the nature and worth of the virtual community belie an ongoing presupposition that there are two types of communities, one authentic and the other virtual" (Baym,1995).

Whenever we speak of online activity, the split between the "real" and the virtual is always implied. To overcome the vitual life vs real life binary, Don Slater suggests that, "What is really required, therefore, is a move from asking about "the nature of online relationships and identities," to asking the entirely different question: "What do people

do online?" (Slater, 2000:539). Slater also calls for "more rich and integrated accounts of the social relations" occurring in online venues arising from "deep ethnographic studies of particular social groups with real histories"(Ibid). Differences do exist between a purely textual e-mail interaction and sharing physical and temporal space talking to someone in a coffee shop - just as differences exist between speaking on the telephone and speaking face-to-face. But we never suggest that speaking on the telephone is "not real."

Instead of asking whether online interaction is "real" it is about time we shifted our focus, then, to questions regarding group norms and standards, structures and traditions that create a sense of inclusion and/or exclusion and to see how these are enacted in virtual environments. Given the supposed separation between online and offline, what about online social interaction that moves offline? What impact does ongoing, regular offline contact have on virtual interaction between the same people? Baym's research, along with a number of others dating all the way back to Rheingold, referenced close relationships formed via virtual channels which moved into other mediated channels (telephone conversations) or face-to-face meetings for at least a portion of computer mediated communication users.

Virtual communities of diasporic communities thus are material and discursive, with very real material consequences. Further, they represent not only a social and digital space of cultural representation but also a contact zone of cultural contestation. Such a notion stems from what Mary Louise Pratt codification. In her influential book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Pratt defines her contact zone as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (Pratt,1992 :4). To be more specific, contact zone refers to "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (Ibid: 6). The notion of contact zone is originally predicated on the unequal power geometry of colonial encounter that usually involves white Westerners and non-Western cultures in the officially bygone era of colonization. Moreover judging from Pratt's vigorous analysis of travel writings produced by Euro-American travelers to South America and Africa in the age of Western colonial expansion, there was much space for the Others' voices in the contact zone.

---

**18.1 Reflection and Action**

What do you understand by cyberspace?

Do you think cyberspace can be real?

In what way is the space of an online communication world different from real physical space?

---

## 18.4   Indian Digital Diasporas

Diasporic communities the world over, of course, seized upon the opportunity to connect globally to form various virtual communities. The question then is, what is the implication of being able to form such connections and of being able to sustain them via online networks. What sorts of cultural practices are reproduced and sustained. What sorts of histories and memories captured and stored. How are digital diasporas re-envisioning cultural, social

and religious pasts and futures. What might be the implications for future generations of the nations that such digital diasporic communities claim a "homes." In addition - how do the technological interfaces available via internet based digital media shape the reproduction of such identities and community practices. Benedict Anderson wrote of *Imagined Communities (1991)* shaped through print capitalism. What we see now in digital diasporas is an extension and transformation of such a logic - multiple and nuanced- the logic of post-capitalism, as suggestion by Frederic Jameson. Further, Alvin Toffler has also predicted the formation of niche communities, which are in essence what we see online in digital diasporas; databases, categorizing and labeling within existing and evolving grids.

Amit Rai (1995) argues that those communities online which are created by immigrants and other diasporic populations reproduce the same tensions and ideologies that are visible within diasporic communities not on-line (that is the communities in real life). He does not see them as "oppositional" formations in the sense suggested by writers who talk about the "radical democratizing potential" of cyberspace. In his article, he suggests that the physico-logical structure of hypertext is visible on these online communities. While one strongly doubts the "radical democratizing" potential of hypertext or of the electronic medium in general, one does believe that the form of hypertext might make possible different types of textual interaction at least for the privileged few who have access to the medium.

Amit Rai (1995) is critical about the possibility that these spaces can "inaugurate liberatory practices of the self", contrary to what some celebratory rhetoric may suggest about the possibilities offered by internet communication. In his article, he discusses how these spaces, while they may have potential (and they may not) for democratization, can equally be used to propagate "reactionary politics". Whether or not the discourses are exact replays of real life interactions, it is true that the limit of this discursive community lies within the actual with-body people who inhabit real life diasporic spaces and who have access to internet. The discussions and narrative threads are wholly the product of the kind of people who are able to get on-line. The nature of an online community depends on the participants and the discourses allowed by the participants of the community. The nature of the discussions online , to a very large extent , is a re-production of politics of interaction within real life communities.

