

Globalisation and Tradition

I will not attempt to discuss conditions peculiar to India or the relationship between Indian traditions and globalisation. I take my warning from the late Edward Saïd: “a European or American studying the Orient ... comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second.” [*Orientalism, 1994, Vintage, p11*]. I know from personal experience that there’s something in the traditions of a culture that can only be understood by those brought up with that culture or, at the very least, fully immersed in it for a prolonged period.

I can, however, talk about the phenomena of globalisation and tradition. Globalisation is global and so anyone on the globe can discuss it. Tradition is a universal human phenomenon so can be discussed as a *phenomenon* by anyone.

At first sight, it would seem that globalisation and tradition are on a collision course and that this conference is a record of that collision. I don’t think that this is quite right. To understand this, we have to try and understand globalisation – not an easy task as it’s always hard to understand anything that is in progress.

Any discussion of the modern condition anywhere in the world must include a discussion of globalisation. As Anthony Giddens (one of the subject’s major theorists) says: “For better or worse, we are being propelled in to a global order that no one fully understands, but which is making its effects felt upon all of us”. [*Runaway World, Profile Books, 2002 (2nd edn) pp6-7*] We must recognise that, as another theorist, Martin Albrow, tells us: “Globalisation is the most significant development and theme in contemporary life and social theory to emerge since the collapse of Marxist systems.” [*The Global Age, Polity Press, 1996, pp98-90*]

So what is globalisation?

As a term it seems that it originated – quite symbolically as it turns out – in an American Express advertising campaign in the mid-1970s. [*Ronald Niezen, A World Beyond Difference, Blackwell, 2004, p47*] It was a phenomenon waiting for a catchword and, once coined, the word spread quickly to sum up what has become, again according to Giddens: “the intensification of worldwide social relations in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.” [*The Consequences of Modernity, Polity Press, 1991, p64*]

This “intensification of worldwide social relations” has many facets and these can be individually important. They are most summarily listed by the German social philosopher Jürgen Habermas: “By ‘globalisation’ is meant the cumulative processes of a worldwide expansion of trade and production, commodity and financial markets, fashions, the media and computer programs, news and communications networks, transportation systems and flows of migration, the risks engendered by large-scale technology, environmental damage and epidemics, as well as organised crime and terrorism.” [*The Divided West, Polity Press, 2006, p175*] A formidable list.

The key initiating events of this process, again significantly, took place in the middle of the last century under American tutelage. These were: the Bretton-Woods Agreement of 1944 which led (eventually) to the creation of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund; the creation of the United Nations in 1945; and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

The Bretton-Woods Agreement, recalling the international catastrophe of the Great Depression in the 1930s, set up a global system for regulating international trade based on the United States and European free-market system. The United Nations, following the failure of the League of Nations and the World War that followed, attempted to establish a system for the avoidance of inter-state conflict. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, after the shock of the industrial genocide of the Holocaust, put in place an Anglo-Saxon concept of the right of individuals over and above their community, nation or state. All three events significantly modified the nation-state system, created in Europe by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, which gave states - and only states - both the right to wage war and absolute rights over the lives of their citizens.

The advancement of transnational human rights was stalled by the Cold War. The record of the UN has been disappointing and its authority has been further undermined by the USA in the lead up to the Iraq war. Outside communist control, however, the internationalisation of free trade and the establishment of an accelerating series of international treaty organisations have, from the beginning, led to a highly successful capitalist global free-market economic system and a corresponding growth of global industries. So successful, in fact, that non-communist states have had to *adapt* to global industry, rather than the other way round, and the structural strength of the free-market global economy contributed to the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1989 and has been adopted, with reservations, by China in the last two decades.

Leading the way in the new global economy were North-Atlantic and primarily American corporations. These were the inheritors of the unique combination of rationalist and scientific philosophies - called 'The Enlightenment' - in eighteenth-century Europe, the Industrial Revolution and free-market system in Britain, and the libertarianism of the American Revolution. These collectively came to be called simply "modernity". At first this led to the domination and colonisation of much of the non-industrialised world, primarily by Britain. American domination of the so-called 'developed' world after the Second World War, led to de-colonisation and the creation of an American-dominated global economic system. This is what we have today except that, as might be expected in truly free global system, the nationality of the corporations becomes less and less relevant. Nevertheless, the global economic culture continues to be based on the North-Atlantic model.

