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Madhavi Mallapragada

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Home, homeland, homepage: belonging and the Indian-American web

MADHAVI MALLAPRAGADA
Indiana University-Bloomington, USA

Abstract
This article critically examines the politics of home, homeland and homepage on what it calls the ‘Indian-American’ web. It demonstrates how the Indian-American web emerged during the 1990s by targeting non-resident Indians (NRIs) and persons of Indian origin (PIOs) in the United States. NRI refers to an Indian citizen who resides outside India, while PIO refers to a foreign citizen who claims an ‘Indian’ origin. The central argument of the article is that the web disrupts hegemonic notions of NRI and PIO identities by articulating diverse imaginations of ‘home’, such as household, homeland and homepage, to the cultural, economic and political discourses of nation, family and community. In the process, the web foregrounds the contestations over ‘old’ and ‘new’ identities within the NRI and PIO communities in the United States.

Key words
belonging • community • home • Indian-Americans • nation • world wide web

INTRODUCTION
The world wide web is arguably the most dynamic of contemporary communication technologies that are routinely transgressing the ‘real’ and symbolic borders around the ‘private’ household and the ‘public’ homeland.
In particular, the digital landscapes of the web are transforming the meanings of ‘home’ and ‘homeland’ for immigrant and diasporic communities around the world. The cyberworlds of migrant groups participate in the transnational and uneven flows of technology, culture, capital and communities in this age of globalization; in the process, they disrupt conventional understandings of cyberpractices and migrant politics. At the intersection of the virtual and the diasporic is a riveting narrative about the politics of home, homeland and homepage in our world today.

This article critically examines the politics of home, homeland and homepage on what it calls the ‘Indian-American’ web. This term is used here to refer to the section of the web that targets non-resident Indians (NRIs) and persons of Indian origin (PIOs) living in the United States and whose institutional architecture is built around a transnational network of cyberentrepreneurs, web advertisers and sponsors located in India and the US. The emergence of the categories, ‘NRI’ and ‘PIO’ in the 1970s and 1990s respectively, is embedded within a complex set of strategic, ambivalent and often contradictory relations between the Indian state, its legal citizens who live outside the country and foreign citizens of Indian descent (Indolink NRI Services, nd; Nayyar, 1994). While the politics of the categories NRI and PIO will be addressed later in the article, suffice to mention here that NRI refers to an Indian citizen who resides outside India, while PIO refers to a foreign citizen who claims an ‘Indian’ origin. Although these terms came into prominence as part of the official discourse of the Indian state, since then they have become central to the migrant sensibilities of the diverse communities that are part of the loosely (and problematically) defined ‘Indian diaspora in the US’.1

Since the 1990s, a network of corporations, non-profit organizations and individuals in India and the US have been forging a set of transnational alliances across the traditional boundaries of the ‘Indian’ and the ‘American’ nation-state to engender the ‘Indian-American’ web. Although the target users are Indian citizens who reside in America (NRIs) and American citizens who trace their cultural roots to India (PIOs), increasingly the web has become the site for the construction of official categories of NRI and PIO identities as well as their dismantling. However, central to such practices have been the struggles over issues of identity and belonging in a community shaped in distinct and diverse ways by migration, mobility, dislocation and relocation.

The central argument of this article is that the web disrupts hegemonic notions of NRI and PIO identities by articulating diverse imaginations of ‘home’ such as household, homeland and homepage to the cultural, economic and political discourses of nation, family and community. In the process, the web foregrounds the contestations over ‘old’ and ‘new’ identities within the NRI and PIO communities in the US. The web’s role in the
disruption of the hegemonic definitions of NRI and PIO identities is particularly significant because the emergence of the web in the 1990s coincided with a dramatic shift in the makeup of NRI and PIO groups, as well as the official discourse about them.

This article argues that engaging with the intersecting and overlapping domains of contemporary social life such as the home, homeland and the homepage within the specific sociohistorical and mediated contexts of the NRI and PIO experience in the US since the 1990s is absolutely critical to understanding the contemporary cultural practices shaping the discourses of identity and belonging within the ‘Indian diaspora’ in the US. It demonstrates the centrality of new media technologies such as the web to the economic, political and cultural agendas of ‘Indian’ immigrants and Indian-Americans as they negotiate their place within official and popular narratives about nation, citizenship, global capital and transnational labor. It also reveals the strategic use of new media technologies by the Indian nation-state to maintain its relevance and power in an era shaped by the unprecedented emigration of its citizens to the US, the proliferation of software and information technologies and the rise of global network economy.

The examination of the politics of home, homeland and homepage on the Indian-American web bears immense significance for rethinking the idea of ‘diaspora’ and ‘new media’ in light of current migrant and cyberpractices. The predominant conceptualization of diaspora posits unequivocal nostalgia and desire for the ‘original’ homeland as defining characteristics of the diasporic sensibility; furthermore, the community is rendered into a homogenous, unified entity that demonstrates a strong allegiance to the national culture of its homeland. It is interesting to note in this context that a similar erasure of heterogeneity and complexity occurs in the popular ‘assimilation or exclusion’ framework that has shaped the study of immigrant cultures. In this framework, immigrants – once again read as a unified group – are faced with one of two choices: total assimilation or exclusion from the host culture. In place of such simplistic readings, the Indian-American web reveals ambivalence, hybridity, uneven power relations and strategic alliances as symptomatic of a community shaped by diverse histories of migration and different imaginings of the homeland.

