

Can Character and Communities Survive in an Age of Globalization?

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1.

Winds of the past and the promises of the present

Back in the summer of 1989 Francis Fukuyama – euphoric over the fall of the Berlin Wall presaging the end of the Cold War – came up with his famous theorization of the “end of history”. Arguing that the triumph of liberal democracy over rival ideologies as fascism and communism constituted the “end point of mankind’s ideological evolution” and thus the end of the history as such, he wrote:

The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one’s life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands.

What Fukuyama posited more than a decade- and -a half ago is strangely true to the first youth generation of the new millennium. Oblivious to the history these cohorts of the 1980s are the aspiring Davos man – Homo globatus. No longer the fabled homo politicus like their predecessors but homo economicus gyrating to the tunes of the globalization – the most potent force shaping the course of human civilization in the dawn of the twenty-first century. They are in essence the children of globalization-its visible face and also its agents. This is the new breed of *Homo sapiens* disillusioned by the history – it appears non-existent for them. For them globalization is the most palpable economic, social and cultural reality configuring their present and the future. They seem to be too enamored of the offers and the promises of the globalization.

It could be too rosy a picture vindicating the centrality of globalization – both as an economic and cultural force – in dominant discourse of the cultural, economic and political identities of the individuals and the communities in the post-Cold War world. The critics of the globalization bemoan that it's the grand design of the rapacious corporations, multi-nationals and the market forces – the part of the neo-liberal conspiracy controlled and guided by the affluent West (read America) against their poor counterparts around the world. It's been seen as a threat on the culture and the national autonomy of these countries. The apologists of the globalization cherish it as a win-win game for both the developed and the developing countries providing the latter the level playing field in the global market of goods and services – making the traditional boundaries and barriers irrelevant.

Whatever side one aligns oneself in this spectrum of contemporary global debate there is no denying the fact that globalization is and, for longer time to come, will remain the most important phenomenon of our time. Our cultural identity as individual and community will be increasingly shaped and determined by the course globalization takes.

2.

Globalization – A cultural paradigm in the flat world

Globalization is generally perceived as an economic phenomenon. But dominant discourse on it has always tended to be political-economic. A proof in this regard can be the established scholastic tradition among the cognoscenti, both from the political Left and political Right, to directly or implicitly invoke the classic conception of the expansiveness of the capitalist mode of production by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in their theoretical

approach to the understanding of the globalization. “ The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the surface of the globe” Marx and Engels professed in 1848 in their celebrated masterpiece *Communist Manifesto*. With remarkable prescience they further wrote:

The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world-market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country.... In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations.

What Marx and Engels foresaw during the rise of the Industrial Revolution in Europe was in the popular lingo of *The New York Times* Columnist Thomas L. Friedman “ the flattening of the world.” To put it another way – the coming of the age of the globalization. In his 2005 bestseller *The World Is Flat* Friedman (2005) puts forward the ten forces that flattened the world. His list of the flatteners start with the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9,1989 – the unprecedented moment in the history of the mankind that spurred the famous “end of history” argument by Francis Fukuyama. About his first flattener Friedman writes:

The fall of the Berlin Wall didn't just help flatten the alternatives to free-market capitalism and unlock enormous pent-up energies for hundreds of millions of people in places like India, Brazil, China and the former Soviet Empire. It also allowed us to think about the world differently - to see it as more of a seamless whole. Because the Berlin Wall was not only blocking our way; it was blocking our sight – our ability to think about the world as a single market, a single ecosystem, and a single community.

The fall of the Berlin Wall, as rightly argued by Friedman, was not only the signpost to the emergence of a “flat world” but also the dawning of the concept of the single community – global community – in the universal human consciousness. For long the Berlin

Wall had been the indictment of the narrow-minded demagogic international politics set in place post-Second World War. Its fall was the metaphor for the ultimate triumph of global human aspirations for harmony, peace and solidarity. It was the time the promises of a single community – parochial national, religious and political identities notwithstanding – seemed tantalizingly possible. The fall of the Wall was followed, and of course preceded, by the fall of the several other walls around the world as the nation-states moved from the centralized planned economics to the export-oriented free market economics. The free flow of the global goods and services made possible the global flow of the human ideas, knowledge, technology and the practices. Global citizenry was no longer a utopian fantasy.

Globalization that was perceived to be quintessentially economic integration of the national economies with the global market was no longer only an economic phenomenon. It's as cultural a phenomenon as economical. The confluence of the domestic markets with the international and global markets brought together the diverse human cultures in direct contact with each other. Cultural globalization followed or went parallel to the economic globalization.

