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Globalization and National Culture: A Complex Relationship

The word ‘Globalization’ has been the common moniker of the 21st century and is given many definitions by scholars across the world. In the most general terms, globalization is the rapidly developing process of complex interconnections between societies, individuals and cultures, creating in the process a global awareness. Globalization has been routinely criticized for its disruptive effects, one of which is that it has placed the role of contemporary national culture and nationalism into question. But does globalization really undermine the national culture? The relationship between the two is important to analyze because of the varying opinions to what effect globalization has had on national culture and globalization has put into question what it means to be a citizen of a state (Erwin). This paper elaborates the complex relationship between globalization and national culture and argues that globalization and national culture can have a fruitful interaction, without destroying the local culture or weakening nationalism. More than that, globalization provides tremendous opportunity for cultural diversity, which is possible to embrace without harming one’s own culture. Specific examples like those of India support the argument and extend it further to show the successful results of cultural globalization.

An understanding of the idea of ‘national culture’ and in general, ‘a nation’ is useful to analyze the argument. The birth of nation states can be associated to the ‘Treaty of Westphalia’ in 1648, a collective global decision which gave rise to nation states and created a sense of nationhood. But people and cultures existed prior to that as well, so it is important

to understand a nation as an imagined community which unifies people who take pride in specific historic cultural ties. It is mainly a psychological phenomenon. The Treaty of Westphalia gave an identification to what we call as our culture today, but this culture didn't come out of nowhere. What one calls as their culture is nothing but an amalgamation of different cultures, bounded together by globalization. Thus, a national culture is a complex unification of various norms, beliefs and customs of different societies, strengthened by an imagination of the nation people have in mind. For instance, the national dish of Switzerland, 'Rosti', is primarily a dish of potato which originated in Peru. This supports the argument as it questions the origin of what one calls as their culture.

Globalization has much older roots than nationalism and it began thousands of years ago with the migration of people out of Africa. Globalization is the cause behind creation of cultures and it is possible to keep what we call as our 'culture' safe with present day globalization. However, it is important to understand whether or not a culture will be destroyed depends on how strong that culture is, which is elaborated by specific examples later. It also depends on the government, which can take steps to promote or ban a particular culture. For instance, the Indian government promotes handlooms as they are an important part of India's traditional culture.

Cultural globalization is generally seen as westernization of the world where cultural autonomy is undermined and hence, national identity is in danger of being subverted. Opponents of cultural globalization see it "as a vehicle which aims at controlling and undermining other cultures. The transmitted ideological pattern has been seen as an invasion of western values, particularly American" (McQuail). However, supporters of globalization rightly argue that "consumers want choice and they want to be empowered, it's our job to

empower them" (Demers, p.58). Moreover, citizens are not powerless in their response to accept or reject a particular culture.

Europeans have shown that "internationalization is not a result of imperialism but of self-determination" (Wang). "The cultural specificity of the British audience makes them still watch British soap operas like *Coronation Street* and *East Enders* over American imports such as *Dallas*, because of lack of specific cultural reference" (McQuail). In their case, cultural globalization does not cause overwhelming damage to national culture. Therefore, cultural identity is not easy to manipulate through the media culture. It instils shared cultural elements in a society without uniquely diminishing the specificity of the local culture.

India, one of the most diverse countries shows that globalizing forces are not sufficient for cultural resistance and can in fact be used by a country to its benefit. In India, globalization of the media allows local media groups to develop quickly and strong cultural factors lead them to play an important role in the preservation of Indian culture. Internationalization of media does not undermine the Indian culture because of the role played by the local media. The success of channels like Zee TV was mainly because it offered increasingly localized content. "Zee TV is the largest commercial satellite in India which has 51% of the total viewership, as compared to star news which has 38%" (Somwalker). The main reasons for the success of Zee TV is because it uses Hindi and Urdu, languages which are familiar to Indians and the Indian dress gives familiarity to an Indian viewer.

India has taken the benefits of cultural globalization, while still being close to its culture. "Indians prefer to be entertained in Hindi, which has forced the main foreign satellite

channels such as Star TV to adapt Hindi language programs. Patrick Cross, the M.D of BBC said that his corporation had plans to introduce programs in Hindi" (Wang). India has shown that the driving forces behind cultural homogenization can be weak sometimes, and it teaches how to benefit from cultural globalization and media globalization, while still being close to its culture.

