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Can the Cultures of India Survive the Information Age?

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The coming of the "Information Age" and the "Networked Society" is the topic of thousands of books, articles, and conferences. Predictions range from outrageous optimism to dire pessimism; we have analyses from a Marxist, a neo-liberal, an anthropological, and many other perspectives; we have advocates and critics; we have more words on the subject than any human being could possibly absorb.

But what we do not have, at least not in sufficient quantity or depth, are analyses of the cultural implications of the new information technologies. By "cultural implications" I mean their relationship to the basic presuppositions, fundamental myths, unstated assumptions, linguistic taken-for-granted, historic grounds and creation myths that unite a society: all of those conceptual, linguistic, imaginative, literary, musical, artistic, and intellectual threads that bind people together to make them feel "of one kind."

"Culture" in this anthropological sense, then, is a core part of our identities as human beings, connected to our mother tongues, to our families as children, to our root assumptions about life and the world, to our links to our ancestors, and to the fundamental texts, written or unwritten, of our social world. It is the glue that binds us together with those whom we recognize as being "people like us." It is what makes a set of individuals a people and not simply a gathering of strangers. In centuries ahead,

when the history of these early years of the Information Age is written, I believe that its relation to culture will be among the features most discussed.

The relation of the new technology to culture is especially vivid and pressing in India. For of all modern states, India is the one which has most successfully preserved, and even enhanced, multiple languages and cultures, plural literatures and traditions, extraordinary cultural diversity. The official recognition of eighteen languages is only an outer manifestation of a far deeper heterogeneity, of the co-existence of multiple cultures, each with ancient literatures, valued traditions and historic arts and monuments. The question I want to pose is whether these rich multiple cultures of India can survive the Information Age. And by the Information Age, I mean most particularly the age brought about by the new technologies of computation and computer mediated communication, but also television, film, radio, and all of the new media.

Given the widespread fear of a kind of cultural imperialism spread through the new media, one would expect that there would be rich and thoughtful discussions of this question. Yet if we search through books, conference proceedings, and meetings about the Information Age, we find precious little on the subject. The technological challenges of rapidly developing information and communication technologies are so fascinating, so intellectually demanding, that they alone are worth lifetimes of individual effort, to say nothing of countless international meetings. The economic implications of a world of global networks, of instantaneous communication, of electronic commerce, of households "wired" at a rate that doubles every year, of international monetary markets and economies linked electronically -- these implications, too, are worthy of and receive intensive study. And not least important are the legal problems of reconciling the standards for the Information Age of more than one hundred countries, of determining what is right, proper, secret, public, pornographic, militarily dangerous, privately owned, obscene, subversive and so on.

These problems (what is sometimes called the "new electronic world order") increasingly attract some of the best legal minds in the world. Were the German authorities right to arrest the German head of Compuserve for permitting the electronic entry of allegedly illegal materials from abroad via Compuserve? Is the U.S. justified in trying to prevent the electronic export of encryption devices? How can we develop international rules to deal with transborder terrorism, confidentiality, pornography, the drug trade, national security, subversion, censorship, and property rights in an era of electronic communication?

But "culture" is rarely mentioned - in South Asia or for that matter in Europe and America. I recently served on the German-American committee of the American National Academy of Science and the German Max Planck Institute whose topic was "Global Networks and Local Values." Apart from myself, the German and the American members of the group were extremely competent technically. Some are international lawyers; others are economists and economic historians. Still others are the men and women who can anticipate (indeed are designing) the technologies of the future. Our discussions of the technological, economic, and legal problems of the Information Age were enormously informative.

