

Globalization and Sri Lanka in the new Century — Part II

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Continued from yesterday

Theoretically, human rights can have no cultural or religious exceptions as they are conceived to be of universal nature especially when it comes to extreme cases of people being forcibly being executed or physically harmed in the name of culture or religion. Every human being has a right to life and this cannot be sacrificed in the name of cultural and religious sustenance. A certain level of global sensibility has developed in this line. Finally, a global level interest has emerged to protect and secure the interests of oppressed groups (i.e. women, children, minority groups) and more specifically those who are identified as indigenous groups (e.g. ved-dhas). Globalization, although often bashed as yet another form of westernization camouflaged in new attire, has an element that identifies and appreciates the human cultural diversity. Unlike the drive towards modernity in which we saw cultural diversity as something impeding capitalist development and therefore to be eliminated through modernization by following the western model, globalization seems to recognize and appreciate the significance of cultural-historical diversity. (Here, I should caution that there is a very subtle process of cooptation as well as commoditification of cultural practices within the global capitalist economy in the Third World countries. Equally, there is a lot of politics to this postmodern veneration of the traditional as well)

For instance, Veddha people going to Switzerland and to the United Nations can be cited as an example in spite of its superficiality and politicization. But, let us give some credit to the west who rejected these kind of people as being primitive and barbaric at one point in history now take them to their homes on their terms (i.e. Veddah leader attending the UN meetings with his axe on his shoulders) although people with 'weapons' (?) are not usually allowed. Freedom of speech is considered as something to be protected globally and as a result there is a growing interest in the world to preserve the media freedom in each country. Overall, what we see is a specific kind of global politics which is not necessarily pursued by the nation-states as such, but by other international organizations and non-governmental organizations.

Cultural Globalization: All throughout history, people of one place have interacted with those from different places. People have moved from one place to another. Colonialism introduced what we call westernization into their former colonies. The dominant cultural interactions that we so far knew of, is one of imitating the west, hence to approximate modernity. Today, the strategies and modes of interactions are so diversified, cultural interaction has become less systematic and homogenous. Arjun Appadurai, an Indian Anthropologist, tries to explain this cultural globalization recognizing several human landscapes forming at global scale - ethnoscaples, mediascaples, finanececaples, and technoscaples. Here, he refers to widening avenues through which the world is economically as well as culturally connected. Avenues of cultural interaction at the global level have thus broadened, dramatically

changing the ethnic, religious and cultural constitution of national societies and self-identity of the individuals. Let us take two examples. One has become part of globalization process unknowingly. When you sit down in front your television, you are willingly or unwillingly placed within the global cultural universe. (The fact that more than half of this global cultural universe is represented by the western cultural discourse is a serious matter to be addressed) The most famous teledrama in Sri Lanka in the recent times was not a Sri Lankan one, but "Shanthi." See what the little children know about cartoons and other features, Sesame Street to Mortal Combat, Night Rider to Batman. But on the other hand we ourselves have brought similar programs such as sudu pancha, Tin Tin dubbed in Sinhala and Tamil, although the dominance of the outside programs is too difficult to challenge. Take for example changing consumption patterns and the kind of restaurants coming out rapidly. "Game Kade" has gained a renewed interest. If one merely considers the naming patterns of restaurants (Gedera, Kussiya, Pol Athu Kade), it is clear that certain local food earlier considered as "undeveloped" and gode, are making their way into the supermarkets in big cities. Therefore, cultural globalization is not merely westernization as such but it presupposes a certain amount of localization too incorporating the elements of the indigenous. Of course, all these changes are made possible by the open economy. The kind of cultural transactions and connections made are so diverse, dynamic and non-systematic, the end cultural output is difficult to grasp.

Environmental Globalization: How is it that globalization and environment relates to each other? In fact, it is the environmental crisis that has made the world largely "globally conscious". The causes of the environmental crisis are so global in the sense that all citizens of the world have contributed to the crisis in different ways although one can make the argument that it is the western industrial nations that are more responsible. However, most important is that the effects of the crisis spare no national boundary. Global warming will affect all of us irrespective of where we are. A global crisis must necessarily produce a global response although the very actions may have to be local and individual (i.e. struggle to limit the increase in carbon gases). This is why the environmental movement insightfully employs "Think globally and act locally" authored by Brundtland as their motto. Most importantly, environmental issues are implicated upon economic, political and social relationships and therefore the connections between environment and globalization are more complex than we think. However, time-space compression is well illustrated in the context of the environmental crisis; Chernobyl is only one small example.