The concept of new media is used often to foreground the unique nature of contemporary media technologies such as the web, for example, the instantaneity and simultaneity of hypertext-based communication or the unprecedented ways in which notions of time, space, the body and the real are being reconfigured in virtual contexts. However, the term is problematic in that it renders invisible the key ways in which the practices of new media technologies are shaped by those of the preceding ones, also known as old or traditional media technologies. For example, the
institutional practices of advertising, sponsorship and acquisitions on the Indian-American web are very similar to that of the television industries in India and the US. Furthermore, the discursive construction of home, homeland and homepage on the Indian-American web point to a critical but neglected aspect of cybercultures – namely, the central role that new media technologies play in reconfiguring discourses of the nation, the family and the community, mediated in past (and present) times through the old technologies of television, film and radio and print media. It is interesting to note that while scholarship on cybercultures has enthusiastically addressed the issue of community, it has rarely interrogated the politics of nation and family in cyberspace. Yet as the case of the Indian-American web reveals, the notions of nation and family are absolutely central to the politics of new media technologies, institutions, texts and users.

In the first section of this article, an overview is offered of the contexts shaping the emergence of the NRI and PIO categories within the official discourse of the Indian state. The second section examines four representations on the Indian-American web that speak to the diverse imaginings of ‘home’ as household, homeland and homepage. The final section locates the politics of such invocations within the emergent discourses of nation, family and community in the ‘NRI’ and ‘PIO’ constituencies of the US. These discourses in turn, it is argued, participate in the construction as well as disruption of the hegemonic categories of NRI and PIO as representative figures of the migrant sensibility of the ‘Indian diaspora’ in the US.

ORIGINS, LOCATIONS AND OFFICIAL IDENTITIES

The NRI became part of official parlance when the Indian state created the category of ‘non-resident Indian’ in 1975 to enable Indian citizens living abroad to open and maintain foreign currency non-resident accounts in US dollars or UK sterling. The Indian government at that time hoped that, by creating the NRI category, the country would witness a growth in its foreign exchange reserves. For Indian citizens living abroad, the NRI category was beneficial as it allowed them to repatriate their earnings during a period marking the beginning of a flexible exchange rate (Nayyar, 1994).

Arguably, NRIs have been valuable to the Indian state primarily for their financial investments. Before India liberalized its economy in the 1990s, its outdated tax laws and regulatory regimes gave NRIs very limited financial options to invest in India. By the end of the 1990s, the Indian state opened up every sector to NRI investments and extended the same fiscal concessions to NRIs that it granted to its resident citizens.

Unlike the NRI, the PIO has emerged within official state discourse only in recent times. In 1999, the government announced that a PIO card would be extended to those living abroad and holding foreign passports. Not only
would it introduce a visa-free regime, but also confer some special economic, educational, financial and cultural benefits to foreign citizens of Indian descent (Indolink NRI Services, nd). For many, the Indian state’s nod was the result of several years of persistent lobbying for greater commitment from the homeland by some of the most prominent members of the global diaspora. For the Indian state, it was a maneuver to demonstrate its desire for parity between the Indian citizen residing abroad and the foreign citizen claiming an Indian origin; this is especially significant in light of the fact that historically, the Indian state has been indifferent to the diaspora, for the most part casting its emigration as unpatriotic and contributing to the brain drain of the nation (Desai et al., 2002; Murali, 2003). However, the shift toward liberalizing its markets in the 1990s as a way to compete in the global economy had led the state to a new realization of its potential ability (or lack thereof) to compete successfully in the global arena. With that has come a new-found love of the financially successful diaspora, many of whose members espouse a cultural allegiance to the nation of India and many others who are keen on playing a key role in the nation’s growth. Hence the PIO card scheme marked a pragmatic measure on the part of the state that was keen to inaugurate a new phase in its relations with the global diaspora.

Having said that, the NRI and PIO are more than idealized figures of the Indian state; they have currency within popular media discourses about the ‘Indian’ diaspora. The lines between the NRI and PIO categories are often blurred when terms such as ‘Indian immigrants’, ‘Indian-Americans’ and ‘people of Indian origin’ are used fairly interchangeably in the media. The symbolic dismantling of the different categories by using them interchangeably is significant because it foregrounds a pivotal transformation in the make-up of the ‘Indian’ diaspora since the 1990s, a transformation brought about by a shift in the pace and patterns of migration from India to the US. In turn this shift was symptomatic of, and contributed to, the technological, economic and cultural transformations of the 1990s. A predominant cause for the migration of Indians to America was the dearth of talented technical professionals to meet the rising demands of the hi-tech industries in Silicon Valley and elsewhere within the US. India, which holds the distinction of having the world’s largest technical workforce, became an attractive resource for the numerous information technology (IT) firms that needed ‘workers’ to sustain their rapidly growing ambitions and business interests (Desai et al., 2002; Saxenian, 2001). As a result, Indian citizens became the dominant group receiving temporary work visas, including the contentious H1-B for the ‘highly skilled professional’, from the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (formerly the INS) during the past decade (Anand, 2003; Bora, 2003).
Nonetheless, the hi-tech professional on a H1-B visa accounts for only part of the influx of Indian citizens to the US. Changes in immigration rules, as well university policies, made graduate education in the US an attractive prospect for Indian students. Record numbers of Indians enrolled in American universities over the course of the decade. It is a trend that seems to be getting stronger, based on the 2003 report that Indian students accounted for the largest contingent of international students to enroll in American universities in 2002 (Arora, 2002). In addition, businesspeople, migrants on seasonal visas, family members and relatives accounted for the sharp increase in Indian immigration to the US during the 1990s.