It is important to remember that virtual communities are disembodied, but nonetheless they are discursive reproductions of real life societies and imagined communities. In spite of the illusion that there is only pure text and no human form from which the text emanates, we have not all dispersed into pure cyberspace. We are not disembodied beings, and even when we are interacting within virtual communities, we are still very much within discursive economies and hierarchies - co-created by us and still within hegemonic structures of social, economic and political interaction. We are talking about "discursive subjects" who are identifiable by the nature and content of their texts.

However, it is not suggested here that there is absolutely no difference in the way people interact within virtual and real communities. The fact that we interact in pure text and not face-to-face confuses and complicates the interactions in interesting ways . The discursive content of the discussions on these EBBs (Electronic Bulletin Boards) and email lists may not always be very different from discussions off-line groups (except perhaps that they use compu-slang every now and then), but the complexities of the

interactions and subject positions can be suppressed due to the unavailability of nonverbal cues and the possibilities of making a disapproving or resistant silence "heard" online.

Virtual communities appear disembodied, but nonetheless they are discursive reproductions of real life societies. In the case of virtual communities formed around a certain national, ethnic or regional identity the imagining of these communities spills beyond cyberspace into RL in ways that are slightly different from the RL overflow from other kinds of virtual communities

## 18.5 A Critical Overview of Literature on Indian Digital Diasporas

In this section we will do a quick overview of literature that exists and suggest future directions for the study of the phenomenon and issue of Indian Digital Diasporas.

While there is a large body of mainstream literature on topics related to Indians and 'IT' (Information Technology), Indians in cyberspace and 'the digital divide' mostly from development related perspectives – these articles do not engage the implications of digital diaspora as a socio-cultural phenomena. However such writing is useful in trying to understand the extent to which the Indian diaspora is spread out in digital environments. Much of this literature relates to business applications, software design and production for businesses worldwide. Some concerns relate to programming labor for businesses, access to IT related jobs for the Indian populations, and issues of access from India to the global commercial centers of the world. Thus the discursive socio-cultural spaces that internet spaces enable, or how the design of information technologies and cultural spaces enabled through such interfaces shape the possibilities and impossibilities for the emergence of marginalized subjectivities are not adequately examined in such writing. Bodies of literature related to India and the IT phenomena that draw connections between Indian (and South Asian) diasporas and cyberculture do however exist. These examine socio-cultural aspects of online activity (see Rai, 1995), and discursive formations online in relation to subjectivities that emerge in digital diasporas and in relation to issues such as 'voice and voicelessness', 'marginalized populations' and 'subaltern counterspheres' addressed by cultural studies, postcolonial theory and feminist scholars. Thus, South Asian nationalist identity formations online as well as processes of economic and cultural globalization through the spread of MNCs (multinational corporations) are important factors shaping Indian digital diasporas.

When examinations of the Indian digital diaspora is limited to examining IT in relation to a privileged minority that has material and cultural access to IT and is thus invested in the maintenance of current manifestations of cultural and economic structures connected with processes of globalization, we lose sight of its implications for globalization and interdependence of development and elevation of poverty in rural and urban India. For instance, in the case of India, only 25 percent of workers are engaged in service occupations – and it is these 25 percent that directly benefit from IT related progress or work. Rural livelihoods such as agriculture handloom weaving – still forming a large portion of the workforce and skills in India are not adequately supported through online information and design – if at all. Examining just the range of workers involved in servicing the global IT industry allows researchers and practitioners to be celebratory about Indian IT successes and boast of 'progress' by pointing to facts and numbers that

indicate that countries such as India have a larger number or the same number of information workers as the developed nations of the world. They justify their concern with only those 'millions of information workers' who are 'mostly urban and educated, living lifestyles similar to information workers in Silicon Valley, Tokyo or London' (Singhal And Rogers, 2001).