But there is a "cultural" issue in this committee that was only rarely discussed. Specifically, it is the issue of American or more broadly "Anglo-Saxon" or "English-speaking" cultural hegemony even vis-à-vis so similar, so technological, and so advanced a partner as Germany. It is related to the commanding technological and economic position of the American hardware industry; it is connected with the dominance of American software even when translated into German. It is related to the fact that, according to one estimate, about 80% of Web sites in the world are in English, with German and Japanese following with about 5% each. And it is connected to the broader worry that what is often called "American culture"

sometimes seems (even to Europeans who by Indian standards are very much like Americans) to be an invasive, alien, or even subversive force that weakens, undermines or overrides traditional cultures -- even of "Western" nations like Germany, France, Italy, or Spain. One latent question in the German-American group, then, is How does one preserve cultural diversity (i.e., "local values") in an era of global networks in which the English language and "American culture" play so dominant a role?

This is the issue I wish to address, with particular reference to India. I need not belabor facts that are obvious to all of us. Since Partition, India has been not only the world's largest democratic state, but the most linguistically and culturally diverse. It has preserved its unity as a federal nation, while at the same time encouraging the distinctiveness and power of the separate Indian States, many of them linguistically defined.

Moreover India has two unusual characteristics. First, it has the world's second largest pool of scientific manpower, reflected in the dynamic information technology industry. Second, it is a nation where the English language plays the special role as the link language of the nation. But precisely for this reason, some fear the vulnerability of India's traditional cultures to an Anglophonic tide. This threat may be defined in different ways: by pointing to the role of the English as the language of power and wealth in India, or by analyzing satellite TV that brings the antics of American millionaires in Hindi or Tamil to thousands of Indian rural villages, or by acknowledging the hegemony of English-language, American-based information technology and software. To think intelligently about the relationship of technology and culture, we need a broader framework, which I will try to outline, recurring to India as the prime example of the as yet undetermined potentials of the Information Age.

As an oversimplification let us imagine a spectrum on which we place the outlooks of the cultures of the modern world. At one extreme is what we may call "cultural imperialism." This is the policy, extant in some nations today, of insisting legally on a single culture and prohibiting all other cultures, including all languages that are not the language of the dominant group. There are, as you know, nations where to speak or write publicly in a language deemed subversive may mean years of imprisonment. More commonly, linguistic imperialism entails making it simply impossible to do business, to be educated, or to conduct any but the most intimate aspects of family life in any language other than the mandated and "official" language.

One author has claimed that the teaching of English as a second language after the World War II in developing countries had many features of linguistic imperialism. Others might argue that in India, the role of the English language as the link language of the Union, the language of the higher courts, the Lok Sabha, the higher civil service, of nationally based as well as international business, and of higher education -- that this role amounts to a de facto linguistic and by extension cultural imperialism because it effectively excludes from power, wealth and influence the great majority of those Indians -- perhaps 95% -- who do not speak fluent English.

I will return to this argument, which is in my view debatable. For now, it is enough to note that against the role of English as a link language, we needed to set the opposite linguistic policies of the Indian States, the extraordinary linguistic and cultural pluralism of India as a nation and of India's great cities, and the multicultural tolerance which, ever since Partition, has characterized India more, I believe, than any other major nation.

Let us now turn to a second point along the spectrum, an orientation which we may call "global monoculture." By global monoculture I mean the de facto dominance of a single culture across all the important sectors of the world.

Coercion is absent (this is not naked imperialism); many languages are tolerated; multiculturalism is officially extolled. But the power of the dominant global culture is such that it tends to overwhelm, or more precisely, reduce to a status of inferiority all local cultures. Such was the case with Roman-Latin culture during the apogee of the Roman Empire; such was the status of Moslem culture and the Arabic language during the greatest epoch of Islam. And such, some claim, is the power of today's global monoculture, embodied in satellite TV, World Cup games, CNN, the Three Tenors at the Baths of Caracalla, Hollywood, Murdoch, the BBC, Bollywood, Microsoft, Intel -- a culture where 80+% of all Web sites are in English, and a world where, in contemporary India, unless one speaks, reads, and writes English it is virtually impossible to use a computer much less send email.

