

GLOBALIZATION AND CULTURAL MEMORY: CRITICAL DISCOURSES IN D R NAGARAJ'S WRITINGS

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Abstract:

Contemporary thought on 'Globalization' has been dominated by economists who argue for and against globalization in terms of the impact on economies of nations. Although this kind of thinking has great value and influences the economic policies of a nation, globalization also has to be interpreted as a phenomenon that has an impact on the culture of a society. D R Nagaraj, the Kannada cultural critic, characterizes globalization as an amnesia inducing agent. Globalization, according to him, forces people to lose the memory of their cultural past. The 'angry farmer' and the 'agitated Hindu' are both responses to the same phenomenon of globalization. The former is a response that originates out of genuine frustration faced by farmers who were the first victims of globalization. The latter response comes out of a desire to be part of the new capitalist world order. In both responses there is a kind of amnesia present which is uprooting communities from their cultural past and accommodating them in this new world order as consumers of culture exported by capitalist societies. This paper examines the concept of 'cultural memory' as theorized by D R Nagaraj in discussing the impact of globalization and capitalism on identities of individuals and communities. It also tries to shed some light on the contemporary consolidation of religious fundamentalism in India and other parts of the world and tries to analyse the link between cultural memory, literature, identity and the new capitalist world order.

Keywords: *Cultural Memory, Literature, Capitalism, Globalization*

One of the important ways by which the contemporary world has been transformed is by turning people, individuals, into consumers. The spread of capitalism as a natural economic order has transformed not just the global and national economic policies but also cultural systems of communities. What differentiates the previous waves of globalization and the present wave is that this wave is accompanied by a strong economic ideologies for which breaking away of barriers between countries is a prerequisite for its functioning. For capitalism to function well economic globalization was a must. For communism to truly realize itself the whole world had to adopt this ideology by breaking barriers between nations. The paradox is that, while communism failed in Eastern Europe, it left behind a never-ending of ethnic conflict which has led to the emergence of strict borders between countries and capitalism has given rise to a wave of protectionism in the first world countries. The lesson to be learnt from both these economic ideologies is that they both miserably failed in creating a true spirit of internationalism.

Let's start with a paradox. How is it possible for the modern world to embrace religion and spiritualism that is mediated through big business and digital media? Even a cursory glance at the history of religious and spiritual experience should make us feel confident that the modern materialistic world driven by consumerism shall be an anathema. Throughout history religions have tended to behave as guardians of orthodoxy and conservative thought, resisting any kind of radical change. The more religious a society gets the greater the resistance for any kind of a change. But this simplistic notion does not help us in understanding the contemporary world.

Let's try to understand contemporary India. Let's start with paradoxes. How is it possible for modern India to embrace religion and spiritualism that is mediated through big business and digital media? How is it possible to be practice spirituality while holding positions of authority and power? How is it possible to practice democracy in a society that is becoming more and more identitarian?

There are many ways in which globalization affects our society. But the chief among them is the way in which it affects memory. Cultural memories are very essential for the sustenance of any community, be it a religious one or a secular one like nation-states.

How does globalization address the question of identity?

The capitalist-modernity driven globalization has a way of dealing with the questions of identity. Identity is very important to the modern world but yet capitalist-modernity tells people to deny their search for identity by looking into the past. For modernity the question of identity is answered in a very simple way by invoking the idea of individualism. Human being is first and foremost an individual with

certain rights. This prepares the ground for embracing the identity of a consumer. This identity is peddled by capitalism and is made to appear to transcend all other identities. The individual who consumes coke need not identify himself/herself with anything else. The consumer identity has tendency to liberate the individual from all other identities which have become a trap for him. The individual who is seeking to transcend his caste identity will not be able to do so in the social world as he finds himself in the middle identitarian politics played by political groups and social groups and most important of all the family, which seeks to preserve caste and make any rebellion against caste within the family an act of sacrilege which breaks relationships.

However, the identity of a consumer, at least momentarily, liberates the person from the clutches of caste. For globalization that is driven by modernity and capitalism human beings who form a society need to first identify themselves as individuals. These individuals then have to develop a distance from history and culture who then become consumers whose desire to consume products only increases with time. Gandhi had realized this well during his anti-colonial struggle and hence Gandhi's response to capitalist-modernity driven globalization was very profound. We will come back to Gandhi's response a bit later.

As new products enter our daily lives and old products disappear, so does the memories associated with the objects that were used in daily life. With the disappearance of the bullock cart as a mode of transportation a whole experience and host of memories associated with that way of travelling will disappear. Most of the objects that were part of our daily life have been replaced in such a fashion. Such replacement might appear as natural in the modern world – in the world of constantly updated smartphones. But such rapid disappearance of objects from everyday life was unheard of until the arrival of modernity. Even if such disappearance used to happen in the ancient world, it, at least, didn't happen with the same pace.