While the 1990s witnessed record numbers of Indians moving to the US, it also witnessed the maturing of the diaspora as its second and third generations became increasingly visible within the community. By most accounts the first extended phase of Indian migration to the US occurred in the years following 1965, when the family reunification clause amended immigration laws and made it easier for single immigrants to be reunited with their family members in America (Leonard, 1997; Reimers, 1985). By the 1990s, the children and grandchildren of that first generation of immigrants were making their presence increasingly felt in the cultural, political and institutional domains of the diaspora and they aspired to do so within mainstream America as well. The multigenerational Indian diaspora in the 1990s was witnessing dramatic transformations in the contexts and contours of its community and ‘old’ and ‘new’ identities were increasingly subject to scrutiny, rethinking and negotiation. The media’s tendency to use the categories of PIO, Indian immigrants and Indian-American interchangeably was one strategic response to the emergent complexity.

MOBILE HOMES AND VIRTUAL GEOGRAPHIES
This section argues that the concept of home is central to the narratives on nation, family and community on the web. Home is invoked in strategic and flexible ways; as a result it carries many different associations – that of the homepage, virtual home, homeland, the familiar, the intimate, the domestic and the physical place that one inhabits.

The imaginative use of home on the Indian-American web echoes David Morley’s insightful remark in Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity (2000) that in the contemporary world, the answer to the question, ‘where is someone at home?’ bears less on a geographical than a rhetorical territory. As Morley writes:

[T]raditional ideas of home, homeland and nation have been destabilized, both by new patterns of physical mobility and migration and by new communications technologies which routinely transgress the symbolic boundaries around both the private household and the nation state. The
At the heart of the cultural anxieties in question is the relationship between identity, mobility, place and belonging. By closely examining the connections between the home, family, household, nation and community in light of transnational media and migration, Morley contends that media are a crucial force in the construction of ‘home territories’ in our world today. In a similar vein, this article argues that the Indian–American web participates in the construction of spaces of belonging such as the family, the nation and the community. It does so by articulating the notion of home to the intersecting domains of contemporary social life such as the domestic home, collective homeland and virtual homepage.

In constructing such spaces of identity and belonging, gender, class and religion along with other axes of difference such as age, caste and ethnicity inform, are, in the words of Doreen Massey, ‘the ways in which we inhabit and experience space and place and the ways in which we are located in the new relations of time–space compression’ (1992: 9). Massey argues that place is formed out of the particular set of social relations which interact at a particular location. Places, she adds, ‘are unfixed in part precisely because the social relations out of which they are constructed are themselves by their very nature dynamic and changing’ (1992: 13).

The Indian–American web participates in the configuration and reconfiguration of places such the domestic home, homeland and homepage. In the process, it participates in the discursive construction of family, nation and community; above all, it speaks to the continuing significance and increasing mobility of what David Morley (2000) calls ‘home territories’. In the rest of this section, four key representations of ‘home’ are discussed that illustrate the strategic and flexible invocations of home – as household, homeland and homepage – on the Indian–American web.

In the summer of 2000, *Siliconindia* (2000), a print magazine aimed at business and technical professionals in India and the US featured a provocative advertisement for the shopping site Namaste.com (www.namaste.com). The headline for the advertisement, which reads ‘Beauty Secrets of India @ Namaste.com’, suggests that by logging onto the site, the user would become part of an exclusive community that knows the secrets about an Indian brand of beauty. However, the fine print sutures the concept of beauty to ideas of culture and consumption, represented here through two of the most popular products of cultural consumption, Indian movies and food:

From bindis [application of colored designs on the forehead] to mehendi [henna] and kangas [bracelets] to jhumkas [earrings] all that you need for the classic Indian look is at your fingertips. So no matter where you live everything you
love about India: movies, snacks, music, health and beauty products – is just a
click away. (Siliconindia, 2000: 69)

Framing the narrative of the advertisement is the visual representation of
two women clad in traditional Indian clothes and jewelry, participating in
the ritual application of mehendi against the blurry backdrop of New York’s
Times Square. Of the two women, Namaste.com clearly marks the one
with the lighter skin, longer hair, the heavily-brocaded skirt, elaborate
jewelry and bindi as embodying the ‘classic Indian look’. No less significant
is the fact that, unlike her companion, the lady in question has her body
turned towards the camera as she looks directly into the eyes of the viewers,
thereby inviting their gaze on her. Bringing the headline, the fine print
and the visual together is the slogan for the site which reads: ‘Bring
India Home!”

By framing the women against a classic marker of America in the
immigrant imagination, namely the global city of New York, Namaste.com
participates in a troubling narrative of transnational, patriarchal desire – a
desire that inscribes the nation on the bodies of its women. The fine print
invites us to believe that thanks to the services of the shopping site,
immigrant women can maintain their ‘Indian’ traditions and cultural
practices in their transnational locations. However, the fetishized body of the
classic Indian woman, when read in conjunction with the slogan ‘Bring
India home’, reveals a more complex story. By inviting the gaze of the
viewer along with the suggestion that both India and its women are just a
click away – from being brought home – the advertisement presents a
gendered space of the nation for symbolic consumption. By adorning the
women with fine clothes and jewelry, along with traditional markers of
Hindu identity such as the bindi, in this particular instance Namaste.com
inscribes the nation on the bodies of Hindu middle-class women. By
literally and figuratively foregrounding the latter in a quintessentially
‘American’ location, the site presents the middle class, Hindu, female body
as symbolically central to NRIs and PIOs in the US. In this context, the
juxtaposition of the leisurely activity of mehendi application with the
dynamic image of transnational flows of capital, icons, people and products
is particularly significant. Locating women at the site of consumption,
leisure, ritual and the domestic, Namaste.com offers a gender-centered,
class-based and religion-centric discourse of labor, family and nation in
transnational settings. It constructs a homology where middle-class Hindu
femininity is articulated to issues of consumption, labor, the private and
national and middle-class Hindu masculinity is linked to issues of
production, capital, the public and transnational.

