

Is globalisation encouraging flat-earth mentality?

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We shall argue that globalisation tends to fuel sub-nationalism and fragmentalism as a compensatory development, in accordance with the principle of cultural isostasy enunciated here. Also, in India globalisation is acting like a tidal force disrupting the ongoing processes of social transformation. If globalisation had not taken place, upper castes would have sought and accepted a diminished role in a new equilibrium state centred on the hitherto ignored castes. But now Mandalized India under globalisation is witnessing the mortifying spectacle of being disowned by its upper-caste dominated middle class.

Civilisationally, human behaviour and thought have been fashioned by a flat-earth mentality, which draws real or imaginary boundaries and makes a local distinction between “us” and “them”. The concept of nation-state assiduously built in recent times introduces the notion of an extended “we”. This extended national “we” is sought to be placed in harmonious relationship with other “we’s” through internationalism. In other words, internationalism respects nations and endeavours to strengthen ties among them. In contrast to internationalism, globalisation seeks to devalue national borders and erode sovereignties. It is a process of denationalisation. More specifically, it involves denationalisation of ownership, production and consumption as well as of laws and politics. A globe, as a geometrical figure, has no boundaries. One may therefore be tempted to expect globalisation to obliterate distinction between “us” and “them”, and talk only of “us”. Such an expectation would be naive. Globalisation is such a powerful process that it does not proceed alone; it fuels compensatory developments, as discussed below.

Cultural isostasy

Water has low density, but the rocks underlying the oceans have high density. Mountains on the other hand are bulks of high density, but they rest on matter of low density. This natural principle of (gravitational) balance is known as isostasy (“same station”). In an analogous manner, we would like to enunciate the Principle of Cultural Isostasy: Whenever a development takes place, the affected people, individually or collectively, consciously or subconsciously, initiate another development that would seek to balance the first one.

One can easily give examples from every day life. Teenagers vehemently disobey their parents but seek to balance this by blindly imitating each other. In the Indian context the rigidity of the age-old caste system has long last found a counter-weight in the craving for a promotion on the hierarchical ladder of government service. Altruism inherent in the setting up of World Wide Web as well as the ease of flow of information on the Internet is sought to be balanced by insistence on intellectual property rights and a fetish for *thingification* of ideas with attendant price tags.

We now come to examples more relevant for the discussion at hand. In the years immediately after the Second World War, people were acutely conscious of the differences in ethnicity, culture, language, food habits, dress, etc. As a balancing exercise, commonalities were sought, leading to the creation of a general atmosphere of liberalism. Today, when homogenisation in areas such as entertainment, food, dress, and even slang has become overwhelming, there are attempts the world over to identify and accentuate differences. McWorld is also a ruptured world. If nationalism brought internationalism in its wake, globalisation is fuelling subnationalism and fragmentalism as if to counterbalance itself.

Globalisation is a pretty phrase; like all such phrases it has a tendency to obfuscate rather than illuminate. Mahatma Gandhi made a sensitive distinction between need and greed. He pointed out that the earth has enough for everybody's need but not greed. Globalisation is not a compassion-driven movement to fulfil the collective needs of the people of the world. Rather it is

a hard-nosed attempt to legitimise and satisfy the greed of a few. The force of globalisation is only matched by its lack of moral authority. It is this lack of moral authority that lends greater weight to attempts to “isostize” globalisation.

Mandalisation and Indian middle class

In India the course of (post-Soviet) globalization has been entwined with that of Mandalisation, the socially momentous process involving transfer of power to the hitherto ignored castes, known as Other Backward Castes (OBCs). This transfer of power is in many ways more significant than the one of 1947, when power changed hands between similar social groups. This time however disparate social groups are involved.