This fast paced disappearance and replacements of objects and the associated loss of memory has certain implications on the way in which the identity of communities and the individuals in those communities is shaped. The essay "Anxious Hindu and Angry Farmer: Notes on the Culture and Politics of Two Responses to Globalization in India" written by D R Nagaraj¹ explores the making of identities of communities and individuals in those communities. In this essay Nagaraj is interested in exploring the responses of political communities when it encounters globalization. The "anxious hindu" and the "angry farmer" belong to these political communities.

¹ This essay appears in the posthumously published book of D R Nagaraj "Listening to the Loom: Essays on Literature, Politics and Violence", 2012.

The first paragraph of the essay sets the context for a discussion of globalization,

“The imagination of a political community rewrites its responses to a particular problem or phenomenon through its own forms of the past. That is how pastiche is born in political action, to use a category from poetics. In India, globalization is translated politically as ruthless economic liberalization, ignoring the subtle nuances and sophistry of academic discourse. For political communities nothing is new; they have all seen it before. Globalization is seen both as a cultural invasion and a raid on indigenous resources by those who are opposed to it.²”

The first paragraph is very telling. It sets the context for the whole discussion on globalization as it tries to look at globalization from the perspective of cultural politics rather than globalization as just an economic phenomenon. The response to globalization in India is compared to that of creating ‘pastiche in political action’. This way of characterizing political action is fresh and forces us to think about political action as one would think about literary texts. This pastiche is born in contemporary times, Nagaraj writes, in an attempt to imitate Gandhi’s response to globalization. Nagaraj continues to write,

“The pastiche is created deliberately; the political communities want to re-inscribe Gandhi into their action. Political pastiche has also tried to come to terms with Gandhi’s original response to the basic practices of modern capitalist form of globalization.³”

It is this attempt to imitate Gandhi in the contemporary times that has created the pastiche.

Gandhi and Globalization

D R Nagaraj points out the close proximity between the responses to globalization given by the ‘anxious hindu’ and the ‘angry farmer’. Both target globalization and modernity and hold them responsible for the problem of contemporary India. But they both differ in identifying the problem. For the ‘fanatic Hindu’ the problem is with the degradation of ‘values’ which are represented by breaking of caste hierarchies, women empowerment and secularization of public spaces. For the ‘angry farmer’ it is something much more tangible: decline in demand for locally produced goods,

D R Nagaraj explores the theme of ‘apparent similarities and real divergence’ in this essay. The ‘apparent similarities’ refer to the similarities that one can see between the responses to globalization of Gandhi and the ‘fanatic Hindu’.

² Ibid, 284

³ Ibid, 285

One interpretation of Gandhi's response to globalization gives it a character of a metaphysical response. But D R reminds us that Gandhi's response was expressed both in words and action. The verbal response may have contained a metaphysical critique of modernity and globalization. But his actions emphasized his real disagreement with the project of western modernity which was driving capitalism and globalization. Gandhi's charaka in this regard was not just a symbolic protest against globalization, it was a real act directed against globalization and more importantly to create an alternative to globalization.

It is interesting to note how this real act is now appropriated by the hindu right as a symbol of indogeneity. This is part of a larger appropriation of Gandhian method into the right wing politics where it is given a symbolic status and discarded as a practical response to globalization.

Gandhi frequently relies of traditions and customs to build an alternative to globalization. For Gandhi the village community with various castes doing specific work not only gave them an identity but it was also good economics. Gandhi embraced the village economy not for the reverence towards ancient customs and practices but for its efficacy and as a good alternative to globalization. Gandhi rejected both the material comforts that globalization brought and the ensuing degradation of morals and values. But for the fanatic Hindu it is much easier to accept the comforts of globalization and then criticize the degradation of morals and values. So, the 'fanatic Hindu' would fiercely criticize any attempts at changing the nature of Indian society. It will be read as a threat to the Hindu identity rather than as bad economics leading to unemployment, poverty and hunger. What drives the conservative hindu towards such a response is the anxiety of disappearance of power and authority over certain things that tradition and religion had guaranteed to them. The conservative attitude in fact emerges from such a fear

'Desire-based response to globalization'

The effects of globalization had started to make its presence felt in the Indian society at a time when democracy and the ideas of liberalism and secularism in a modern sense were in a nascent stage. India was transitioning from a caste based feudal society to a democratic and secular society. But the globalization driven by capitalist modernity rocked the Indian society at the time of such a transition. The demand on the new Indian state was also a demand for breaking away with certain aspects of its past. The caste society had to be done away with. Gender inequality had to be done away with. The project of the building a new nation entailed all these demands. These changes were driven not just as part of building a new nation but also independently by political communities which had a political awakening and wanted to liberate themselves from the clutches of an oppressive society.