Globalization: Myths and Challenges

Globalization is thus a process, which has intensified the interrelationships in the world in economic, political, social and environmental spheres thus minimizing the importance of the variables of distance and time but maximizing a global sense to a certain extent. While this is the most identifiable feature of globalization, people tend to interpret as well as to misinterpret by relating it to internationalization, furtherance of westernization and extension of imperialism. It is true that globalization entails a good proportion of westernization. But it cannot be equated with

them. The way in which globalization unfolds itself varies geographically and therefore the kind of questions arise in relation to globalization also differ from one society to another. What we need to understand is that most tenets of globalization are debatable and hence it is constantly contested.

For example, internationalization refers to a process of interrelationships between sovereign nation states to promote congenial relations within the nation-state system. Further, its purpose is to make the nation-state system more powerful and best example for this is the international activities and forums initiated by the United Nations. Globalization does not involve nation states as their primary unit of action; its purpose is neither to promote nor to destabilize the interstate system. There are, in fact, multiple agents of globalization - Multinational corporations, NGOs, Private international institutions, special interest groups and so on although their input can vary.

This takes us to a very important matter related to globalization. Does globalization disempower the nation state? As mentioned above, economic statistics indicate that economic power of nation state has been decreasing giving way to the multinational corporations. This is a matter that can be argued both ways. In fact, East Asia provides a good example where governments and the multinational firms have worked together to make the region economically more viable. East Asia is intricately integrated to the world capitalist economy. But, this does not mean that the East Asian states have lost their power. Governments as well as the firms are exploiting the economic complementarities of the region to mutually avoid the risks and high costs of business to promote dynamic growth in the region. The situation in East Asia directs us to a different tendency within globalization - that is regionalization rather than a case of losing state power.

But the experience of the Third World poor countries such as Sri Lanka can be very different. Even in the case of Human Rights issues, International Organizations can, at times, be biased against Third World poor countries. They are losing their bargaining power in an increasingly globalized world although a very few states such as India has risen amidst international pressure (i.e. nuclear issue). But this situation should not merely be attributed to the forces of globalization but the political culture of these societies is also largely responsible. In fact, politicians as well as other civic leaders tend to use globalization as a scapegoat, as can be witnessed from issues such as Eppawala Phosphate Mine in Sri Lanka. As economic globalization is unavoidable keeping the nation state strong and maintaining a good political culture is, in fact, important. Global capital requires peaceful and stable states. States can emerge strong by preserving human rights, making the polity and society democratic and observing good environmental ethos thus making themselves attractive to global capital.

Nevertheless, many think that globalization make developing countries succumb to westernization ever more rapidly changing the national (?) cultures. (Here, must state that we have always blamed "something else" for our cultural deterioration and now the latest culprit is globalization. Until 1960s we blamed colonialism; then until 1970s we blamed imperialism; 1980s and 1990s we blamed the open economy and now in the

new century we have conveniently found globalization). This takes us to the next challenging issue related to globalization. Does globalization threaten the local cultures and hence does it dispose localization? (Those who bring out this argument should critically examine the question whether there is something called "local/national culture in a unified sense within any country) This is the foremost as well as ultimate criticism against globalization emanating from developing countries. This idea that globalization threatens what is local emanates from another assumption, that is, globalization is nothing but westernization. It is true that western societies lead globalization and as a result, what is western becomes "global" due to the increasing mediatization of culture. So, Dallas, Night Rider and Sesame Street become part of global consumption. Expanding global culture and economy make Madonna and Michael Jackson to find a global audience. What is most important is whether this kind of spread of popular culture through media signify a uniform global culture dissolving local cultures. This is the side we see directly when we talk about globalization.