As Vinay Lal points out, such a perspective works for 'Internet elites', whose 'mobility in cyberspace furnishes them with opportunities to work within the world of international finance and business; like the elites of the First World, they are beginning to live in time, and space poses no barriers for them ...The time-space compression that cyberspace typifies only works to the advantage of these elites'(Lal, 1996b). Thus from a perspective unquestioning of a westernized patriarchal and urbanized transnationalism that works for the very few culturally and materially privileged populations of the world, it is possible to see IT and South Asia (especially India) as an unproblematic success story.

On the other hand much of the available literature studying Indian digital diasporas is limited to studying Indians/South Asians in digital diaspora as discursive formations online, describing the socio-cultural aspects of online formations of various South Asians both located geographically in South Asia and living in diaspora outside of South Asia. Much of this latter body of literature focuses on the various religious diasporic formations online, discussing such topics as Hindu Diaspora online, Sikh Diaspora, Eelam online, Muslim diaspora and so on. This literature is important – just as the literature that examines Indians and the IT industry. Both bodies of literature shed light on how the Indian digital diaspora is manifested.

However, while such literature does acknowledge the role of gender in national formations online, is mainly concerned with analysis of existing diasporas online. The focus of much of this literature is on textual analyses with little attention paid to the applied problem of designing e-spaces. Most of these are based on analyzing online spaces as 'texts'.

Thus existing studies of Indian digital diasporas are more concerned with the consumption of electronic spaces. The production end – issues related to designing and building of e-spaces - is thus left to the 'techies' (engineers and programmers) and to professionals engaged in marketing and other e-business related activities. Implicitly, a divide is created between 'culture' and 'economics'; between 'applied technology' and 'discourse.' Further (and perhaps as a result of the textual analysis approach), even where gender or geography is engaged, women and rural populations are hardly ever portrayed in ways that suggest that they could be active producers of online spaces and IT design. In order to understand this, there is need of more research from the offline user end (perhaps focusing on ethnographic and auto-ethnographic investigations of processes of design and negotiation of such spaces).

## 18.6 ICTs, Nationalism, Religious Diasporas

Information communication technologies, nationalisms, and religious diasporas are inextricably linked within processes of globalization. The world becoming "smaller" is enabled through a variety of technologies, and the clashing of various cultural, religious, and political discourses and extremisms has material consequences. The processes of production and cultural activities surrounding these processes are both products of an economic globalization and transnationalization that rests on the need for self-contained identity

formations (consumer demographics) and a performance of multicultural difference. "Jihad" and other religious fundamentalisms and nationalisms (including modern day "crusades") are examples of "concepts of belonging" and ways of imagining community that are "currently being mobilized in the service of the larger political and economic demands associated with globalization" (Spivak, 1999)

As is the case with the processes of rebordering and the recent surge of ethnonationalisms in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, different fundamentalisms based in ethnic and religious identity formations are linked to emerging "global reconfigurations" that help the imagining of ethnic and religious communities transnationally while providing selective class-based access to global capital. Thus new hierarchies emerge that feed into "the logic of uneven global development." Sadowski-Smith further states, "It is essential to realize that . . . concepts of belonging are currently being mobilized in the service of larger political and economic demands associated with globalization."

What might be the role of virtual communities in fostering such nationalisms? Virtual communities are passage points for collections of common beliefs and practices that unite people who were physically separated. In the case of a diasporic individual for whom home is no longer a concrete geographical place, cyberspace presents itself as an ideal site for the recovery of community and connection with other diasporics with similar backgrounds. For men and women in diaspora, home already exists within the two-dimensionality of memory and nostalgia, therefore, it has been suggested that cyberspace may provide a way for these disembodied minds to make contact with apparently similar beings. This production of digital diasporic identity at the interface of internet technologies as online and offline interest, is determined in various ways by access to computer technologies, the design of these technologies and the medium through which the identity will be shaped. The collective imaginations of the people involved will also be restricted by is perceived as their material, social, cultural, ethnic, religious, geographical location.

An examination of the literature dealing with the socio-cultural, political and discursive aspects of cyberspatial South Asian formations reveals an interweaving focus on examining such online formations through theoretical frames provided by concepts such as 'imagined community' (i.e. how is imagining of community online taking place?) and diasporic counterpublics. Within such a framing, some attention is also paid to the structural and technical aspects influencing the socio-cultural shaping of online spaces. It is important for us to examine these discussions for assumptions implicit.

