Title
Virtual homelands: Indian Immigrants and Online Cultures in the United States by Madhavi Mallapragada

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Virtual Homelands: Indian Immigrants and Online Cultures in the United States, by Madhavi Mallapragada. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014. 179 pp. ISBN: 978-0-252-08022-7

Madhavi Mallapragada is an assistant professor of Indian descent in the Department of Radio-Television-Film at the University of Texas at Austin. Her latest penetrating work is dedicated to the immigrant experience in the United States. Mallapragda's powerful narrative provides the reader with meticulous descriptions and informed details about the life of an Indian immigrant or member of the Indian diaspora, leaving her audience with no choice but to establish deep empathy with the subjects of her real-life stories. But *Virtual Homelands* is also about the digital age. In Mallapragada's work, online media are considered contested terrain, reflecting and reproducing biased and often hostile views about Indian immigrants in the United States, representing opportunity for online Indian companies, as well as tools for empowerment and civic engagement. Gender, technology and immigration are here treated not as separable, but as mutually constituted. Mallapragada adopts a cultural studies approach for her research (p. 68). For example, a main source of methodological inspiration for Mallapragada is Raymond Williams's 2003 book *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (Williams, 2003). The author also refers in her writings to key humanities figures such as Mary Douglas and Roland Barthes.

"Real world" issues, especially race, gender and visa status, are analyzed in the book in relation—and opposition—to buzz words such as *digital diaspora*, *online activism*, and the notions of the *global web*, *smart houses,* and *wired homes*. In her work, Mallapragada explores different online communities and platforms, including Silicon India, H1bjobs.com, Indusladies.com, INDOlink.com, Shaadi.com, Namaste.com, Indiaplaza, Reddiff.com, and drumnyc.org. In the first two chapters, "Homepage Nationalism" and "Out of Place in the Domestic Space," Mallapagrada's analysis rotates around key concepts such as visa status and the terms *NRI* (Non-Resident Indian) and *Desi* (person of Indian or Pakistani descent). The subject of the first chapter is a special category of Indian immigrant: the technologically expert Hindu male who works in the American software industry and possesses an H-1B visa. The author's aim here is not to analyze how H-1B holders organize themselves on the Web, the traditional way to study digital diasporas, but instead to detect and dig into "the sites of tension, rupture and reconfiguration" (p. 23). Race is a key factor in the online representation of Indian immigrants. The author has previously worked on the intersection of popular culture and race in several articles and blog posts, such as in *Food, Race, and Technology*, (Madhavi Mallapragada, 2013). Ultimately, Mallapragada seeks to complicate the narrative of the openness and

diversity of the web, instead pointing to ways in which it reproduces racial and ethnic biases and stereotypes.

The second chapter also addresses women on H-4 visas, the wives of H-1B engineers. One condition of their visa is that they cannot work in the United States. This condition is perceived as unfair by H-4 holders, as it forces them to stay at home and results in dependence on their partners. Mallapagrada harvested the stories of these women from online forums, mainly Indian Ladies and INDOlink.com. The forums expose loneliness, deprivation and patriarchal control. As she explains, "H-4 has become a code for dependency" (p. 50). Even if the emotional response to the H-4 condition varies from woman to woman, forums frequently include phrases as "sad," "depressed," "lonely," "losing my mind," and "going crazy" (p. 58). Important cited works on this issue include S. Uma Devi (Devi, 2002) and Sandhya Shukla (Shukla, 2003). Also of particular interest is how Indian websites classify different H-4 issues. INDOlinks.com, for example, relegates H-4 discussions into a specific section called "Women's Corner." In contrast, Indusladies.com recognized itself as a critical space for H-4 women and encourages new narratives about the NRI home and household.

Mallapragada then directs her attention toward Indian-American e-commerce and online banking services. The author draws an original and interesting connection between digital business activities and ways of "belonging" to a specific culture. These platforms, in the author's view, don't just "turn cultural needs into profit" (p. 84), but are key agents in the process of defining the experiences of Indian immigrants in the United States both on and offline. Services like ICICI online banking, Namaste.com, Indiaplaza and Rediff.com are created ad hoc for NRI. These economic entities contribute to shaping immigrant experience in the United States through targeted online marketing and the production of sponsored content. For example, a supplement published on *India Abroad* (a publication owned by Rediff.com) under the title "The Day of the Diaspora," was sponsored by the ICICI bank. The supplement itself implied a relationship between the two entities and reproduced narratives and symbols associated with Indian economic reform policies of the 1990s. Communication campaigns directly affect the everyday life of NRIs. As Mallapagrada points out: "For Indians who reside abroad, the act of being at home is mediated through the digital worlds of one of the India's leading financial institutions" (p. 217).

The last chapter of the book deals with the identity category *Desi,* a label self-adopted by American citizens of Indian origin, who were born in the United States or moved to the United States during childhood, as explained in the short documentary titled "The Making of Desi Culture on MTV" (Mallapragada, 2007). The term means "from the homeland" and simultaneously invokes one's identity as South Asian but also as being "outside South Asia" (Mallapragada, 2007). *Desi* bears a special attitude toward the place of origin, in fact, "being Desi implies

being critically engaged with the 'realities' of India rather than uncritically celebrating the hype surrounding its contemporary global image as high-tech nation" (Mallapragada, 2007). Mallapragada highlights the role of the online narrative in Desi networks, with particular attention to the website of the working-class South Asian community organization "Desis Rising Up and Moving" or DRUM, identifying its key role in challenging contradictions within immigration narratives.

Mallapagrada's latest work situates itself within the cultural studies tradition, yet expands the scope into the complex social system embedded in the networked technologies and communities. In contrast to the traditional cultural studies approach, the author doesn't analyze the digital media or the digital relations per se but as parts of a larger system of social and cultural signification. *Virtual Homelands* successfully makes the point that studying online communities by themselves, as separate and independent entities, leads to an incomplete analysis. Indeed, thoughtful patterns and suggestive narratives are hidden in the relationships between digital communities and neoliberal and global institutions. In Mallapragada's research, power is a distributed process that spreads, evolves, hides and explodes across the borders of online and offline entities and identities.

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Reviewer

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