Then, what about all the Indian cultural impact; "Shanthi" is one of the most famous family teledrama recently; shalwar has become one of the most popular dresses, Chinese restaurants are established even in remote places in the country, Indian and Pakistani restaurants serving Chapathi; Indian celebrities come to Sri Lanka for fund raising etc. There is a series of changes occurring in our societies which can neither be identified as being westernized or otherwise.

So far, we talked about "us" receiving things from elsewhere. Let me take a different example. Certain things (food, music, dress) which are branded as rural and local, and of course, as "belonging to the poor" are making their way to the Supermarkets and hotels. Why is it that rice and curry is served in a "wattiya" in Majestic city? Urban eating places now try to portray their authenticity. Why is it that the national dress (Sarong and the national) has found a place among the new elite (not the politicians)? (Whether these symbolic gestures will promote any ideological transformation within our society is to be debated.) Not only that, certain local products are finding their way into the international market (e.g. Link Sudantha tooth paste). Many Ayurvedic products are today developed for the international market. Herbal health care, which is unique form of Ayurvedic medicine, has found a global market. What I try to stress here is that globalization is not merely one-way street from the west to east as it is usually portrayed. There is a tendency towards bot regionalization as well as localization within the process of globalization. Earlier, 'modern and traditional' was viewed as diagonally opposed elements. Now, there are exchanges between rural/traditional and urban/modern. Especially with the increasing environmental consciousness, there is a tendency towards "going natural and organic." For example, Kothala Himbutu has become an important medicine. What was earlier condemned as local and traditional is now placed high in the post modern space. There is a global demand as well as a recognition for what is indigenous. (Rather than taking measures to control the demand as well as the supply side of Kothala Himbutu, we have left its market be totally anarchic. As a result, it might disappear soon. We should fight for the patent rights of such local products when

they are used in medicine by outside companies. We could implement a course of action to avoid misuse of such locally important herbs to ensure its long-term existence. It is unfortunate that it is not globalization per se, but our own politicians and short-sighted people that destroys what is local without any consideration)

Such cultural fusions in various countries signal that there may be emerging sets of new cultures, which are fed from all sorts of cultural flows both internal and external. For example, certain changes in the field of dancing and music in Sri Lanka show that they are neither purely (?) Sri Lankan, nor Indian or western. But people enjoy and support them although some might criticize them as un-Sri Lankan popular music. Take for example how Channa Wijewardena has mastered the art of dancing into a new hybrid form. In fact, this is the kind of thing that Partha Chatterjee describes as belonging to "independent imagination" which is neither totally controlled by western influence nor motivated by a naive native exceptionism. In the field of music, there have been dynamic innovations blending folk music with other forms. Many dynamic singers have come to the forefront as there are more avenues for them to present.

It is important to understand that the cultural changes associated with globalization can no longer be understood as a simple expansion of the western ideology. Thus, to a certain extent, globalization, in fact, presupposes localization. Ecologically sensitive global tourist requires us to protect our natural beauty and cultural heritage. Therefore, there is an opportunity for us to preserve and maintain natural and cultural artifacts in a globalizing world although unfortunately it is our own people/politicians who destroy them and think about very short-term gains. What I want to stress here is that globalization does not necessarily suppress what is local as what was anticipated with modernization.

As a whole, globalization is an open process and its directions are never predetermined. Of course, its westernizing impacts remain dominant and much felt by the developing countries. The reason for this is that globalization unfolds itself within the existing geopolitical and economic power balance; it is closely related to the dynamics of the capitalist economy. Therefore, we continue to think that globalization is yet another extension of western imperialism completely disregarding the opportunities and new spaces it provides to the non-western world. In some societies, the status-quo may use "globalization" in very paradoxical situations: overinterpreting it as westernization to win the local people and then to use it as an ultimate scapegoat to pursue certain policies which are not very popular.

Globalization is not an autonomous process determining the destiny of the people in the 21st century in a particular direction. Our future will depend on how we engage with it and the contexts within which we do so can result in different experiences of globalization which would vary over time, space and very importantly social class. Therefore, it is paramount that we try to escape from the historical Sri Lankan inhibition of "blaming something else for our ills" in the new century and start critically looking at our own pitfalls and shortcomings to see why we get the "bad" things even from globalization.

Concluded