Mandalisation is a multi-faceted phenomenon. For the Upper Castes (UCs), it means loss of political power, aggravated by deliberately aggressive posturing by the OBCs and Scheduled Castes. To make the situation more complex, the recently aroused OBCs, at least in north India, maintain an uneasy relationship with those above and below; there is a clash of ego with the upper castes and conflict of economic interests with the scheduled castes. For the upper castes, however the most serious aspect of Mandalisation has been the OBC conquest of the classroom. Reservations for OBCs in state educational and professional courses as well as in jobs mean lesser opportunities for the Ucs than before.

If globalisation had not taken place, it is very likely that Mandalisation would have eventually produced a new equilibrium state in which the UCs would have willy nilly accepted a diminished status consistent with their numbers. Globalisation has disrupted this social process in the sense that the upper-caste dominated Indian middle class (IM C) has opted to effectively distance itself from the mainstream India and seek greater role elsewhere. In the words of the irrepressible American film-maker Sam Goldwyn, the Indian middle class has included itself out.

Signs of this phenomenon are everywhere. The Hindi spoken on FM radio channels is ungrammatical, inelegant and unnecessarily hybridised. Most English-language broadsheet newspapers have remodelled themselves after lowly western tabloids and are now enthusiastically engaged in rather laboured word play and insensitive punning (Fatima Beevi is Biwi No.1). Globalisation has divested IMC of any sense of noblesse oblige that might have remained; and bestowed legitimacy on its selfishness. Selfishness itself is not new. What is new is the quest for legitimacy and the success thereof. Middle class anywhere in the world is entitled to indulge itself.

When the Indian economy was controlled, icons of middle class consumption (Ambassador or Fiat car, Bajaj or Lambretta Scooter) were furnished by the economy itself. Of all the aspects of globalisation, the one that has appealed most to Indian is the denationalisation of consumption. The new consumption levels defined by foreign branded goodies ranging from cosmetics to cars are beyond the capabilities of Indian economy. The cult of consumptionism (a term advisedly used in preference to consumerism) is taking its toll, as can be seen from the ever-increasing chasm between imports and exports. In 1990 high-tech Indian exports stood at 6% of all manufacturing exports. By 1999 the figure had crawled up to 7%. In the same period, the corresponding Chinese figure went up from 7% to 23%. The mainstay of Indian exports is still as traditional as it was 50 years ago, with textiles, handicrafts (including carpets) and gems and jewellery, in that order, topping the list. In 1993-94 imports exceeded exports by 4 billion dollars. Six years later the imbalance had shot up 400% to 17 billion dollars. It is significant that while most consumer product-oriented joint ventures are flourishing, the solitary infrastructure-related project (Enron) is bagged down in controversies.

The Fifth Pay Commission used liberalisation of economy as a justification for substantially increasing the salaries and pensions as also for improving service conditions. As it put rather elliptically: “The Central Government can no longer pretend to be a model (even a good employer in the context of other sectors of the economy having forged ahead of it in the matter of compensation packages to employees.” The sectors of economy cited here as role model certain'

are not the manufacturing sectors. India's globally high corruption index implies an informal national consensus placing lifestyle before development. The total-earnings of a low-rung government servant set the standards for other sections of society. Farmers' demands for subsidy should be viewed in this context.

In India, traditionally, from the late Mughal times through the British, ruling clite have specialised in appropriating the wealth generated by others with a view to maintaining themselves. This is in contrast to the post-industrial West where the interests of the generators of wealth have been synonymous with the national interests to be furthered by everybody. While globalisation has given an impetus to high living, it has also created new tasks for the Indian ruling elite. In the post- WTO regime, there is need to protect the interests of Indian wealth generators at national and international levels. If the Indian middle class includes itself out, who will perform this epochal task?

