

Towards a global perspective on globalization

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In the years immediately after the second world war, the concept of nationhood was considered sacrosanct. Internationalism recognized and respected national boundaries, aspirations and priorities. It sought to build bridges among nations and to do so went out of the way to discover, even invent, and enhance commonalities. Globalization on the other hand is a process of denationalization, of capital flow, ownership, production and consumption as well as of laws and politics. It seeks to devalue national borders and erode sovereignties. It introduces homogenization in superficial areas such as entertainment, food, dress and even slang, but deeper down tends to encourage sub-nationalism and accentuate differences between “us” and “them”. Any feeling of fellowship, noblesse oblige or colonial guilt that informed the days of internationalism has since been swept aside by the tidal wave of globalization.

Three worlds

The term third world was coined in 1952 by the French demographer Alfred Sauvy to denote the economically underdeveloped countries. The capitalist, industrialized countries constituted the first world, whereas the Soviet communist block represented the second world. The coinage was inspired by the expression third estate which denoted the commoners of France before and during the French revolution as opposed to the priests (first estate) and nobles (second estate).

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the second world has disappeared, even though the term third world continues to retain its original meaning. We may still divide the globe into three worlds using the industrial revolution as a marker, with the third world retaining its original composition. The third world comprises countries whose societies have essentially remained untouched by the industrial revolution. The second world consists of countries which have been transformed through industrial revolution, industrialization or by association, but have retained memories and sensitivities from the pre-industrial times. The first world, comprising a solitary country, USA, is a social product of post-industrialization era representing a total break from earlier times. The second world represents, numerically as well as culturally, an arithmetic mean between the first and the third. Because of its historical contacts with the third world, it has been familiar with the latter’s mindset. The first world on the other hand has consciously fashioned itself by reacting to the Europe it left behind. This is reflected in the first world’s definition of what constitutes novelty, for instance.

Just as the first, physico-chemical, industrial revolution went hand in hand with European colonial expansion, the second, biotechnological, revolution is being attended on by globalization. Whereas the industrial revolution was an entirely self-contained European enterprise, the biotechnological revolution needs the third world with its stock of biodiversity and the attendant traditional knowledge on food and health care. The third world countries today are a confused lot, just as Indian nationalists were before Mahatma Gandhi came on the scene. Should they expediently ask for petty profits for information supplied or should they oppose the regime itself on principle?

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 civilizationally 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.

Notwithstanding its broad sweep and power, globalization suffers from a serious handicap. It is bereft of any serious theoretical underpinning. There is no philosophical basis for it beyond current economic interests. Enforcement of globalization seems to be its own legitimation. Even colonialism in its day was provided with an ideology no matter how abominable it may look now. The foremost task today is to put heads together in developing a cross-cultural civilizational perspective on various basic issues.