

## **Towards a global perspective on globalisation**

GLOBALISATION IS a process of denationalisation of production and consumption; capital flow and services; as well as of laws and politics. What makes globalisation of singular importance is that it is taking place in a unipolar world and is being accompanied on the one hand by worldwide retreat of state and on the other by revolutionary breakthroughs in biotechnology (BT) and information and communication technology (ICT).

Globalisation must clearly be distinguished from internationalism which it seeks to replace. In the years immediately after the Second World War, the concept of nationhood was considered sacrosanct. Internationalism recognised and respected national boundaries, identities, aspirations and priorities. It sought to build bridges among nations, and in doing so went out of the way to discover, even invent, commonalities. In contrast, globalisation seeks to devalue national boundaries and dilute sovereignties.

A psychological dimension needs to be noticed. Globalisation introduces homogenisation in such superficial areas as entertainment, food, dress and even slang, but deeper down accentuates differences between "us" and "them." If the intensity of nationalism was being tempered with internationalism, globalisation is being countervailed by a rise in sub-nationalisms.

Right from the taming of fire through advent of agriculture, invention of wheel, development of non-muscular source of power to man on the moon, human beings have been arranging and rearranging building blocks provided by nature. Now, it has become possible to modify these building blocks themselves, at molecular level. The first industrial revolution dealt with physics and chemistry and went hand in hand with colonialism. The second industrial revolution deals with biology and is proceeding in conjunction with globalisation. The first industrial revolution would still have come even if colonialism had not taken place; but colonialism increased the pace and profitability of Europe's industrialisation. Similarly, biotech revolution would still have come; but globalisation is being used to make it more uneven and selectively profitable.

### **Rising and flat technologies**

At this stage it will be useful to distinguish between flat and rising technologies. A rising tech is one which is currently in a rapid phase of development. A flat tech, on the other hand, is one which has more-or-less been standardised. Quite obviously, in course of time a rising tech will become flat. The U.S. has tended to drive its economy through rising techs, at the same time parcelling out production based on flat techs to lesser countries. These countries in turn tend to keep the higher end of the flat tech to themselves and parcel out the lower end to countries down the line.

Whereas the (first) industrial revolution was an entirely self-contained European enterprise, the biotech revolution needs the third world with its stock of biodiversity and store of traditional knowledge on healthcare and food. How does the third world respond to this situation? Unfortunately, the third world countries are a confused lot, just as Indian

nationalists were till Mahatma Gandhi came on the scene. The pre-Gandhi Indian leadership could not decide whether it should challenge the Empire's might and incur its wrath or appeal to its sense of *noblesse oblige* and ask for small favours. Gandhiji resolved the dilemma by squarely placing the colonial powers on the defensive on ethical grounds and for all times to come.

### **Ethical framework**

Colonialism in its day was furnished with an ideology no matter how abominable it may look now. In contrast, globalisation, notwithstanding its broad sweep and power, is bereft of any serious theoretical underpinning. There is no philosophical basis for it beyond current economic interests. Enforcement of globalisation seems to be its only legitimation. The foremost task today is developing a cross-cultural civilisational perspective on those aspects of globalisation that deal with food and healthcare and which consequently are literally matters of life and death for many countries. In particular, questions pertaining to intellectual property rights associated with traditional knowledge should not be addressed by individual countries in a knee-jerk fashion. Rather, attempts should be made to develop a global ethical framework which should be binding on all major players.

When patent laws at international level were first introduced, they dealt with tangible things, applied to a small part of the world, and had the benefit of actual practice over four centuries at local levels. In contrast, intellectual property laws pertaining to biotechnology and impinging on such civilisationally basic areas as food and health are being framed at the outset itself, when there is neither any ethical framework to interpret them nor benefit of actual practice to fall back upon.

Today when we talk of globally applicable laws, no national laws can serve as a role model. This is so because so far laws have been made to safeguard national or local interests. Global laws require fresh thinking. When the world was Euro-centric, it was easy to define what was new. If Europe did not know of it, it did not exist before. In 1738 William Champion was granted a patent in his capacity as "the first European to produce metallic zinc," even though the process was known to have been brought from Asia. However, 100 years previously, in 1608, when Hans Lipperhey applied for a patent on telescope, he was turned down "on the ground that it is evident that several others have knowledge of the invention." By the same logic, if the knowledge is available anywhere in the world today, it should not be possible to patent it.

The onus of protecting traditional knowledge should not rest on individual countries. (Much of it transcends current political boundaries). Traditional knowledge in its entirety should be treated as common heritage of humankind. If it is incorporated into modern scientific mainstream with a view to deriving commercial benefit, then royalty should be paid into a global fund specially created for the purpose. This fund in turn should be used for the good of the repositories of traditional knowledge.

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