Globalization in India is seen as homogenization of culture because of a rise in the number of fast food outlets, western dressing and the use of English language, as these are things claimed to be outside the domain of Indian culture. But, this is not exactly the case. Moreover, a national culture is a collection of different cultures over the period of history, so one should be careful in claiming something to be a part of their culture because there is very little that is actually national. For instance, 'Chilly' and 'Tomato' are an important identification of Indian culture, but it was only in the 16th century that these were brought to India by Portuguese explorers. It is because of the strength of the idea of culture Indians have in mind, they diversify but are still very close to their traditional culture. For instance, most Indian households dress traditionally when there is a festival but they might wear western dress otherwise. Thus, India's case arguably shows that globalization does not lead to homogeneity, it leads to heterogeneity. Instead of one culture, there are many.

Globalization has undoubtedly resulted in greater cultural diversity and enhanced the ordinary individual's cultural experience. For instance, "an Indian can stay in town and dine on Italian, Chinese, Thai or Vietnamese, listen to German symphonic music, buy French neckties, English raincoats and Italian scarves. Likewise, a Parisian can choose croissants or New York style bagels" (Boudreax). Instead of creating a boring global village,

globalization is encouraging the proliferation of cultural diversity by allowing different cultures to co-exist together.

While the concern that globalization is increasing homogeneity has some merit, it is not a sufficient condition to destroy the local culture. It is said that Hollywood has a homogenizing effect on the world. While this claim is true to some extent, it is also true that the local culture is not completely destroyed in the process. “In countries like India, Germany, France and Japan, which account for more than half of the world’s films, most of the theatrical box office is made up of films produced in those lands” (Lynton). Thus, globalization in these countries leads to a variety of choices for the citizens.

It is argued that globalization leads to a secularized and individualized view of the world, but an Irish economist Marc Coleman explains that it is an opportunity for cultures that are more traditional and family oriented to push their view of the world (“Does Globalization Destroy Culture?”). Coleman says that Ireland has actually used globalization to sell its culture, a successful example of which is ‘Guinness’, one of the most successful beer brands worldwide. “In Ireland, increased participation in global trade not only boosted and diversified the Irish economy, it also allowed the Irish to spread their culture around the world, whether through beer or film or music and dance. Simultaneously, the influx of competing cultural influences has increased awareness of their cultural identity, spurring citizens to defend their cultural identity and features they care about the most, like the Irish language” (Sunde). This example shows how it is possible even for a small country to use globalization to its success.

The relationship between nationalism and globalization has also received much attention and it is argued that globalization has threatened nationalism as it transcends national borders and exposes the national culture to outside cultures. While it is a justifiable argument, it is not a sufficient condition to undermine nationalism as a nation is an imagined community and an idea in the mind of citizens, as stated earlier. Whether or not nationalism will be undermined depends on how strong that imagination is, which in turn depends on how strong that culture is. The case of India shows that a strong culture might be unaffected by the negative influence of cultural globalization.

The arguments that criticize globalization for weakening nationalism work dichotomously to prove that globalization can even strengthen it. Globalization has threatened citizens in general and as a result, it has increased nationalistic sentiment amongst them. “Cultural ties to the nation states have seen an increase in the 21st century due to the threatening feelings brought by cultural imperialism” (Erwin). Due to this, citizens have made it a point to preserve their culture. “The idea of a nation state being rendered obsolete in the context of global politics inevitably invokes nationalistic sentiments as a protective mechanism against the dismantling of one’s nation” (Erwin). The Anti-immigrant sentiments in countries like the UK and the USA suggests the same. “The battle between nationalism and globalization is a mutually beneficial co-existence of two compatible agencies” (Abdulsattar). This implies that the complex relationship between nationalism and globalization is not a zero-sum game in which one weakens the other, but both can complement each other.

Therefore, it is possible for national culture and globalization to have a fruitful interaction, without weakening nationalism and destroying the local culture. The case of

India shows how with the insertion of various cultures, the national culture can be kept intact. In conclusion, since globalization is an inevitable phenomenon and there is no way to entirely stop the process as human desire drives it, citizens need to learn the right way to deal with globalization, because the result ultimately depends upon them. If they can respect the diversity of people and their culture in this new era, “it will lead to a global community marked by unity in pluralism” (Wang Yi). This will lead to a new kind of globalization that will not be homogenizing, and a society where cohesion and fragmentation can exist together.

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