The political scientist Barber has termed this world "MacWorld," combining MacDonald's and Macintosh into a single epithet. Barber notes that even in France, with its proud cultural nationalism and its brilliant tradition of film-making, 90 to 100% of the most popular films each year are American. We could add today the role of CNN, the BBC, and English-language Star TV, the popularity of American films and Soap operas translated into languages like Hindi or Swahili or Spanish, or even Indian MTV, often hosted by laid-back young Indians who speak English with an American accent. The singers and the languages of the songs, to be sure, are Indian; but the concept is not in origin Indian.

How should we evaluate this global monoculture? The Japanese scholar, Toru Nishigaki, argues that despite its appearance of multiculturalism (e.g., "The many cultures of Benneton"), today's global culture is in the last analysis an American monoculture, founded on the enormous appeal of Hollywood films and American TV, on the dominance of the American entertainment industry and on the technological, economical, and military power of the United States. Nishigaki argues that we are

witness to the spreading, subtly or directly, of "American" values of "free enterprise," materialism, consumerism, political liberalism, and so on. For Nishigaki, this American plague threatens to infect, denigrate, or relegate to insignificance all other cultures.

An alternative view has been stated by Samuel Huntington in a recent controversial work. He claims that far from being unified into one "Western" or "American" monoculture, the world is increasingly polarized around multiple regional cultural-religious centers -- a neo-Confucian world in East Asia, an Islamic world in the Middle East and North Africa, a Latin American world in South America, et cetera. Huntington's work is popular with leaders of nations like Singapore, Malaysia, and the People's Republic of China, who claim that there exist something called "Asian values" (distinct from so called "Western values"). "Asian values" allegedly stress patriarchy, family deference, community, unanimity, a disciplined and obedient citizenry, and an authoritarian state. According to this view, "Western" values like human rights, human dignity, freedom of the press, religion, and speech are alien impositions that have no rightful place in an "Asian" context.

As is often true, the experience of India puts such views to the test. How can it be, if an obedient citizenry, cultural unanimity, and an authoritarian state are "Asian" values, that Indians are so firmly attached to political democracy, that Indians are almost as undisciplined as Americans, and that Indians have shown so dedicated a commitment to free speech, multicultural tolerance, and freedom of religion? The experience of India to date affirms the possibility of preserving multiple cultural patterns, and it raises doubts that all values can be neatly classified as American values, Indian Values, Asian values, or what have you. Indeed I myself believe that such values as the dignity of human life, the right to a decent living, the right to choose one's rulers, to education, to literacy, to health, to freedom of speech, the press

and religion -- that these values are not American, Islamic, Asian, or Indian, but simply human.

But many, including myself, would agree with Nishigaki that there is at least a danger of a global, covertly American or more broadly English-language monoculture that relegates all other cultures to inferiority, antiquity, or second place. And it is easy, and not entirely inaccurate, to caricature this global monoculture, especially as seen in television and the World Wide Web. It is a world of individuals with platinum Visa cards checking into five star hotels, of glittering luxury sports cars whose dashboards sparkle with subtle green gauges, of viscous shampoos that promise fragrance, body and romance, of soaps that turn filth to pristine whiteness, of politicians who promise whatever they think will enable them to win. It is a world of freely downloadable pornography, of search engines encumbered with advertisements, of information so vast in quantity as to overwhelm the most brilliant and devoted computer user.

It goes without saying that this world is offensive, even obscene, when 300 million Indians and a billion other humans go to bed each night hungry. Indeed, so shallow is this monoculture that we are within our rights to ask whether it is truly a culture at all or, as my colleague, Claude Pesquet, has proposed, "only an interface."

But also need to ask whether the average person, rich or poor, really takes these tele-worlds and cyber-worlds very seriously. Equally plausible is the claim that these worlds occupy the same place in the minds as ancient mythologies and foundation myths, popular fictions and rituals. Indeed, I suspect that the Indian villager who watches "Dallas" does so with the same mix of amusement, interest and distance with which he previously viewed the televising of the great Indian epics. Neither are models to be emulated in ordinary life, but legends, cautionary tales, entertainment.