

DESIJOURNAL: A VIRTUAL COMMUNITY OF THE INDIAN DIASPORA

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ABSTRACT. This essay discusses the role of the Internet for Indian diasporic community. I argue that the internet is a powerful medium in maintaining their sense of identity as Indians. I use an Indian online magazine, *Desijournal* (available at www.desijournal.com), as a case study to support my argument. Various issues are discussed in this essay, such as the concepts of diasporic and virtual communities, and the sense of identity among them.

Keywords: internet, diaspora, cultural identity, virtual community

DESIJOURNAL: MASYARAKAT VIRTUAL DARI DIASPORA INDIA

ABSTRAK. Artikel ini mengkaji peranan internet bagi masyarakat diaspora India. Penulis berpendapat bahwa internet ternyata dapat digunakan sebagai cara untuk tetap mempertahankan identitas budaya mereka sebagai orang India. Penulis menggunakan sebuah online magazine, *Desijournal* (www.desijournal.com), sebagai contoh kasus untuk mendukung argumentasi yang diajukan. Dalam artikel ini juga dibahas mengenai konsep masyarakat diaspora, virtual community, dan identitas budaya bagi masyarakat diaspora.

Kata kunci: internet, diaspora, identitas budaya, masyarakat virtual

INTRODUCTION

With the development of technology and transportation in modern society, people can travel from one place to another more easily. The moves they make sometimes become permanent when people stay in the new places; this raises issues such as identity and adaptation to the new cultures. Advances in communication technologies, including trans-national television, satellites and the Internet, become significant tools in relation to immigrants' ties with their homelands. In this essay, I will argue that the Internet is a powerful medium in maintaining the sense of identity among the Indian diasporic community. I use an Indian online magazine, *Desijournal* (available at www.desijournal.com), as a case study to support my argument. I did the observation in June 2005. Various issues will be discussed in this essay, such as the concepts of diasporic and virtual communities, and the sense of identity among them. Before discussing the

importance of the Internet in maintaining the sense of identity for the Indian diaspora, it is important to explain the notion of a diasporic community.

DIASPORIC COMMUNITY

Sinclair and Cunningham (2000) point out that the origin of the word 'diaspora' is the Greek *diaspeirein*, meaning 'to disperse' or 'to scatter'. *Diaspora* thus refers to a dispersion or scattering of people belonging to one nation, or having a common culture beyond their land of origin (p.19). They note that the term 'diaspora' has been used in understanding major population movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the complex processes of maintenance and negotiation of cultural identity that go along with them (p.11-12). In general, diaspora is synonymous with migration; however, Safran (2004) explains the unique characteristics of diaspora very clearly:

"... diasporas comprise a special kind of immigrants because they have retained a memory of, a cultural connection with, and a general orientation toward their homeland; they have institutions reflecting something of a homeland culture and /or religion, they relate in some (symbolic or practical) way to their homeland; they harbour doubts about their full acceptance by the hostland; they are committed to their survival as a distinct community; and many of them have retained a myth of return" (p.10).

Safran points out that a 'homeland' orientation is the major element that distinguishes diaspora from ordinary immigrant communities; the notion of identity for people in diaspora always becomes an issue. He argues that being in diaspora implies a tension between being in one place physically—the place where one lives and works—and thinking regularly of another place far away. The people in diaspora may or may not have adjusted to life in the hostland, but they have a spiritual, emotional, and/or cultural home that is outside the hostland.

Nowadays, more people, such as Chinese, Greeks, Indians, Caribbeans and others, have become diasporic communities; moving from their places of origin to live elsewhere. Sinclair and Cunningham (2000) also include people living more or less permanently outside their countries of origin, such as business expatriates, foreign students and academics, retirees, and long-term cultural tourists (p. 2). These people bring their own cultures to the new places; on the other hand, they also face a new culture, which may be different from their own. There is also a challenge to adapt to the new cultures; they will assess and observe the new cultures, and perhaps adopt some of their aspects. The process of interaction between the immigrants and their new homelands will raise another issue: cultural identity.

