

[Editorial](#)

Category : [June 1995](#)

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Editorial

From Indra's Net To Internet

the Editor

"To err is human, but to really foul things up requires a computer." Paul Ehrlich, 1988.

Science fiction writers' fertile imaginations fabricate futuristic prophecies, but they totally missed one of humanity's most profound innovations: computers. It's true. Sci-fi prognosticators, those dirt-free archeologists of the future, rightly predicted skyscrapers, subways, lasers, space travel and television long before they were even on the drawing boards. Yet not one among them saw computers in their crystal balls, those amazing binary brutes which have transformed just about every dimension of human life: industry, war, entertainment, communications, travel and more. What else did they miss that lies ahead?

Though India has not been negligent in adopting computers, she is having a real problem nurturing their use. Bangalore ranks among the top three software engineering regions in the world, and in the West Indians are rising to the top of the profession like foam on boiling ghee.

But Bharat's bureaucrats are baffled by cyberspace and struggling to keep a tight rein on it. A century-old law lets the government control all overseas communications. Regulations require citizens to obtain licenses for modems, fax machines, cordless phones and any other communication device except the standard telephone. Indians ignore these rules, and mostly get away with it.

But the Information Highway, as the Internet is known, is radically altering the rules of engagement, partly, I surmise, because the very idea of a highway is so different in India than, say, in Germany where BMWs cruise at 150 km/ph (try that in Bombay). Computer users are crafting ways to hook into the Internet, a scary proposition for officials concerned about India's active separatist movements. They point to rebels in Mexico and Burmese insurgents who use the Internet to propagate political views. "There are broad security concerns," admits R.K. Thakkar, senior bureaucrat at the Ministry of Telecommunications.

Money is a concern, too. The phone monopoly controls satellite and telecommunication links in and out of India and does not want to lose revenue to computer networks. India has only recently begun to relax rules for domestic communications. For the first time, private companies are being allowed to set up cellular telephone and paging services.

Since India's Internet access remains limited, enterprising computerists dial in using accounts in Singapore or Hong Kong. The exalted cost of international calls means few spend much time browsing databases. Computer aficionados are chipping away at the restraints. Twenty computer bulletin board services in India offer e-mail, news, shopping for gizmos and games. So far only 2,000 subscribers have logged on, a tiny fraction of the burgeoning activity in the West. The government recently proposed imposing a hefty bulletin board license fee, but cyberspace regulars banded together in the Forum for the Right to Electronic Expression, lobbying successfully against the fee. Now, in an effort to keep things under its control, the state's Overseas Communications Co. is installing a computer that will give Indians a gateway to the Internet-for a fee.

The Internet and WWW are highly mystical. Not so much in content (there's just as much tedium, foolishness and low chakras stuff on the Net as anywhere), but in functionality. Consider that from any computer (outside of India anyway) you can get to any other computer, virtually instantly. Thus each node (that's what the cognoscenti call a single computer connection on a network) reflects or contains every other node. It's reminiscent of the Buddhist metaphor of Indra's net given in the Avatamsaka Sutra illustrating how interconnected are the things of this cosmos. Indra's net is a vast array of precious gems hanging above the palace of God Indra: In the heaven of Indra, there is said to be a network of pearls, so arranged that if you look at one you will see all the others reflected in it. In the same way, each object in the world is not merely itself but involves every other object and in fact is everything else. The texts state: "In every particle of dust, there are present Buddhas without number."

Indra's net nicely describes the Internet. On the Net you are a tiny part, one of 25 million nodes, yet your computer contains and has access to all of them. Amazing how the outer world is becoming more and more like the world within the mind, the world described in the Vedas. Hear the words of the illumined ones: "Everything is within you, the sun, the moon, the stars, all of the various manifestations of form. They are all within you." Every virtual surfer on the Net knows this to be a digital truth.

I know what your thinking: "What's our editor babbling about? Digital truth? Nodes of knowledge? Tell him to get real. Can you bank binary bucks or digest digital dosai?"

Good questions, and the answer is yes! On the net you can exchange money, pay your bills, buy stock and order fast food (the eating part still requires "sneakernet" delivery systems-a term used humorously to describe what happens when information is put on a small disc and delivered, by hand, to another computer by a person suitably attired in Nike shoes). Before long you will be able to watch movies, check books out of just about any library, take interactive classes, tour the best museums, subscribe to Hinduism Today, see and talk with your grandchildren in Europe, download exotic chutney recipes for your next important dinner party, search the Vedas for all references to women or listen to a swami's morning upadesha, though he is 9,000 miles away.

On April 26th, just as this issue was going to press, Sri Lankans finally gained full access to the Internet through a local gateway when Lanka Internet Service Limited inaugurated the service. Appropriate to our editorial, science fiction writer and space visionary Arthur C. Clarke, who lives in Colombo, was chief guest at the ceremony. LISL is connected to Internet through a 64-kilobits-per-second line leased from Sri Lanka Telecom. Until now, Sri Lankans could only gain access to the Internet through a foreign gateway.