Adding another layer of complexity is the play on the word ‘home’ in the
slogan ‘Bring India Home!’ . On the one hand, there is the implication that
India can be brought to one’s home, the space of the domestic and familial; on the other hand, there is the suggestion that one can bring India to the new ‘homeland’ of the NRI and PIO – the elite locations of America and the world, symbolized by New York. And last but not least, there is the innovative idea that India can be brought to its new home in cyberspace, thanks to the online community of Namaste.com. In this representation, is the promise that India is virtually everywhere, in no small measure due to the success of its ‘digerati’ and diaspora.

The slogan further raises another set of complex questions, such as: what does the idea of home mean? How are notions of the domestic and the ‘private’, traditionally associated with the idea of home, articulated to the ‘public’ domain of the nation? The advertising campaign for NRI banking on the very popular Rediff.com (http://us.rediff.com), a Mumbai-based site owned by Rediff India Ltd, offers some insights on these and related questions.

During 2002–3, the users of the NRI Finance Channel on Rediff.com were treated to an unusual advertisement when they clicked on a link entitled ‘Know more about ICICI Bank’ on the channel’s main page. The advertisement featured Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan, who greeted users with a warm smile and the following words, ‘You’ve always been proud of Indian culture, cuisine and heritage. Well, it’s time to add banking to the list!’ (Rediff NRI Finance Channel, 2002a). The advertisement was unusual in part because it was arguably the first time that Amitabh Bachchan had been featured on a web advertisement targeting NRIs. But more so given the fact that he was endorsing ‘Indian banking’ as a fitting addition to the pantheon of the best of India, including its culture, cuisine and heritage. Bachchan’s new avatar on Rediff.com was as the cultural ambassador for the Industrial Credit and Insurance Company of India (ICICI) Bank, a leader within the banking industry.

A central factor shaping the mobility of home territories in present times is the flexible and innovative pattern of transnational capital flows. These patterns demonstrate the limits of nation–states in controlling economic flows across national borders. At the same time, the new configurations of capital flows are engendering flexible strategies within nation–states as they reinvent themselves in an effort to participate more effectively in the competitive global marketplace. One such strategy used by the Indian nation–state in recent times is to extend an unprecedented level of financial and investment incentives to NRIs. Given the web’s potential to target transnational users, it is no surprise that highly competitive private banks in India were the first, and arguably the most successful, institutions to target NRIs with e-banking and financial investment opportunities. And no bank has done it better than ICICI Bank.
ICICI Bank sponsors the NRI Finance Channel on Rediff.com. In the mid-1990s, the site primarily targeted users in India. However, the parent company was quick to take note of the massive number of hits from users in the US and soon introduced the ‘Rediff USA’ edition of the site. One of the highlights of the new edition is the NRI Finance Channel sponsored by ICICI Bank. Users are invited to ‘come, be a part of the ICICI bank family!’ (Rediff NRI Finance Channel, 2002a), by exploring three services in particular, namely banking, money2India and home loans. While the banking service offers NRIs flexible plans for creating and maintaining ICICI money accounts in India, it is the money2India and home loans services that are of particular significance to the present discussion.

In early 2003, the bank launched its money2India e-transfer service. An upgrade from the regular money2India service, which involved time-consuming paperwork, the e-transfer service promised unprecedented convenience and speed in transnational financial services:

A completely online and paperless way of transferring money to India. No branch visits, no posting of cheques. Just issue us your instructions online from your home or office! You can transfer money free to any ICICI Bank account or issue a bank demand draft at more than 670 locations. (Rediff NRI Finance Channel, 2003)

For NRIs, e-transfer provides a refreshing change from the antiquated methods of existing money transfer services. More importantly, it allows them to ‘send money home at express speed’. When read in light of the four to six-week timeframe for earlier transactions, the instantaneity of the cybertransaction reinvents the very act of repatriating money to one’s home. Furthermore, in place of home as ‘here’ and ‘there’ (invoked by the earlier methods), the ‘express speed’ of e-transfer links the US and India homes of the NRI within a narrative of the here and now. It also reinvents the identity of ICICI, India’s national bank, within a discourse of the transnational, represented through its cyberhome, US-based clientele and globally competitive financial practices.

Equally significant is ICICI Bank’s advertising campaign for its home loan service, which assures the NRI that ‘a dream home in your homeland is a definite possibility’ (Rediff NRI Finance Channel, 2002b). While ICICI’s home loans are ‘fast to apply and even easier to get!’, its online database of the entire real estate market in India makes the ICICI method ‘the most convenient way of finding [one’s] dream home’ (Rediff NRI Finance Channel, 2002b). The bank’s role in this instance is to realize the NRI’s dream, which goes beyond fulfilling their financial obligations towards their family in India (the money2India service takes care of that). The dream, we are told, involves a brick and mortar structure in the land they once called home. Framing the advertising campaign is the image and caption that
appear on the homepage of ICICI’s NRI services on Rediff.com – a beaming father–son duo gazing into a computer screen while the caption states, ‘Welcome back to where you belong: feel at home anywhere in the world with a range of services to meet your every financial requirement’ (Rediff NRI Finance Channel, 2002c).