CULTURAL IDENTITY

Mitra (2005) notes that one of the ways the idea of identity has been explored and expanded is by establishing the connections between identity, location, and

culture. Karim (2003) suggests that the sense of identity tends to be linked to the location or space where people live. Hall (1994) claims that our understanding and negotiation of where we live is central to defining our cultural and personal identity. He argues that identity is a 'production' that is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation (p.392). So this issue is significant for people who live in diasporic communities. It is important to understand how they can maintain their cultural identity without losing their roots in different places and cultures. He notes there are two different ways of thinking about cultural identity. The first definition states that people with the same cultural identity share their culture, history and ancestry. The second definition is different from the first, in that it is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being', belonging to the future as well as the past, and always in transformation. He argues that, in this second definition, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. In this sense, both definitions of cultural identity can be applied to immigrants in new places. They share same histories and ancestry from their old places; in the new places, they interact with new cultures that are different from theirs. This relationship will involve a complex process; the new culture is not always in line with their original cultures, therefore immigrants have to negotiate with the new one. In their everyday life in diaspora, they learn about and assess new cultures; they may adopt some of them while omitting others that do not fit in with their original values. It is interesting to understand how diasporic communities try to maintain their cultural identity, at the same time interacting with new cultures in the new place; it can be argued that they will seek ways to achieve this goal. One of the ways is through consumption of media; Karim (2003) argues that people in diaspora always seek for cultural products that maintain and ritually celebrate the links of the diaspora with the homeland. He further argues that they also exchange symbolic goods and services, including media content, thus sustaining global networks (p.3). He notes that Indian diaspora in South Asia, South-East Asia, Africa and Western countries watch Indian movies or Bollywood films. They use the films to maintain their sense of Indian-ness in foreign countries. Christiansen (2004) also explains that people in diaspora have "a hunger for news" from their homeland; she points out that Asian and Middle East people, such as Pakistanis, Turkish and Moroccans, who are in Europe, like to watch television news in their own languages.

Another way to keep their cultural identity is by maintaining relationships with people from the same cultural backgrounds. So it is understandable that many diasporic communities live within close-knit neighbourhoods, such as Chinatowns, Indian communities, Vietnamese communities, and others. Within this type of community, physical space is often an important factor. However, with the development of communication technologies, such as satellite trans-national television and the Internet, physical location has been replaced by technological connection. Immigrants in a diaspora can build communities in cyberspace and

cross physical boundaries, consistent with Mitra's (1997, 1998) argument that immigrants who have similar interests and backgrounds can now form alliances in cyberspace that allow them to build a sense of belonging and commonality that was formerly unavailable, because of geographic separation and distances between individuals in the diaspora. These communities can be even bigger than traditional communities for which locality is the significant element. People with the same cultural backgrounds who live in different countries can connect to each other using these technologies. I will argue that the Internet can function as a place where people in diaspora can maintain their cultural identity by communicating with one another. Before discussing the virtual communities, it is necessary to understand the concept of community.

COMMUNITY AND VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

The word 'community' tends to be used about people in a place or location. Traditionally, when we thought about community, we would think about a group of people living in a certain area or location and building relationships. However, with the development of communication technologies, physical space is no longer a main factor in building a community; now with the advance of communication technologies, in particular the Internet, people can connect to each other and build virtual communities. It can be seen that there is similarity in the definitions of community and virtual community. Both definitions indicate that communication and relationships are significant elements; a group of people, whether in physical reality or in cyberspace, will not become a community if they never communicate with each other. Watson (1998) argues that communication creates, re-creates, and maintains community in cyberspace through continued interaction among participants.

Before the emergence of cyberspace, Anderson (1983) proposed an idea of 'imagined communities' to explain the concept of nation. He argues that it is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of the members of the community, meet them, or hear of them. However, all the members understand that they live in the same community. He further argues that in fact, all communities larger than those with face-to-face contact are imagined, and that "communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (p.6). According to Anderson, people from the same cultural backgrounds are related to each other, although they may have never met and become known—the relations are imagined. This concept can be applied to the notion of virtual communities, where people are related to each other, but are not in the same geographical space; they use the media as a virtual space where they can meet and communicate with each other.

Rheingold (2000), an expert on cyber communities, defines virtual communities as "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationship in cyberspace" (p.xx). He also argues

that people in virtual communities "do just about everything people do in real life" (p.xvii), but they "leave their bodies behind". Rheingold views virtual communities as communities in real life.

However, computer-mediating technologies have challenged many of the concepts and definitions people have long taken for granted, including the concept of community (Wood and Smith, 2001, Watson, 1998). Some people argue for the notion that communities first existed and still exist in physical space, whereas, in cyberspace, physical space has been replaced by technology. Watson suggests that we should begin thinking of 'community' as shared relationships among people rather than thinking of it as shared communication in the same physical space (p.120).