There has been much discussion of the imagining of community in the available literature that examines virtual community formations. Imagining, as these explanations imply, happens on an individual level, where there is an attempt to connect the individual (often personal) experience with macrosociological features, often by translating one directly into the other. This is related to the imagining of any kind of community online, based in common interests, hobbies, collaboration on projects, professional interests and so on. For instance on any listserv, we imagine our readers/audience when posting within an online community based on what the listserv FAQs and information sheets describe - we imagine co-members of the community. We imagine a kind of affective/intellectual communion. This imagining does not necessarily connect directly to our various real life communities, or to other imagined ones online.

The other sense in which the term imagine is used in relation to community is related to Benedict Anderson,s definition of imagined communities. This type of imagining applies in the case of creation of virtual communities framed around national, ethnic, religious, diasporic identity/subject formations. To quote Ananda Mitra: "The imagination that binds the members of the electronic group is the common memory of the same putative place of origin from which most of the posters c[o]me. The sense of community is based on an original home where everyone belonged, as well as a sense of a new space where the question of belonging is always problematized. Since the original home is now inaccessible, the Internet space is co-opted to find the same companionship that was available in that original place of residence"(Mitra , 1997).

Thus, drawing from the work of Benedict Anderson, some researchers examine the socio-cultural manifestations of diasporas online and write of imagined communities of diasporic postcolonials in cyberspace. Jon Anderson writes: Much as Benedict Anderson's creoles of early modernity were crucial to the imagined communities of ethnolinguistic nations that are modernity's signature, so, too, may be the virtual communities for the emerging Information Age.

Mitra in turn makes a connection between imagining and imaging indicating ways in which an electronic community can textually produce itself, thus imagine itself as well as present itself to the outside world, and thus produce an image. He further suggests that there exist opportunities for various peoples in diaspora to form communities via the Internet, across place-based geographic boundaries, which are based on the constructs of commonality and fellowship while connecting to the conditions of existence of diasporic individuals.

While Jon Anderson and Ananda Mitra write of Arab and Indian diasporas online not specifically focusing on the religious diasporas that have emerged in relation to various fundamentalist nationalisms that have arisen most visibly in the last decade (even while implicitly doing so), Amit Rai and Vinay Lal extend discussions of online imagined communities to an examination of religious diasporas, specifically the Hindu diaspora and the discourses surrounding events in Ayodhya, India, in 1992. Amit Rai attempts to interrogate the diasporic publics and counterpublics in the context of Hindu religious fundamentalist activities. He too uses Benedict Anderson,s concept of imagined community while arguing that cyberspatial nets provide a space for South Asian Hindus to construct and contest identities that are doubly marked by the nightmare of all the dead generations what we diasporics remember as India and by the always deferred promises of this new land of opportunity what is imagined as America.

Rai,s use of the notion of Imagined community leads him to examine the style in which diasporic communities are imagined and the regulatory fictions produced by officers of the British Empire. It is thus through the totalizing classificatory grid[s] produced in British colonial times that South Asian identities in the form communal and religious diasporas - are performed online. The performance of diasporic identities in these online communities is thus regulated through historic, political religious discourses associated with colonial and post-colonial geographic territories and nationalisms.

Researchers such as Mitra use the concept of imagined community implicitly in an effort to examine possibilities in varying degrees for the emergence of diasporic formations and seem not to question whether the internet has

the potential to enable a variety of liberatory and counter-hegemonic coalitions. Vinay Lal, however writes explicitly against the celebration of the notion of Imagined Communities online. Further, he also begins to address the linkages between economic globalization, e-commerce and these socio-cultural diasporic cyberspaces by pointing to how the agenda of the internet elites is linked with currently manifested hierarchies of globalization. Such a global economic climate, thus, suggests that, contrary to being a panacea to the world's problems cyberspace represents a more ominous phase of Western colonialism, the homogenization of knowledge and, in tandem, the elimination of local knowledge systems.

