Comments on Kerstin Andersson's 'The Online Durga'

by Matthijs van den Bos

'The Online Durga' describes a case of diasporas and new media. It focuses on websites that offer an online ritual servicing diasporic Kolkata intellectuals. The ritual in question, the Durga puja, is the main religious festival of Bengali Hindus, celebrating Durga, the ten-armed goddess of fertility and the third embodiment of the Devi (10). Kolkata intellectuals are broadly defined as "the Bengali Hindu community consisting of the three castes of bramans, kayesthos and badias" (3). The paper first elaborates on their social, historical and intellectual background, then delves into their migratory histories and reconstructions of home and tradition, and subsequently addresses the role of new media in these processes (particularly the phenomenon of E-Durga puja). This last section also recasts the analysis of community construction within a larger phenomenological perspective.

The value of the paper as I see it, lies in its detailed description of how new media usage may connect actors transnationally but within a particular ethnic-cultural realm, and how it may mould their communications in individual cases. Second, the original, syncretic uses of email that the paper documents - by either offering typed messages to the provider or sending handwritten and scanned messages - underscore the value of studying local articulation rather than resorting to easy technological determinism. Third, what struck me as opening up new space for research was the contrastive depictions of online and offline (diasporic) interaction. Tradition in Kolkata marriage and religious observance comes across as fluid and reflexively practiced - as in the case of the wedding couple who left out the fire ritual and the ensuing public debate on its legitimacy among the Kolkata diaspora (6). Although E-Durga puja is framed in similar terms, it is non-reflexive statements that stand out, among which: "the different rituals and the prescriptions for performing them correctly are displayed" (13), or "the specific rituals that are performed during the puja are described" (12) - I would be interested to learn Kerstin's verdict on whether that is significant. In the following, I will state some questions that remained on my mind after having finished reading the paper, and some doubts I have regarding parts of the argument.

The section on 'diasporic media' helpfully outlines the development of ICTs globally and in India but uses a questionable label to indicate their adoption in Diaspora -geographically defined usage does not modify the media. Illuminating new media development, an outline is then given of how an initial email service transformed into a multifunctional portal providing for the diasporic Kolkata population. It is claimed here - not apparently on the basis of Kolkata communication but as if an undisputable fact - that "online communication and email has become the major means for communication with and among the Diasporic populations" (9, cf.15). This is actually what the case study needs to help substantiate, but it doesn't seem to do so.

The recurrent notion of Kolkata websites being important for diasporic imagination and community apparently derives from their number and numbers of hits rather than an analysis of online and offline usage, either in Kolkata or in Diaspora. Neither look like very convincing criteria in this context. There are "numerous sites for overseas pujas" (12) - but is comparative data available on (the impact of) offline print media, i.e., numerous on what scale? Durgapujas.com is managed by an international team, which suggests diasporic embedding, but equally telling clues are not given for other sites such as bangalinet.com. "Millions of viewers from over 50 countries" for durgapujas.com (13) sounds massive, but for

the sake of the argument: these hits could just as well be on account of non-Kolkata visitors. The hits alone do not seem to bear out that "Durga Puja websites have become very popular among the Diaspora population" (12).

Apart from its views on the large impact of E-Durga puja sites, the paper shares a perspective on online media that considers them significant transformative channels of (diasporic) communication. This is seen, for instance, in the idea that "access to new forms of communication alters identities and social forms" (abstract). Indeed, it is not difficult to conceive how a website allowing individual users to cherry-pick the Durga puja ritual elements would affect the ritual's communal foundation, for instance (cf.13). Regarding the offline Durga puja, the paper observes that "often politically influential men have a leading position in the puja committees" (11). It again seems likely that distanced and individualised online involvement in the ritual would challenge such authority wielders, i.e., that diasporic online media usage actually transforms offline reality here. But all this is hypothetical and would emerge empirically only from a view on online and offline practice in
  Kolkata
  and Diaspora.

What does stand out from the material presented in this paper is something that arguably points in the opposite direction. However they may alter identities and social forms within Kolkata diasporas, the new media are not producing new audiences in a broader sense. The paper underlines mono-ethnic identification on a larger scale (and presumably with an intensified focus on its cultural constituents?), but I did not find cosmopolitan tendencies, indications of ecumenicalization, cross-ethnic hyperlinks or larger national Indian identification in this rendering of the online Durga. Similar facts and circumstances have been documented by many observers over the past two decades: whether or not one believes that deterritorialization is the essence of globalization, globalization goes hand in hand with ethnic fencing and (re)assertion.

Furthermore, anthropologists often present cases where globalization is felt to fundamentally alter ethnicity, ethnic labels being either made into huge categories with uncertain referents or, inversely, large signs having fatally misplaced concreteness - accounted for by factors such as modern bureaucratic intervention, global capital undermining state sovereignty, or transmigration. Here we seem to have a case, however, with some of such factors involved that simultaneously remains very familiar from a more traditional perspective: new transnational media usage sustaining a particular ethnic-cultural realm whose borders remain unaffected.

Matthijs van den Bos

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Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies
University of Amsterdam
Oudezijds Achterburgwal 237
1012 DL Amsterdam, the Netherlands
T +31 (0)20 525 2113   F +31 (0)20 525 3628
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