Mitra (2001) considers cyber communities as discursive spaces, built by people who speak in the same way about the same things, and with some commonality that can be taken as a criterion for their establishment (p.39). Wood and Smith (2001) state that virtual communities allow people to transcend geographic boundaries and meet other people who share the same interests (p.110). This is consistent with Slevin's (2000) argument that modern communication technologies such as the Internet are opening up opportunities for new forms of human association (p. 96).

A community on the Internet is based on common interests and communication among its members. Wood and Smith (2001) suggest that one of the reasons that people join virtual communities is so that they can acquire a feeling of inclusion, especially among those individuals who seek the company of like-minded people. Another important factor is commonality, as Fernback (1999) suggests. Thus physical geography is not the most significant element in the communities; however, there is a limitation in the notion of virtual communities. Members of these communities need to have access to computers and the Internet, so there are some groups of people who may be left behind by these technologies, such as poor people in developing countries, elderly people and those who do not have access to the Internet for other reasons. However, in the future, more people will have access to it, meaning that more people will be able to participate in virtual communities.

Hiller and Franz (2004) argue that one of the compelling aspects of computer-mediated communication (CMC) is that it transcends limitations of time and space. CMC also supports interaction that is either rooted in, or sustained by, real community (p.732). They argue that computer usage can cross boundaries of geography and time zones and, in some sense, even makes them irrelevant. They study immigrants in Newfoundland who use computers to maintain ties with both their homeland and other immigrants in diaspora. Hiller and Franz (2004) found three types of online relationships among immigrants: to build new ties, to maintain old ties and to find lost ties. New ties refers to the initial need to establish new relationships with other people in diaspora; old ties means using the computer as an important mechanism to sustain identification with the home community, for

example by keeping contact with family and friends from the place of origin to help maintain the sense of belonging. Online communication also can be used for rediscovering lost ties, using facilities on the Internet which can be used to find them, such as search engines, message boards, guest lists and chat-rooms.

The advance of communication technologies, in particular the Internet, has changed the notion of identity; now people do not have to be at the same geographical locality to have a sense of identity. Morley and Robins (1993) argue that the process of globalization means that place is no longer the clear foundation of our identity (p.5); they further assert that the advance of communication flows and mass human migration has eroded territorial frontiers and boundaries, and thus challenges notions of culture and identity. Mitra (2005) argues that the desire to redefine identities in new places is motivated by the 'survival instinct' needed to adapt to the new place, as well as the wish to become a part of it.

The relationship between media consumption and pattern of residence has become an interesting subject of study. On the one hand, the media can be used to 'escape', at least in the imagination, from people's geographical locations (Morley, 2000). On the other hand, with the advance of communication technologies, such as the Internet, many people believe that the media can help diasporic communities to maintain their identity in new lands.

DESIJOURNAL : A VIRTUAL INDIAN DISPORIC COMMUNITY

I chose the Indian diasporic community—also known as NRI (Non-Resident Indians)—as an example, for several reasons. The first is that the Indian diaspora is the second biggest such community after the Chinese (Sharma, 2003). Its combined income is \$160 billion, equal to 35% of the motherland's gross domestic product. This is the reason why the Indian government has tried to appeal to the Indian diaspora to help build its economy. At the moment, there are 20 million Indians overseas; they are dispersed all over the world, in places such as North America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Southeast Asia, the Caribbean, Central America and South America (*Far Eastern Economic Review, 2003*). Cahudhuri (2004) notes there have been two stages of the Indian diaspora. The first involved Indian workers in the Caribbean, Mauritius, Southeast Asia, and South Africa, after Great Britain abolished slavery in 1833. The second or modern diaspora consists of people who went to other countries and were motivated by commerce and careers; they have remained in permanent contact with their kin back in India. Many of them hold important positions in companies, academics, and professionals; most of the Indian diaspora can be categorized as 'economic migrants' (Sinclair and Cunningham, 2000), people who are willing to work in any country to improve their lives, or just to maintain them. Another reason for studying the Indian diaspora is that, as Mitra suggests (2005), Indians have been very visible in the technological industries of the West, with many of them are professionals in IT industries; therefore they have significant access to the Internet. Thus it will not be difficult to find Indian communities on cyber space.