This model is based on the Enlightenment principle that, as Baron d'Holbach said in 1753, "reasonable opinions" must take over and "the vain chimeras of men" must be removed - "inconceivable theology, ridiculous fables, impenetrable mysteries, [and] puerile ceremonies", [*Good Sense*] in other words traditions. Reason and rational experiment would allow us to progress to an ever-improving world. Progress would involve change and change would be driven by continual experiment. In the United States, these principles when combined with the liberty of every individual both to innovate and consume, created a highly successful and expanding industrial and

capitalist market system. The USA was historically averse to the colonialism that had allowed European markets to expand, and so, once American wealth had overtaken Britain and the other European powers, the USA managed a progressive expansion of its economy through an effective imposition of its free-market system on the rest of the world. Colonialism, which was consciously repressive and racist, was easily dismissed under the new doctrine of Human Rights. American market expansion, however, brought with it a political system which linked the freedom of markets with its own concept of political freedom. As early as 1904 Hugo Munsterberg wrote that “the duty of America is to extend its political system to every quarter of the globe: other nations will thus be rated according to their ripeness for this system, and the history of the world appear one long and happy education of the human race up to the plane of American conception”. [*The Americans, McLure Phillips, p6*] Prophetic words. The usually unstated combination of the free market and American culture is harder to dismiss than colonialism. Accept the undoubted economic benefits of the free market and you tend to get the culture with it.

The early start of the USA and its North-Atlantic satellites in the global arena allowed industrial brands from these countries to dominate the global marketplace. Brands such as Coca Cola, McDonalds, Nike and Starbucks have become symbols of globalisation. The effects of this across the world are plain to see. It is summed up by the cultural ecologist Helena Norberg-Hodge. “Western films and products and, more recently, satellite television ... all provide overwhelming images of luxury and power ... [and] give the impression that everyone in the West is rich, beautiful and brave, and leads a life filled with excitement and glamour. In the commercial mass culture which fuels this illusion, advertisers make it clear that Westernised fashion accessories equal sophistication and ‘cool’.” [*The March of the Monoculture, The Ecologist, Vol 29, No 2, May/June 1999, p195*] Or, in the words of Theodore Levitt in the Harvard Business Review in 1983, “everywhere everything gets more and more like everything else as the world’s preference structure is relentlessly homogenised.”

The prestige of this system extends to the built environment – the subject of this conference.

In the early twentieth century in Europe and then in the United States an architectural style emerged that drew its inspiration from the principles of the Enlightenment. This style, modernism, made an aesthetic out of the symbolic representation of rationality, innovation and anti-traditionalism. It almost completely took over the architectural and planning professions just after the founding events of globalisation. Modernism has joined with other global brands to represent the success of the global free market. Much as the North-Atlantic economic system came to dominate global markets, North-Atlantic modernism has come to dominate global architecture with the same homogenising effects.

This economic system is for many the sum total of globalisation – not least anti-globalisation demonstrators. But as Habermas’s list reveals, there is much more to it than this.

Opinion is divided as to whether the new globalised world is the logical extension of the Enlightenment or modernity or whether we are, in fact, entering a new quite different age, beyond conventional modernity, of similar significance to the

Enlightenment itself. Does a completely globalised world lose the momentum of expansion that has driven capitalism forward? Does the recognition that industrial innovation has the imminent potential to destroy the environment, undermine the concept of progress itself? These and other questions cannot be answered here. All commentators are agreed, however, that we are entering a new age and that, short of a devastating natural catastrophe, globalisation will not go away.

All are also agreed that the flip side of commercial and political globalisation is a growth in *localisation*.