Swaminathan Aiyar (2005), the noted Indian economist and the regular columnist with the largest selling English daily *The Times of India*, perhaps best summarizes this cultural facet of the globalization:

I feel just as much at home eating noodles in China, steak in Spain, and cous-cous in Morocco. I am a Kargudi villager, a Tamilian, a Delhi-wallah, an Indian, a Washington Redskins fan, and a citizen of the world, all at the same time...Globalization for me is not just the movements of goods and capitals, or even of Aiyars. It is a step towards Lennon's vision of no country.

3.

Culture and Communities in the Flat World and the Specter of the “Clash of Civilization”

The seminal work by Samuel P. Huntington *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* that jolted the world back in the mid-1990s seems increasingly vindicating itself post- September 11. The subsequent resurgence of global terrorism, the imbroglio in the Middle East, the immigration tensions in the Europe, the intransigence of the “rogue” states as Iran and North Korea to give up their nuclear ambitions; all these geopolitical developments signal to the larger picture of the contemporary world where the critical distinctions between people, as argued by Huntington , “are not primarily ideological or economic; they are cultural.”

As people of one culture come in contact with the people of the other culture in the globalized world they increasingly become aware of their differences and peculiarities. The optimistic positive outcome of this coming together of the cultures would be that the people will come to know the beauty of the diversity of their shared humanity expressed in the diverse manifestations of customs, language, traditions, religious practices and indigenous knowledge and practices. It would result in the increased understanding and harmony among the cultures. The competing argument would be the Huntingtonian assertion that it would result in the increased conflicts and tensions:

In this new world [post-Cold War world] the most pervasive, important, and dangerous conflicts will not be between social classes, rich and poor, or other economically defined groups, but between people belonging to different cultural identities....

If character is the culture writ small than the community is the modus vivendi to adjust the multiplicity of the character of its individuals. Community, as a key concept in social and cultural anthropology, is characterized in terms of common interests between people or a common ecology and locality or common social system or structure. In the “flat world” the term has various connotations and meanings depending on the context it’s being used. Culture is the bond between the individuals in the community sharing the common set of mores, values, traditions and beliefs. It’s the set of these cultural elements binding together the individuals in a community that shape the character – the self or identity – of each of the individuals. Individuals are the cultural constructs and so is the character they embody.

Whether the communities and the character can survive in an age of the globalization is the cynic’s apprehension that soon meets the ideological cul-de-sac. The answer it seems is blindingly obvious. Of course they can survive and are surviving as well. To what extent they can retain whatever was theirs and to what extent they adopt whatever wasn’t theirs determines the nature of that survival.

The social-Darwinistic rhetoric of the opponents of the globalization – the type that is echoed in the World Social Forums and its regional versions –has been that globalization is the ruse of the “Fat Cat” capitalists represented by the rapacious multinationals and the corporations, the neo-colonial ambition of the West to control over the resources of the developing countries. The delicate socio-cultural fabric of the communities could not stand the assaults of the Western culture and would eventually yield to it. Hence there is the threat to the very existence of these communities from the globalization. This understanding smacks of the gross misunderstanding of the very nature

and historical and philosophical underpinnings of the globalization. That globalization is the process as old as the human curiosity for the unknown – though it has been strongly manifested only from the last decade of the preceding century – and is the cumulative product of the experiences and knowledge acquisitions by human beings across the cultures and communities continues to evade the intellect of its opponents. The apprehensions about the homogenizing tendencies of the globalization are thus as unwarranted as the Huntingtonian prophecy of the clash of the cultures.

4.

How much of ours is ours and how much of ours is theirs?

Oscar Wilde famously said, “ Most people are other people.” In a globalized world the character and the communities seem to suffer the same enigmatic fate. “Their thoughts are somebody else’s opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation,” he further said. And that’s exactly what seems to be happening to the individuals and their communities in the contemporary world.

Standing just in front of the Statesman building in the downtown New Delhi, the capital of the thriving Indian economy, one can see a community that increasingly seems to be the ‘other’ community and one very often runs into the individuals who are increasingly ‘other’ individuals. Here is the great Indian Middle class milking the benefits of the globalization (and are also being milked). A community of English-speaking businessmen selling the consumer electronic items imported from China, Thailand, Japan, Malaysia and from around the world. A group of college going youths relishing cappuccino at the Cafe Coffee Day and burgers in the McDonald’s communicating with each other in English

replete with swear words and expletives as “ Shit!” and “ F***!” Most of them attending the classes in the daytime and working in the call centers in the night. An entire generation of mobile -users who are “ half here “ and “ half there.” Thanks to the great LPG (Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalization) highway the country took back in the early 1990!