Mansabdari

A notable feature of the Mughal administration was the Mansabdari system. A Mansabdar (rank-holder) was a servant of the state; the ranks varying from say 8000 or 7000 to a mere 10. Upper-level Mansabdars were called nobles (Omra, plural of Amir) (The Emperor himself was not a Mansabdar). In today's parlance, everybody on the payroll of the state (except for the President of India) would be called Mansabdar. There is a clear-cut inverse relationship between the size of the Mansabdari and quality of Mughal administration. In the sunset years of the Mughal empire the size of its Mansabdari increased. The golden age of the empire lasted from Akbar to the first phase of Aurangzeb's reign, before he embarked on his disastrous Deccan campaigns. The decline that began in the second phase of Aurangzeb turned into a rot soon after his death. In the 70 year period from 1678 to 1748, the number of upper-level Mansabdars went up 500% (Table 1).

Table 1
Number of Mansabdars of rank 6000-7000 during 1678-1748

Year	1678 ^a	1707 ^b	1713-19 ^c	1719-48 ^d
Number	18	35	48	91

- a. Auranzzeb before the Deccan campaigns
- b. Reign of Farrukh Siyar
- c. On death of Aurangzeb
- d. Reign of Mohammad Shah Rangeela

“The inordinate grant of mansabs [by Farrukh Siyar) to a very large number of people continued unabated, resulting in decline in state revenue - even the clerks in the offices of diwan, bakshi and khansaman were granted ranks and jagirs...” Decline in the quality of Mughal administration coincided with the globalisation of north Indian trade during the century preceding the Plassey battle. If the civil administration had retained its tightness and integrity while European traders were roaming about, the course of Indian history might have been different.

Techno-baboo

We have already seen that since Indian economy is not large enough to sustain a globalised standard of living, funds have been transferred out from development for the benefit of state-supported elites. The professionals, on their part, have taken to doing petty jobbery for the west, for the sake of money, gladly under-employing themselves in the process.

We are familiar with the sad spectacle of top-of-the-heap engineers going on to obtain diplomas/degrees in business management. What. makes the spectacle sadder is their ending up selling toothpaste, telcum powders and credit cards. In more recent times we have seen India proudly providing cheap labour for development of software in the west, especially USA. It is

curious that when the west criticises India for its nuclear or missile programme, we feel elated. But when USA praises India for its enthusiastic use of H 1 B visa, we do not see the catch.

The term Techno-Coolie has been used to describe our software professionals on the basis of the work they have been asked to perform. The term coolie is an affront to human dignity and can invite backlash. The British called Gandhi a coolie in South Africa, and see what happened to the empire. Elsewhere I have used the term Techno-Baboo, deliberately using the old spellings to recall the role assigned to Indians by the British. Petty jobs such as remote back office services, debugging of computer programs, etc. offer welcome employment opportunities, but such work should be carried out by people at the lower end of academic/technical accomplishment. But, sadly our best engineering brains have been converted into Techno-Baboos for paltry sums as low as \$300, which translates into an enjoyable Indian salary of about Rs.14000. The production industries of India (such as chemical or pharmaceutical) for their R&D work cannot pay Indian professionals the type of salaries which foreign companies can pay for fill-in-the-blanks work. Regrettably, for India, liberalisation has meant trivialisation of its brainpower. Globalisation does not mean perpetual sunshine in the west and perpetual sunset in India. Globalisation means that similarly qualified persons anywhere in the world should be more or less similarly employed.

Alexis Carrel, the French surgeon who won the 1912 Nobel prize for medicine, said, "Intelligence is almost useless to some one who has no other quality." In a similar manner, we could say that *Information technology would be almost useless to an economy that has: no other strength*. To be effective, IT should be a working class tool and not an upper class toy. So far India has been assisting the west in developing the tool, it has not been using the tool itself. India should integrate IT into administration, judicial processes and, most importantly, into manufacture and agriculture. On the governance level, globalisation seems to be becoming a pretext for abdication responsibility by the state. (Look at the increasing extra-judicial role being assigned to the higher courts.) On the industrial level, there is a real danger of S&T ceasing to stand for science and technology and coming to denote services and trade. Let us be warned that no country can afford to be disowned by its middle class.

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