During the British rule, for instance, traditional modes of production in India were forcefully replaced by industrial mass production which was more beneficial to the British economy than to the people in the Indian sub-continent. In the new industrial mass production era the traditional products lost markets and the traditional producers their confidence. The resulting outmoding of traditional forms of community and production under the ideological cover of western Enlightenment, led to a loss of self amongst local producers. People with expert knowledge of local modes of production were declared ignorant. In the presence of Enlightenment from the West, the Southern modes of thought and life were implicitly and explicitly constructed as backward traditional and ignorant. Now with economic globalization associated with ICTs and access to the material capital and even academic and cultural voice in the westernized world, a certain hegemonic cultural system is associated with economic upward mobility. Access and even mere survival is thus enabled only through sanctioned ignorances by subaltern Others as they aspire towards voice and material success or even just a basic means of livelihood. The use of information technologies in digital diaspora thus, is situated in a larger socio-cultural ethos which in itself denies the possibility of access and voice to certain populations of the world.

# 18.7  South Asian Digital Diasporas – Mobile (Gadget) Generations

So what about the generation of women and men in diaspora who grew up taking computers and the internet as a given in their lives? Some refer to these as the gaming generation — however we would like to call them the mobile (gadget) generation, since they move through the world in their own mobile digital aura.

There are several transnational venues in digital diaspora, that are inhabited by the ipod carrying, gameboy playing young men and women with their casual dress code and urban manners. Some of these spaces are less U.S. centric than the previous internet based SA generations – such as livejournal, online journal communities (masked in semi-anonymity) that blurr notions of transnational South Asian sexuality as they hide behind Bollywood icons. There is a continuing play on gender and identity as the bollywood icons produced in such communities are subjected to a gaze that blurs the the boundary between heteronormative idolization of bollywood stars and queer pleasure, while also producing uncertainty about geographic location as they appear to multitask between work, fun and offline/online formations of friends. For this lot, being online is no more unique than being on the phone. In fact, for this generation even the telephone is digital connectivity as they incessantly text-message each other, download and exchange ring-tones, pix, flix. This elite group of young South Asian in digital diaspora are multiply literate and socio-culturally flexible and mobile as they "hang out"

in online communities of open-source developers, bollywood and tollywood fan groups and so on. Thus Indian digital diasporas continue to be elite – with the haves facing the possibility of "having it all" with a great gap between the haves and have-nots. It is possible to see that the everyday practices that mobile generations in digital diasporas are engaged in a different kind of problem solving space than those living in the materially underprivileged areas of the world. Thus while the categories of "virtual" and "real" cannot be applied – we can certainly see the socio-economic and cultural gaps between the mobile and immobile widening.

---

**Reflection and Action 18.2**

Do a google search for Indian Diaspora – select five websites based on your interest. Describe what drove your choice of these websites. Examine the websites carefully to see what is being represented and how. What audience does each website seem to be targeting – why do you suppose. Is the content and form of the website accessible to the the audience they claim to be targeting -why or why not. Analyse the images in relation to the gender, caste and class representations. Discuss all this in a 1000 word essay. Print out the website and images and attach as appendices.

---

## 18.8    Conclusions

In a globalised digital technologies and telecommunication technologies are playing an important role in connecting people together so much so that one wonders whether there are virtual communities out there in the cyberspace. To understand such and other elated questions we felt it would be useful to have detailed discussions on concepts such as cyberspace, and virtual community. We also tried to give you an overview of the literature available on this topic so you may have a better grasp of the topic. Our interest is also in detailing how diasporas connect over the internet and what these interconnections mean. In this unit we have analysed the coming together of Indian diaspora , where the diaspora felt they were part of larger tradition of Hinduism and were therefore mobilizing people and taking political action. We also discuss how the internet communication offers avenues for anonymity to the users that they can play their fantasies as well hide behind pseudo-identities and what it means the new generation. Cyberspace and digital communication is not without the politics of hierarchy, difference and inequality. Interent has been confined largely to the elite and as a part of larger globalisation process, which has tendency of homogenising the world, internet tends to homogenise knowledge.

## 18.9    Further Reading

Marc A. Smith, Peter Kollock, 1998. *Communities in Cyberspace* , Routledge:UK

Barbara, M. Kennedy and David Bell, 2000. *Cybercultures Reader*, Routledge:UK

Jones, Steven G. (Ed.), 1997. *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, London: Sage