The image and caption are significant on many levels. On the one hand, the relatively comfortable, wired, living space of the father–son duo who stand in for the NRI family, allows for a middle-class, techno-savvy masculinity to be sutured effortlessly to ideologies of familial, national and migrant identities. In welcoming the NRI ‘back’ to where they belong, ICICI conflates the cybernetic space of ICICI, a veritable institution in India, with the national home. Therefore one can feel at home by entering ICICI Bank’s virtual space. More importantly, it implies that for the Indian who resides abroad, the act of being at home is mediated through the digital worlds of one of India’s leading financial institutions. To fulfill their dreams and obligations, the NRI has to return to where he belongs: the ICICI family (where he is welcomed, of course). It is suggested that fulfillment of the NRI’s financial obligations towards his home and family in India is possible only when he enters into a different kind of financial commitment with the ICICI ‘family’. Hence, the young man and his progeny can feel at home while residing in the US because, through their acts of investing in ICICI and their loved ones in India, they experience a sense of belonging. Thus home, homeland and homepage are entangled in the discourse of belonging on Rediff.com’s Finance Channel sponsored by ICICI Bank. By framing NRI familial relationships within a web of financial obligations, Rediff.com’s Finance Channel and ICICI offer an economically reductive discourse of nation, family and the migrant condition.

Offering a very different perspective on the idea of ‘home’ is Drumnation.org (www.drumnation.org), the cyberhome of Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM), an organization devoted to the struggles and issues facing working-class and poor South-Asian immigrants in New York. ‘Desi’ is South-Asian, Hindi terminology which stands for ‘those from the homeland’. Within South-Asian communities, it is common to refer to each other as ‘desis’. DRUM grew out of a community education project involving the South-Asian youth of Jackson Heights, Queens. Unlike the previously discussed examples from Namaste.com and Rediff.com, Drumnation.org targets members of the ‘Indian diaspora’, but is not limited to them.

There is an institutional distinction between the sites. Namaste.com and Rediff.com are commercially sponsored. They are supported primarily by their advertising, sponsorship and tie-in-related revenues. Much like the institutional politics of old media where, for example, the commercial
aspects of television often shaped its mainstream appeal, the advertising-driven content of Namaste.com and Rediff.com predominantly reinforce the mainstream discourse on nation and migration in the ‘diaspora’. Drumnation.org, however, is an example of a non-profit community site that foregrounds a marginalized viewpoint within the ‘Indian/South Asian diaspora’, one that reveals rather than erases the key distinctions in class and location within the immigrant community.

The institutional distinctions between the sites have key implications for understanding the politics of the diverse representations of ‘home’ on the Indian-American web. For example, Rediff.com is a highly visible site within the community. Advertisements for the site are featured regularly in the Indian-American print media. In recent years, the site’s parent company, Rediff. India Ltd, acquired a leading Indian-American newspaper, India Abroad and what has ensued is a synergistic alliance between Rediff.com and India Abroad. Rediff.com also makes itself visible in the community by sponsoring cultural events in the US. Similarly, Namaste.com is part of larger network enterprise aimed at the ‘ethnic’ market in the US. The site’s parent company, Ethnicgrocer Inc., started up by a group of Indian-American entrepreneurs in 1998, also hosts the popular Ethnicgrocer.com (www.ethnicgrocer.com) which targets the ‘ethnic’ market at large and Gongshee.com aimed primarily at the ‘Chinese diaspora’. While a network of commercial alliances bestow a high visibility and potentially greater reach to Rediff.com and Namaste.com, Drumnation.org relies on local networks of working-class activists to make its political project visible within the community. Drumnation.org clearly lacks the financial clout and high-profile visibility of the commercial sites discussed previously, and as the following discussion reveals, the representation of ‘home’ on its homepage differs greatly from those on these sites. However, it is precisely the site’s relative marginality within the dominant commercial framework of the Indian-American web as well as its alternative framework of imagining ‘home’ that makes it imperative to include Drumnation.org (or similar sites) within the present analysis of home, homeland and homepage on the Indian-American web. The alternative perspective not only makes visible the constructed nature of the hegemonic, but equally importantly reveals the key links between capital, institutions and ideologies.

For Drumnation.org, it is the idea of the South Asian, rather than Indian, Bangladeshi or Pakistani, that is pivotal to the identity of a working-class and poor migrant from South Asia. The grass roots organization aims to mobilize ‘low-income South Asian immigrants for racial, economic and social justice on critical local struggles and their global roots’ (DRUM, 1999a). Drumnation.org’s struggle is against the American state and the mainstream which participate in the oppression of working-class immigrants, as well as the ‘conservative trends particular to South Asian immigrant
communities, particularly, the facets of racism, patriarchy, class oppression and communalism’ (DRUM, 1999b). In addition to building alliances with progressive forces in other minority communities, DRUM’s strategy includes using media to mobilize support for its agenda.