So how much of them are theirs i.e. truly Indian and how much of them are from outside (read West)? Not only in the terms of what they use and consume and dress but also in the terms of what they think and how they behave? The answer is becoming more and more ambiguous in the age of globalization. Does this ambiguity of not having the undiluted and unadulterated single identity of Indian community and Indian character qualify as the reason to say that the community and the character cannot survive in the age of globalization?

The answer would be resounding “no”. While the Indians in the burgeoning cities of India might dress, speak and think like their Western counterparts due to the contact with them owing to the profusion of popular media and inter-active technologies the Indians living abroad (NRIs) might at the same time feel and think more like the Indian. They might assimilate their own inherited Indian cultural identities along with their adopted identities in the community away from their own community and still retain what was originally theirs. In *Identity and Violence The Illusion of Destiny*, Amartya Sen (2006) puts it more eloquently:

There are a great variety of categories to which we simultaneously belong. I can be, at the same time, an Asian, an Indian citizen, a Bengali with Bangladeshi ancestry, an American or British resident, an economist, an dabbler in philosophy, an author, a Sanskritist, a strong believer in secularism and democracy, a man, a feminist, a heterosexual, a defender of gay and lesbian rights, with a nonreligious lifestyle, from a

Hindu background, a non-Brahmin, and a noble believer in an afterlife (and also, in case the question is asked, a non-believer in a after-life as well). This is just a small sample of diverse categories to each of which I may simultaneously belong – there are of course a great many other membership categories too which, depending on circumstances, can move and engage me.

5.

A tale of a people and a community

Globalization is indeed a ubiquitous presence in every nook and cranny of the world!

One hour away by air from New Delhi, the capital city of the one of the most vibrant and thriving world economies, is the capital city of Nepal, Kathmandu. The country whose economy has been in the doldrums from many years due to the insurgency and the political instability. In 45 minutes journey from the hustle and bustle of the downtown Kathmandu one will come to a small suburb of Bungmati and Khokana, the medieval villages of the Newar community – the indigenous community of the Kathmandu valley. Here one can see how the character and communities not only survive but also thrive in the age of globalization. Famous for medieval old houses, the alleys and streets, temples, traditional practices and festivals that go throughout the year these are the attractive tourist destinations inside the Kathmandu valley. The Newar community in these villages has been affluent and almost each household has the modern gadgets as Television, computers and telephones. The woodcarvers and craftsmen of Bungmati have been world famous. Their products of the Hindu and Buddhist idols carved out of wood and metals are exported to the outside world and the craftsmen keep on visiting the countries like Japan and Germany for the promotion of their crafts. In Khokana the mustard oil is prepared in the traditional

grinding mills using the mustard seeds imported from as far as Europe. And it is famous for its mustard oil.

The Newar community of Bungmati and Khokana has been in contact with the forces of globalization for long time but little have been the changes in its cultural landscape. The teenagers and the youth of the community hum the tunes of Michael Jackson but fully and responsively participate in the cultural activities of their community as well. They are aware that tourism can be the potential source of the sustainable income for the community and for that it is necessary to retain the medieval charm and beauty of their villages.

The point being made isn't that character and the communities can survive in their intact form in the globalized world. It's not only difficult but also increasingly impossible for these two to remain intact. They are bound to change but their original cultural strands of religion, language, customs, values and mores will still be dominant. How much the character and communities change by coming in contact with other characters and communities is also dependant on their willingness and predisposition to change.

6.

Conclusion

Yes, the character and communities can survive in the age of the globalization. The cynicism dogging the critics of the globalization that it's the threat on the very survival of the character and communities is nothing but the lopsided understanding of the

phenomenon of the globalization itself. The current era of the globalization that started post-2000 is no longer about the countries and the multinational companies flexing their muscles to control the global market and services but it's all about the individuals empowered by the information technology and the knowledge capital competing and collaborating in the level playing field. This economic globalization has been accompanied by the cultural globalization resulted by the seamless flow of ideas, knowledge and information. Together they have resulted in the unprecedented coming together of humanity and the greater appreciation and understanding of the diversity of each others' cultures and multiplicity of our identities.

Globalization is not the panacea for all the problems afflicting the global human community. And the political and the institutional deficiencies and inefficiencies that has resulted in the increased sectarian violence, demographic strains and global terrorism in the post – 9/11 World can not be attributed as the fallouts and the failures of the globalization.

After all, there seems to be no alternatives to globalization but more democratic, more all-inclusive and the people-led globalization!

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