Last month our publisher shared with readers Hinduism Today's newest, neatest, nicest World Wide Web address [<http://hoohana.aloha.net/~htoday/htoday.html>] as he reflected on the consequences to Sanatana Dharma of electronic communications. Since then we have added some new features on our home page and welcome all those on the Internet to visit it. You can find wonderful resources on the World Wide Web. Sitting under a mango tree in Hawaii, on the banks of a river overlooking a waterfall below

(really!) our staff at Hinduism Today, found a few Web pages this month and share them here for readers who are ready to explore the net. If you know some special ones, we'd love to hear from you, and now and then we will update this list. Remember: If you have a computer and a modem, you are almost Webable. All you have to do is open an account with a local internet provider (call a users' group near you for options). In the US this costs \$10-20 a month, and the software is free (Netscape is our preference these days). That done, you will be connected with the Big Wide World and can browse the pages here and beyond.

Surfing the Net in Hawaii: Our Selections from the World Wide Web For Readers to Browse this Month

http://rbhatnagar.csm.uc.edu:8080/hindu_universe.html

This is the Hindu Students Council's Global Hindu Electronic Network, described by them the most comprehensive WWW home page for Hindu Dharma and called the Hindu Universe. It offers the entire text of important Hindu scriptures, and latest news and views from Bharat (India) Online, lists of temples in North America, Hindu names, some political content and many useful links to other sites.

<http://hypatia.ucsc.edu:70/1/RELATED/Batish>

The Batish Institute of Indian Music and Fine Arts in Santa Cruz, an apparently vast resource on Indian music from Pandit Shiv Dayal Batish and his son Ashwin.

<gopher://gopher.cc.columbia.edu:71/11/clioplus/>

scholarly/SouthAsia/Teaching

This is a gopher site, not strictly a Web, but accessible in the same way, with a

lot of resources on South Asian religions, including Hinduism. It has databases, directories, mailing lists and more. A goldmine.

<http://akebono.stanford.edu/yahoo/>

Regional_Information/Countries/India/

Looking for anything Indian? Business, travel, abundant regional information by state and news sources. Lots of links here.

<http://uts.cc.utexas.edu/~janahan/tamil.html>

Tamil page (in English) with information on Eelam, Tirukural, human rights and Sri Lanka peace efforts and an introduction to Tamil language.

<http://www.isc.tamu.edu/~msr/msr.html>

This page is enthusiastically titled Swagatham: Welcome to Bharat.

<http://www.isc.tamu.edu/~msr/hindu/hindu.html>

Sanathana Dharma, Sai Baba, Shaktism, yoga paths and newsgroups.

<http://aremis.aux.mtu.edu/arajakum/>

The Tamil Nadu home page, rich with history, recipes, photos, songs, Tamil fonts, Tamilian names and even movie reviews.

<http://www.cis.ohio-state.edu/~singh-rv/india/india.html>

India Information Resource with real depth. It has maps, symbols, languages, visa information, travel agents, holidays and festivals.

<http://www.io.org/~sandeep/sikhism.html>

A nicely done page with many resource links on Sikhism.

<http://WWW.tezcat.com/~bnaik/chinmiss.html>

Chinmaya Mission's home page, mostly out of Chicago. One of the first Hindu organizations to be on the Web.

<http://www.wcc-coe.org/oikumene.html>

The World Council of Churches home page. A good place to start when exploring Western spirituality. Various religious sites can also be found at www.marshall.edu or at rbhatnagar.csm.uc.edu:8080/ajay.html or at akebono.stanford.edu:80/users/www.server/society_and_culture_religion/

<http://coombs.anu.edu.au/WWWVL-AsianStudies.html>

A must visit. Australia has really put a lot of data on the WWW for us.

<http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~gupta/research.html>

<http://www.cs.buffalo.edu/~skumar/india.html>

<http://india.bgsu.edu/index.html>

<http://spiderman.bu.edu/misc/india.html>

Try these home pages for general reference. There are also many newsgroup listings where information on human spirituality can be found, everything from Catholicism to scientology, from Vaisnavas to wiccans. A wildcard search on the Internet for alt.religion.* will yield extensive listings.

<http://www.cis.ohio-state.edu/~sundar/>

Indian Classical Arts. Bharata Natyam, Kathakali, Kuchipudi and Kutiyattam in the south, Kathak, Manipuri and Odissi in other parts of India.

The Web publisher is creating and maintaining a Carnatic music database.

<http://zeta.cs.adfa.oz.au/Spirit/Veda>

This is a largely ISKCON site with links to a wide variety of metaphysical places, including Theosophy, one of the topics our writers cover in this month's issue.

Please do send us your favorite home pages. Aloha.