While Drummation.org acknowledges that South Asia includes diverse nations, its dominant perception is that South-Asian immigrants share a regional identity and common history which is reinforced under different circumstances within mainstream America; when it comes to the working class, the ‘Indian immigrant’ is not differentiated from their Pakistani or Sri Lankan counterpart – both are low-income ‘brown’ folk. In addition, in a neighborhood such as Jackson Heights, it is their common South-Asian identity that marks the ‘Indian’ immigrant and the ‘Bangladeshi’ immigrant apart from their neighbors; in other words, it matters little if one is from India or Bangladesh, since it is one’s regional affiliation to South Asia that becomes the marker of one’s ethnic and racial identity within mainstream America.

Drummation.org highlights the struggles and the politics of working-class South Asians who labor as immigrants in the US. The organization’s grass roots politics necessitate a shift from the India-centric, middle-class, nationalist discourse of the NRI and PIO to a regional, working-class perspective on ‘the spaces of belonging’ that ultimately constitute the place called home. It is belonging to the same neighborhood – of the South-Asian region in the world and the working-class, migrant locations of global cities such as New York – that shapes their sense of being at home. For the members of Drummation.org, a collective sense of belonging is engendered precisely by their ‘outsider’ status in the nation of America and those in the South-Asian region.

Mobilizing on similar issues of marginality and conservative nationalist practices is the cyber, membership-based South Asian Women's Network (SAWNET; www.sawnet.org). Through a series of discursive formats, including email, discussion forum, debate, opinion, creative writing and information pieces, members foreground issues that are relevant to them as South-Asian women. As with Drummation.org, South Asia at large rather than India in particular is the focus of the network; however, in the process of opening up a dialogue about South-Asian women’s issues, the status and struggles of women in and from India are addressed often. Some of the issues discussed relate to media representation, political activism, legal matters, marriage, divorce, parenting, health, sexuality, domestic violence and the workplace. The picture that emerges from the diverse viewpoints expressed reveals the complexity of the issues addressed and, equally importantly, highlights the political, legal, domestic, technological and economic practices that shape the dominant narratives about ‘Indian’ women as well as those that disrupt them.

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For example, SAWNET has a link to sakhi.com (www.sakhi.com), the homepage of Sakhi, a New York-based South-Asian organization offering support to women facing domestic abuse. Creating a virtual link to organizations addressing the problem of domestic violence (SAWNET, 1995a) and among others, tackling the subject of domestic abuse in middle-class NRI and PIO households, SAWNET participates in the demystification of the ideal ‘Indian immigrant family’. It disrupts the conservative notion that domestic violence occurs only in working-class and poor immigrant households. Highlighting the links between domestic abuse, patriarchy and the shifting gender roles due to changes such as the growing economic power of women, SAWNET remarks on the ways in which the political, cultural and economic are deeply implicated in the ways in which women experience their everyday lives. It also foregrounds the difficulty of imagining one nation for differently gendered subjects when the immigrant family, a microcosm of the patriarchal ‘public’ nation, writes violence and coercion into the narratives of women’s lives in the familiar, intimate space of the ‘private’ home.

The women of SAWNET produce an alternative to the national community by revealing the common thread of gendered nationalisms in South Asia and articulating community to a set of shared practices that transgress national borders and boundaries. Here South Asia, to invoke Morley (2000), bears less on a geographical than a rhetorical territory. Furthermore, the very act of creating and maintaining a cyberhome where diverse representations of South-Asian women thrive destabilizes the hegemonic discourse of gendered technologies, where passive consumption rather than active negotiation marks the dominant relationship of women to media, communication and technologies.

INTERROGATING NATION AND MIGRATION
This section locates the politics of the diverse representations of ‘home’ on the web within the emergent discourses of nation, family and community within NRI and PIO groups in the US. It argues that the discourses in turn destabilize the hegemony of the ‘NRI’ and ‘PIO’ as representative figures of a group shaped by different contexts of migration, belonging and citizenship.

The representations of home in the first two examples discussed, namely the Namaste.com advertisement and ICICI Bank’s services on Rediff.com’s NRI finance page, clearly work towards maintaining the hegemony of a middle-class, gendered Indian nationalism in immigrant locales. Common to both representations is the depiction of the immigrants’ location within America; while the ‘Indian’ women of Namaste.com are juxtaposed against the transnational capital flows of Times Square, the familial duty-bound NRI of Rediff.com is ensconced within his network-ready home. Both
representations present their target users as part of the transnational elite, whose interaction with America is limited to its technological and financial domains. The politics of silencing framing such a representation makes the discourse of the gendered nation and cultural belonging through the idea of ‘home’ all the more significant.

Seen in conjunction with each other, Namaste.com and Rediff.com participate in a discourse of nation and family where women are in charge of maintaining ‘Indian’ culture and tradition in the private space of the household, while the men sustain the nation in its technological and financial domains. Although the women of Namaste.com are framed against the dizzying pace of life in Times Square, they seem impervious to their surroundings. Instead it is leisure, tradition, the ‘private’ and the feminine symbolized by the practice of mehendi application that has them engrossed. By contrast, Rediff.com’s father–son duo at the computer screen are active participants in the ‘public’ domain of technology networks and transnational capital flows. In this instance, it is the network–ready computer which mediates the location of the NRI men within the ‘private’ household and the ‘public’ homeland (Morley, 2000). Their participation within technological and financial domains thus sustains both the individual household and the collective homeland. Primarily investing the men with expertise in the technological and financial worlds and the women with a desire for tradition and leisure, Namaste.com and Rediff.com deny the histories of women’s participation in the technological and financial realms. They construct a gendered divide between the ‘public’ masculine worlds of technology and finance and the ‘private’ feminine realm of the household and the private. Further, such a reductive discourse on gender is problematic for denying the complex ways in which the technological and financial are deeply implicated in the realms of the domestic and the social.