The Indian diasporic communities have been studied by Mitra (2001, 2005), who notes that immigrants have often been marginalized in their new cultures, unable to make their voices heard. The Internet has offered a new space for them to voice their 'unspeakable stories' and eventually to construct powerful connections that can be labelled as 'cyber communities' (Mitra, 2001, p. 30).

Mitra (2005) also studied the Internet as a 'safe place' for Indian immigrants to create an immigrant ethos and to enhance the creation and circulation of cultural memories. He argues that the voices in virtual space contain traces of identity narratives that are intimately connected with the histories of people and the places they came from, as well as the real places they occupy.

Desijournal is an online magazine for the Indian diaspora founded in March 2002. It is a weekly magazine published every Friday, intended to reflect the lives of Indians, principally those living in the United States. According to the founders, the goal was to create a space where the point of view would be rational and reasoned, progressive and inclusive. There are various sections on the Desijournal, such as articles and personal stories, and book and movie reviews. The books and movies reviewed are books on India and Indian movies. Desijournal also provides links to other interesting websites and articles that have connections with India. Desijournal is a unique website in the sense that people can share their stories about their experiences living in diaspora.

I decided to examine the *Desijournal* because, in my view, personal stories about everyday life are powerful means for connecting people to each other. This is because the members of the community understand the contexts of the stories because they are also experiencing the life in diaspora, so the members can identify with the stories and react more emphatically to them. In addition, a situation where all participants can contribute to the website, and share their daily life experiences and thoughts, is similar to a real community. In real communities, the members can communicate and have a chat with each other and share their stories without any formal limitations on topics. *Desijournal does not put advertisements on its website, because pop-ups and other types of advertisements can disturb the readers; instead it urges readers to make donations. Desijournal also provide a forum where anyone can make comments and have discussions on the topics of the stories.*

During the observation, I read the postings and comments carefully, and I found many interesting topics related to their sense of identity as Indians. Having observing the website, it can be seen that the reactions to the stories are different, according to the topic. Some topics attract a great deal of discussion, while other topics only provoke a few people to provide comments. There are various topics discussed on the *Desijournal, ranging across religion, culture, parenting, women in Indian culture, and other stories about their lives in diaspora.* There are many interesting discussions in the forum, especially about stories describing Indian cultures or Indian daily lives, and experiences with life in different cultures. The

articles present issues faced by the Indian diaspora and related to Indian identity issues, such as choosing Indian names for children, language teaching issues for parents, and others. Anyone is welcomed to contribute to *Desijournal*, but there are editors who edit the articles and comments for "relevance and politeness" (Walsh, 2002). The authors of the articles usually provide their background information at the end of their articles. From the articles and comments posted in the magazine, it can be seen that the members of this virtual community are mostly middle class and well-educated people. They hold various jobs such as IT professionals, academics, writers, housewives who "enjoy writing and reading", and other professions.

I will argue that the *Desijournal* has become a virtual community that helps those in the Indian diaspora to connect to each other and maintain their sense of Indian identity. They use the website to discuss various topics which are often related to their cultural identity as Indians. There was an interesting article with the title "What's in a Name?" which was posted on January 31, 2003 by Vinita Menon. It discussed how to choose a name for Indian children; the author suggested that parents should choose names in the cultural awareness of being immigrants. In the end, the author argued that "cultural identity is not defined by what you wear or what you eat; it's what you feel in your heart". Some authors have compared life in America and India, for example, in an article "Arranged College" by Nandini Pandya that was posted on April 1, 2005, she draws an analogy between choosing a college for her daughter in America and an Indian arranged marriage. Another article titled "Dirty Laundry" posted on March 4, 2005, discussed cleaning work in America and India, comparing the use of maids in India to do household chores with cleaning companies in America, and the differences that are due to cultural aspects. There is another interesting article with the title "My Niece—The New American" posted on October 29, 2004 by Madhumita Gupta. The story was about her niece who has adopted some American cultures, and at the same time remains an Indian. She writes:

"Despite all the ways in which she has changed, it is heartening to note that she has retained much of her Indian-ness. East and West, the twain, I safely say, have met in Deepa."