Now that the successful economies of states comes to depend on attracting free-floating global commerce and now that interstate warfare is becoming a thing of the past, as the sociologist Daniel Bell famously put it in the 1980s, “the nation-state has become too small to solve global problems and too large to deal with local ones”. But nation-states and national identity are largely nineteenth- and twentieth-century inventions that themselves attempted to homogenise varied communities within their borders. In diminishing the role of the nation-state, globalisation has lifted the lid on local culture and identities. As Jan Aart Scholte points out, “when faced with a seemingly vast, intangible and uncontrollable globality, many people have turned away from the state to their local ‘home’ in hopes of enhancing their possibilities of community and self determination”. [*Globalisation: a critical introduction, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005pp 189-90*] Indeed, in 1991, Larry Chartand identified over 5,000 discrete communities of peoples - or nations - amongst only 200 states. [*A New Solidarity among Native Peoples, World Press Review*]

Regionalisation and the re-emergence of micro-nations is a worldwide phenomenon. Examples among a great many include decentralisation in Argentina, the legal primacy of the Catalan language in the Catalan region of Spain, the independence of the central Asian states from the Russian empire, and the 74th Amendment of the Indian constitution. The instruments of global communication - television and the internet - are used to reinforce the identity of re-emerging nations. Satellite broadcasts have assisted the survival of the Inuktituk language; the Cree Indians and the European arctic circle Sami both have own-language-entry web sites that act as a community focus.

As the linguistic historian Nicholas Ostler says, “every living language is the embodiment of a tradition” and “any human language binds together a community”. [*Empires of the Word, Harper Collins, 2005, pp xix & 7*] Indeed, traditions more generally are the collective memory and identity of any community. Many traditions have been released by the decline of the nation-state and nurtured through transnational communication media.

And yet, globalisation is based on the power of reason and acceptance of change brought in by the Enlightenment as a contrary to the conservatism of, what are called, “traditional societies”. This enquiring, scientific, rational and liberal outlook continues to be the engine of expanding globalisation. Is this not a paradox? Where then does tradition, the old enemy of unrestrained progress, fit into this new world?

So successful has been the rational global system that there are very few simply traditional societies left. A society that can rely on tradition as the sole justification

for its actions without recourse to any logical reasoning is extremely rare. As Anthony Giddens says, “The end of tradition doesn’t mean that tradition disappears, as the Enlightenment thinkers wanted. On the contrary, it continues to flourish everywhere. But less and less ... is it tradition lived in the traditional way. The traditional way means defending traditional activities through their own ritual and symbolism – defending tradition through its internal claims to truth”. [*Runaway World, Profile Books, 2002 (2nd edn) p43*] The last bastion of this level of tradition in any wider social context is religious doctrine, which is either left well alone in any rational debate or takes the extreme form of fundamentalism. Otherwise, wholly traditional societies are so rare that any such group would now have its traditions carefully protected as ethnic relics.

Tradition is no longer the enemy of reason and progress. Almost everywhere traditions are a discretionary or life-style choices – there’s always an alternative. To quote Giddens again, “traditions only persist in so far as they are made available to discursive justification and are prepared to enter into open dialogue not only with other traditions but with alternative modes of doing things.” [*Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, Scott Lash, Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order, Polity Press, 1994, p105*]

Traditions and their role in social cohesion are a key component in the complex world of the new globality. They are not the self-justifying traditions of the past but rational or reflexive traditions, open to self-criticism, modernity and development.

We can and must now examine traditions for what they are worth. We can find things that we cannot support: female circumcision, forced child labour or the suppression of minorities. And we can find a great deal that is of value: a sense of place in a world where we are, according to Homi Bhabha, estranged from “any immediate access to an ordinary identity”, [*The Location of Culture, Routledge, 1994, pp 1-2*] the cohesion of a community and settlement of individuals within it, a deposit of accumulated empirical knowledge, or an established methodology for the use of low energy resources.

It is notable that one of the last refuges of rabid anti-traditionalism is aesthetic modernism. And yet it is precisely here that rationality and free thought have been turned into symbols that are neither rational nor permit free debate. Instead, impractical, unsustainable and unpopular forms are defended with proscription, dogma and slogans. Instead of examining traditions for what they’re worth they’re dismissed as irrelevant and nostalgic. On the contrary, I would suggest that we follow the advice of one of the most notable and respected supporters of globalisation, the economist Jagdish Bhagwati, and understand that “Nostalgia ... is used not to bottle up change ... but to decide what a society really wants to remember in the context of change and then find ways to do so. That is surely the way to go.” [*In Defense of Globalization, Oxford University Press, 2004, p113*]

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