While the Rediff.com page is clearly addressed to the NRI, the classic ‘Indian woman’ in the Namaste.com ad (Siliconindia, 2000) targets both NRIs and PIOs. By inviting the viewer to ‘Bring India Home!’, the advertising campaign speaks to a trend where the cybernetworks of matrimonial sites and the social networks of extended family and friends in the ‘homeland’ are mobilized to find suitably ‘cultured’ brides in India for NRI and PIO grooms in the US.

Furthermore, the gendered discourse on nation, family and technology is inflected by a middle-class, Hindu bias. While a Hindu identity is subtly suggested through the women’s attire, bindi and other embellishments, their class location as well as that of the father–son duo is represented more clearly through their access to technology and capital as well as their upwardly mobile location in a transnational context. On the one hand, the recasting of the women in the diaspora as Indian, arguably Hindu women, speaks to the reworking of hegemonic nationalist thought in transnational
locales. It recalls Partha Chatterjee’s (1993) argument that the hegemonic project of nation-building in colonial India relied on the construct of the middle-class Hindu woman in the domestic sphere as a sign for nation in colonial India. On the other hand, the recasting of the men in the diaspora as essentially ‘Indian’ foregrounds a strategic alliance in the making between the elites in the Indian state and diaspora. Rediff.com speaks to this alliance by casting the male NRI aspiration to be that of financial security for his extended family and a dream home for himself in the homeland. Both ventures involve making a financial investment in India, an idea that is being aggressively promoted by the Indian state. As stated previously, historically the Indian state has been indifferent toward its expatriates; however in recent years, economic pragmatism above all else has made the state do a volte-face and woo the financially powerful sections of the diaspora (Lakshman, 2003; Nayyar, 1994).

In the wake of its new-found love of diaspora, the Indian state has introduced a series of economic reforms that in effect make it easier for Indian citizens residing abroad as well as foreign citizens of Indian descent to participate in the financial and cultural domains of the nation (Lakshmi, 2003). Interestingly, many of the elites are more than happy to do so, given their own agendas to shape India’s political and economic future. Moving away from the traditional rhetoric about the diaspora’s role in draining the nation of its resources, former Prime Minister of India, Atal Behari Vajpayee, has on many occasions expressed the nation’s pride at the achievements of its ‘extended family’ (Lakshmi, 2003: A21). In 2003, Vajpayee, a member of the staunchly nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), announced that 9 January would be celebrated as Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (Indians Residing Abroad Day). At the inaugural celebrations in 2003, Vajpayee announced plans to grant dual citizenship to the expatriate community based in seven countries around the world (Joseph, 2003). While those based in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Arab Emirates, the UK and US are among the chosen few, notable exceptions include those based in Africa, Fiji and Trinidad. Given the fact that Indians migrated to Fiji way before New York became the center of the Indian migrants’ imagination, the state’s current stance reeks of economic pragmatism, cultural insensitivity and little else (Ali, 1980).

By offering a reductive narrative on a complex and diverse community of people shaped by migration, Namaste.com and Rediff.com participate in the construction of the hegemonic discourse of the ‘NRI’ and the ‘PIO’ as representative figures of the community. It is, nonetheless, a discourse that is made vulnerable in light of alternative imaginings of the migrant condition, experience and context.

Drumnation.org offers an interesting counterpoint in part because it reframes migration not along national lines, but along those of similar
histories and life trajectories. In defining ‘desi’ on the homepage, the organizers state especially that while South-Asian ancestry is one definition of the term, it includes ‘people who share a common history of colonization’ and ‘people who have origins in the Indian subcontinent’ as well as ‘Guyana, Trinidad and the diaspora’ (DRUM, 1999a). The special mention of Guyana and Trinidad is especially significant in light of the fact that the Indian state’s promise of dual citizenship to the diaspora conspicuously excludes PIOs in Guyana and Trinidad. The history of Indian emigration to Guyana and Trinidad is marked predominantly by the voluntary and involuntary relocation of working-class and poor Indians, many of whom served as indentured labor for the British Empire (Ali, 1980). In making a deliberate mention of the history of oppression, working-class conditions and migrant struggles shaping one of the historically first diasporic communities of India and South Asia, Drumnation.org articulates the commonalities of an immigrant experience around issues of class oppression and racial discrimination; equally importantly, it articulates the commonality around the sense of being an outsider within the national narratives of the US as well as those of the South-Asian countries. By ignoring its PIO citizens in Guyana and Trinidad, for example, the Indian nation is doing precisely that – ignoring the complicated, often grim, histories of Indian emigration and extending a welcoming homecoming only to the contemporary elites of the diaspora.

Drumnation.org foregrounds some of the class and racial struggles of NRIs and PIOs and in the process calls attention to a growing trend in the diaspora where the NRI and PIO are stereotyped as affluent, highly-educated skilled professionals and where the conservative politics of the few are being used increasingly to shut out any discussion of the workings of race, class and gender, for example, in everyday living contexts. The site also makes the crucial point that the idea of ‘India’ is not as central as conservative voices in the community would have us believe; for those routinely marginalized by the nation, it is a critical political stance towards the nation, rather than an uncritical celebration, that is a potential outcome.