In an article "Mother Tongue", posted on October 22, 2004 by Nandini Pandya, she writes about teaching Indian language to children. Most Indian children in America do not speak an Indian language, they use English as their language, sometimes causing a dilemma for parents who want their children to speak an Indian language to maintain their culture. However, the article also reflects identity issue for immigrants in diaspora, about their desire to maintain their Indian identity, such as by teaching their children an Indian language, and in the same time to be accepted in American culture. The author writes:

"Once they feel secure about who they are and their place in the greater American society, they will have the opportunity to turn to a study of their roots... We have arrived at a compromise by putting the

kids' need to be comfortable and confident, ahead of our need to be good Indians".

The author believed there is another way to be an Indian; she writes that she has carried on "a lively dialog with them, albeit in English, about that amorphous thing called culture—family stories, beliefs and morals, history and politics, the reasons why we came to America and why we still miss India". She also writes that her daughter wanted to learn an Indian language and was planning to do part of her time in college at an Indian university.

People in diasporic communities still have the desire to return to the home country. In an article "Return to the Homeland", posted on May 20, 2005, the author expresses her desire to return to help other people in India. The interesting part is, in sixteen comments to the article, most of them did not agree with the reasons proposed by the author. The comments suggested that they could help people in India in other ways. The desire to return to their homeland also can be observed from stories that many of them tell about making a holiday trip to India every year to see their family and friends.

DISCUSSION

From the articles posted in the *Desijournal*, it can be seen that the members use the website as a forum to express their opinions. This is consistent with Mitra's (2001, 2005) assertion that cyberspace provides a new space for marginalized people, in this case immigrants, to speak their voices. In addition, cyberspace also helps people in diaspora to maintain their cultural identity in new homelands. Mitra (2005) argues that the immigrants' narrative identities, which were deconstructed by their move, can now be reconstructed in cyberspace. In cyber communities, people in diaspora can build relationships with other people from the same cultural backgrounds and support each other. From the postings, it can be seen that the members of the community are aware of their cultural identity as Indians in diaspora, while most of them are in America. They try to maintain their Indian identity in a new place; by maintaining ties with other people from the same backgrounds and discussing their issues, they can maintain their cultural identity.

Other sections in the *Desijournal* are also intended to provide members with a sense of Indian identity. Movie and book review sections discuss Indian movies, books written by Indians and books on India (however, there is one movie review on a Western movie). Participants can send in their own reviews on books or Indian movies; these reviews then can be discussed in the same way as articles.

Desijournal can be understood as a virtual community; it fits the characteristics of virtual communities established by Jones (1997), cited in Wood & Smith (2001). The first of these is that there has to be a minimum limit to the interactivity that happens when there is a flow of communication among members of the communities. The members of the *Desijournal* community participate in discussions; people give comments and feedback on articles posted on *Desijournal*;

the authors of the articles will answer the comments in the forum and sometimes this will produce long discussions. The second quality is variety of communicators; in *Desijournal*, *everyone can contribute to the discussions and send articles*; most of the participants are Indians in America, however the participants are not only Indian diaspora in America, but also Indians in India and Australia. There is one Hispanic woman who contributes to discussion. The third characteristic is common public space. In *Desijournal*, *this public space is the comments forum where people can express their opinions on topics discussed*; it is a place where community members can communicate with each other and send and read messages or comments. Another unique characteristic is that sustained membership has to exceed a minimum limit, meaning that people in virtual communities have relationships that are sustained over time. The members of *Desijournal* *can read stories about the main contributors and their involvements with Desijournal*; *they can also read the story of the founders and their initial ideas in forming Desijournal*.

CONCLUSION

Based on the observation, the situation in which the Indian diaspora meet online on the *Desijournal* *site and share their experiences can be understood as a virtual community*. They also try to maintain their Indian identity in the hostland. It is consistent with Safran's (2004) characteristics of diaspora and the arguments discussed earlier, that people in diaspora have a spiritual, emotional, and/or cultural home in their homeland. He also points out that cyberspace can be seen as substitute 'homeland space', in the sense that people in diaspora can discuss the images, languages, cultures, histories, and problems of the homeland on the Internet. In *Desijournal*, *the participants often discuss India's situations—usually after they return from a visit to India—such as poverty, pollution, transportation systems, and other topics*. It indicates that although they live in diaspora, they still think about their homeland, India, and its problems. They also discuss how to help people in India.

The articles and discussions in *Desijournal* *indicate that the website has been used as a place where the Indian diaspora can maintain their cultural identity in a new place*. It also indicates that virtual communities can serve a function, like that of real communities, where the members can discuss their life experiences.

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