Such a change necessarily brings with it a lot of problems. One such problem is the problem of identity. What happens when power and authority is stripped from

a person or a political group which does not want to give it up? The conservative hindu is made to look at assertions of equality as the effects of western modernity which comes as a package along with globalization. The political force involved behind this misreading converts an ordinary hindu into a political hindu. Thus the conservative hindus become a political entity, a political community. The anxious hindu is a political hindu.

In D R Nagaraj's analysis this political community of the anxious hindus has built an identity narrative that is based on desire. Nagaraj writes "The desire-based identity narrative survives in politics in the form of a paradox: everyday objects of the glocal surrounded by pre-global religious memories. Globalization has become the mystical experience derived from everyday objects"⁴. In simple terms a shopping mall built in the form of a temple. Shopping mall is the new temple.

The project of building Hindu identity necessarily entailed a going back to the past, the pre-British and pre-Muslim era in which everything was grand and beautiful. Hence the immediate past had to be disowned. But at the same time the Hindu identity had to deal with capitalist modernity and the challenge it threw to all collective identities. "The identity narrative of Hinduism came into being, as discussed earlier, in its effort to be 'glocal' in the world of capitalist modernity'. It accepted capitalist modernity as a given and as something that everyone has to aspire to. The marriage between capitalism and Hindu identity is complete and hence there is no problem for a conservative Hindu to shop from shopping malls and eat at KFCs even though they destroy the livelihoods of Indian farmers and producers.

The conservative Hindu becomes anxious only when modernity threatens his position of superiority, power and authority in the society. It is these aspects of modernity such as the demand for equality or the demand to forget certain aspects of the past that creates anxiety. Women wearing western clothes is one such source of anxiety for a conservative Hindu.

'Hunger-based response to globalization'

The angry farmer is also part of a political community which was formed as a response to globalization. But as Nagaraj points out, this response is not driven by anxiety but by anger. This stems out of desperation as globalization is seen as a monster that is destroying livelihoods and not as an identity erasing phenomenon. As P Sainath has pointed out, from the time of the LPG farmer suicides have only been increasing.⁵ The debt collector had become the face of all this. The angry farmer response was definitely a violent one. Since they were affected because of bad economics and they found it difficult to stage protests against economic principles and get the attention of the people, they resorted to protests against the visible signs and symbols of globalization.

⁴ Ibid, 303

⁵ The Largest Wave of Suicides in History, P Sainath, 2009 <https://www.counterpunch.org/2009/02/12/the-largest-wave-of-suicides-in-history-2/>

Hence the protest against fashion shows and KFCs in Karnataka led by the farmers organizations. In particular Nagaraj discusses the farmer organization's protest against the KFCs where a group of farmers went and vandalized a KFC outlet in Bangalore and its immediate success and ultimate failure. He writes, "Today's hunger-based identity chose chicken, once again an everyday object. The chicken did not strike terror in the heart of global business, but that did not affect the seriousness of the agitator's intent. The poignancy of this pastiche lies in its littleness, and its political also lies in its radically different way of negotiating a new relationship between politics, power and representation."

The pastiche in this case is the imitation of Gandhi's salt satyagraha where an everyday object like salt brought British administration to a grounding halt. In this case the choice of chicken or the mode of protest didn't create the same disturbance.

Conclusion

The lesson to be learnt from both these responses is that the current phase of globalization has learnt to deal with all the tensions it gives rise to. It has been able to accommodate desire-based response by enabling the creation of a monolithic Hindu identity that in opposition to other religious identity and thereby transferring the hate towards globalization to other religious communities and to certain selected aspects of modernity.

It dealt with the hunger-based response by way making it irrelevant. Hunger has been turned into an economic question rather than as an existential question. When it becomes an economic question it immediately stops being the collective responsibility of the society to deal with the problem. Only the economists need to struggle with it. The failure of recent farmer movements in different parts of the country can be explained by this.

The political community of farmers are not a memory based collective and hence the subject of hunger doesn't stir any memories among the larger masses. However the political community of Hindus is a memory based collective and hence the subject of temples brings back memories of the past, both real and imaginary. Hence a new way of creating a collective identity that uses the cultural memory of everyday objects is required. In this regard the folk and cultural narratives of farming communities and tribal communities need to be used in our responses to globalization and modernity. The memory of the spade needs to be retained in the face of the amnesia inducing tractors. This is a project that needs to begin now with first beginning an engagement with our cultural memories.