It is a similar outlook that frames SAWNET’s engagement with women’s issues. By addressing the issue of domestic violence, for example, in middle-class NRI and PIO households, SAWNET contaminates the idealized images of Indian sexualized femininity and the caring, responsible ‘family’ man represented on sites such as Namaste.com and Rediff.com respectively. Seen in relation to each other, these representations together bring to the fore repression from the harsh enactment of patriarchal power, as well as the violence and pain inscribed on the minds and bodies of the women within the idealized NRI and PIO families.

The significance of disrupting the ideal by offering alternative representations is better understood when located in relation to conservative
trends within the community. An example of such a trend is the concern expressed by Kanwal Rekhi, a prominent member of the PIO community, over current US immigration policy. Rekhi, described by one journalist as ‘the unofficial but quite undisputed godfather of Silicon Valley’s Indian mafia’ (Warner, 2000) is known for using his financial and professional clout to gain greater visibility with the elite political circles of India and the US. Rekhi, who emigrated from India to the US in the 1970s, recently noted (Din, 2001) that the entry of ‘poor quality’ immigrants such as taxi-drivers and ‘non-professionals’ posed a serious threat to the political advancement of American citizens of Indian descent (PIOs) such as himself within mainstream America. In particular, he denounced the 1965 family reunification clause (Reimers, 1985), the cornerstone of immigration policy in the US, which permitted family members of working immigrants to be reunited in the host country. In Rekhi’s view, the clause enabled the entry of ‘poor quality’ immigrants who, he fears, might trigger a mainstream American backlash against presumably ‘good quality’ immigrants such as himself.

Rekhi’s problematic views on labor, transnational mobility and citizenship are complicit with the elitist biases of the Indian and American states. While the Indian state’s recent turn to the diaspora has been primarily an acknowledgement of the latter’s economic and cultural elites, the visa classifications under current US immigration policy imply a qualitative divide between the high and low skills of foreign labor. Furthermore, by implying that working-class elements within the community are the real obstacles to greater participation within mainstream America, Rekhi, like many of his peers, continues to ignore the crucial ways in which issues of race and ethnicity shape such participation, or lack thereof.

CONCLUSION
This article has examined four key representations of ‘home’ on what has been called the Indian-American web. The latter refers to the network of corporations, non-profit organizations and individuals in India and the US since the 1990s which have been forging a set of transnational alliances across the traditional boundaries of the ‘Indian’ and the ‘American’ nation-state, engendering in the process the dynamic Indian-American web. It also contends that this web emerged in the 1990s to target two key constituencies of the broadly defined ‘Indian diaspora’ in the US – namely, the NR1 and PIO. Both categories emerged within a financially motivated discourse of the Indian state, but have a popular appeal within sections of the ‘diaspora’.

By examining the representations of ‘home’ on Namaste.com, Rediff.com, Drummation.org and SAWNEN, it has been argued that the
web participates in the construction as well as the disruption of the hegemonic notions of NRI and PIO identities by articulating diverse imaginations of ‘home’ such as household, homeland and homepage to the cultural, economic and political discourses of nation, family and community. The examples from Namaste.com and Rediff.com reveal a nexus between a Hindu, middle-class, gendered nationalism and idealized narratives about the NRI and the PIO.

In this context, the intersections between the politics of old media such as television and new media such as the web are worth noting. In a sophisticated analysis of media, Hindu nationalism and public culture in contemporary India, Arvind Rajagopal (2001) argues that the BJP skillfully used the televised Hindu epic Ramayan (1987–9) to mobilize support for its Hindu nationalist agenda, which included the controversial Ram Janmabhumi temple restoration project. In an influential study of Doordarshan, India’s state-run television, Purnima Manekar (1999) argues that the televised Hindu religious epic Mahabharat (1988–90) became the site for the construction and contestation of narratives about the nation, women, citizenship and identity at a time of social and cultural upheaval.

Locating Rajagopal and Manekar’s insightful analyses of television in India within the present discussion about the politics of nation, family and community on the Indian-American web reveals that new media technologies often act in tandem with old media technologies. On the one hand, the Indian-American web’s participation in the construction of a gendered nationalism and a Hindu-centric, middle-class ‘Indian’ immigrant identity during a period of increasing transnational mobility of capital, people and ideas keenly echoes the politics of television in India during a period of economic liberalization, growing consumerism and greater participation of women in the workplace. On the other hand, sites such as Drumnation.org and SAWNET contribute to a disruption of idealized images of ‘the immigrant’ by foregrounding alternative ways of imagining identity, belonging and community in their current location in the US.

In the past decade, the web has emerged as a crucial space for the enactment of the desires and struggles of a diverse community loosely defined as the ‘Indian diaspora’ in the US. Studying the Indian-American web is not only essential to understand better the contemporary politics and practices of such a community, but is eminently relevant to discussions about cyberspace, community and transnational mobility in our world today.

Note
1 The term ‘Indian diaspora’ is problematic because it is an uncritical descriptor of diverse communities with varied and overlapping histories of connections to, and interests in, India and the US.
References


MADHAVI MALLAPRAGADA is an assistant professor at the Department of Communication and Culture, Indiana University-Bloomington. Her research interests include cybercommunities, immigrant cultures and transnational technologies. She is currently working on a book, *Homeland, Homepage: Indian–American Networks in the Digital Age*, which deals with the cybercultures of Indian immigrants in the US.

*Address*: 208, Ashton-Mottier Hall, Department of Communication and Culture, 1790 East 10th Street, Indiana University-Bloomington, Bloomington, IN 47405, USA. [email: mmmallapr@indiana.edu]