Globalization: The Khasi Perspective

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People’s living conditions change throughout history. Society changes in different directions because of variations in local resources and local conditions. Today, with the advent of new information technology, industrial production and liberalized world trade, the changes happening around us are having a multidimensional effect. These changes and their consequences are the visible manifestations of globalization and it is hard to find a single place, which remain untouched by them.

The concept of globalization is not something new. We can find its root dating from the colonial period. When we talk about globalization, we normally refer to a more advanced stage of the process of development of the world economy. It is about the exploitation of the market on a global scale. The impact of the globalization process is more accurately seen in terms of an emergence of global-local nexus, which has been made possible through the establishment of worldwide information technology and communication networks.

The Indian and particularly the Northeastern examples provide illuminating perspectives of the dynamics of globalization. Prior to India’s independence, the driving developmental discourse was extensive literacy missions, education and healthcare and an implied adoption of cosmopolitan attitudes that would help facilitate an integration of all Indians into a single national community swearing allegiance to one sovereign state and governed by one constitution. While it is true that Gandhi advocated an ideology of homespun reliance, the general mood of the leaders of the new Indian republic was rapid industrialization and a moving away from the traditional socio-economic mould. The consequences of the post-colonial idealism was also felt in North East India with a set of some very significant markers that were exploited to gain political advantage through ethnic assertiveness, cultural indigenization and regionalism. The powerful Seng Khasi and Hill State movements spawned in Shillong are the spin-offs of this idealism.

Keyed to developmental concerns, folklorists have been closely following the intersections of the economic-technical forces with folk culture on the global information super-highway and we have adopted what we would like to call, for now, the “market-model” to test our observations in respect of globalization in the Khasi context.

We conducted a study of the two established markets of Shillong, the Iewduh or Bara Bazaar and Police Bazaar. These two markets are situated barely a kilometer from each other and while the first, i.e. Bara Bazaar, has an antiquated origin, Police Bazaar developed only in the last decade of the nineteenth century. While Iewduh or Bara Bazaar is directly under the control of the Syiem or traditional chief who has a ceremonial house on its premises wherein annual rituals are performed, Police Bazaar is managed by the Shillong Municipality and the Department of Urban Affairs of the Government of Meghalaya. The lanes and by-lanes of Bara Bazaar are clogged with rude foot traffic, open stalls and mobile vendors fighting for space and attention. The gutters overflow in some sections and the steps, when they are there, are perilous. Agricultural products from far flung and nearby villages are brought in by transportation of all kinds and stout porters are engaged to carry them to the vending stalls. Meat, fish and bulks of grocery are bargained over with exchanges resembling abuses. The various dialects of the Khasi language are heard along with Hindi, Nepali, Rajasthani and Sylheti. Bamboo baskets, fishing equipments and implements for agricultural operations are sold in bulk. Here, traditional measure systems co-exist with the metric system and counting is done on fingers, paper scraps and Chinese calculators. Strategically tucked in some corners, one finds eating joints, packed to overflowing customers, selling the traditional cholesterol-loaded jadoh and the assorted meat delicacies. Hooch shops run by Khasis and Nepalis are found to do brisk business alongside the more intrepid Tibetans who sell Indian-made foreign liquor.

Police Bazaar, on the other hand, is the romping ground of the hip and the happening and boasts of discos, bars and fancy eating-places. The streets are well-lit and cosmetic works on roads and structures go on through out the year. Beautification projects are periodically launched. During festivals, public performances are staged at Khyndai Lad, (literally, where nine roads converge), in the very heart of Police Bazaar. A huge fountain set amidst a circular lawn dominates this superbly illuminated site.
Market places create their own texts and are veritable theatres of contact and action. In Khasi folklore, traditional markets are significant mythic sites marking harmony and discord among the community of both humans as well as beasts. There are many legends, which are actually market-lore, that articulate the formation and disintegration of many Hima or Khasi traditional states. Even today, markets are the places for maintaining human contact and cultural exchanges. They continue to generate new traditions. One ostentatious change is the disappearance of the tailoring songs from Bara Bazar. The tailors of Bara Bazaar are renowned singers and whistlers as they work on their sewing machines. This tradition has stopped although a handful of tailors still tenaciously cling to their old machines, in the tailoring quarters of the market. One gnarled tailor rued: “Times are really hard. We are not tailors any more; we are menders and repairers. We repair old clothes. The few clients that we have are people from the villages. The heavy influx of readymade garments has ruined our trade. Nowadays, we barely make seventy rupees a day.”

It is not difficult to comprehend the reason for this – less than a kilometer away is Police Bazaar, the commercial center where expensive and branded garments are sold largely. It is the place for dress material, cosmetics, expensive food items and goods associated with the affluent and the trendy. Shops offer a wide range of international branded products and if one’s resources match the price tags, one can indulge in a Gianni Versace pair of shoes, don a Nike sports jacket or strut around in a pair of Pepe jeans. PB, as Police Bazaar is fashionably called, is a shopper’s stop for the affluent people of Meghalaya and Northeast India.

The profusion of branded outlets dealing in and selling branded products such as Adidas, Reebok, Nike is impressive. The media, through cable TV and the Internet, have created a phenomenal market for branded accessories ranging from underwear to wristbands, water bottles to travel bags, and cosmetics to apparel cleverly classified as climate light and climate cool. The new order entrepreneurs are brimming with confidence and aver that five years down the line, people will be wearing only such types of garments. Globalization has thus made the world a smaller place where people from various corners of the globe can voice a common fashion statement.

During our study, we noted the presence of what we call the “sweat shops” not far from the glitzy establishments. In these horribly confined spaces provided by lean-tos, conveniently concealed by facades of buildings, tailors toil to make and stitch adjustments. It is a fact that physically the people of Northeast India are smaller in comparison to people of other parts of the globe. So it is very obvious that when one buys readymade apparel, one still need to have fittings and adjustments made. It would not be greatly surprising to find one or two of the Bara Bazaar tailors working there, having abandoned their freewheeling independence to slave in these dingy surroundings.

Earlier, we had mentioned that the engine of globalization is being fuelled by the media and the electronic image and a direct spin-off of this is the mission of establishing newer cultural values and meanings through the hegemonic communication forms of satellite TV, film, print media and music industries which are decidedly spreading and homogenizing American post-modern culture. This system, defined by the three considerations of race, gender and income, creates a set of cultural ideologies that are consumer-oriented and these are marketed, distributed, sold to and consumed by the Third World, Soviet and European audiences. Globalization has thus made the world a smaller place where people from various corners of the globe can voice a common fashion statement.

We made a survey of one international and four Indian magazines (Time, The Week, India Today, Outlook) going back through a year’s issues and found that there are almost as many, (if not more), advertisements than there are stories, and these glossy and often seductive advertisements become sites for consumption lust and if income permits, to be indulged in. Fashion advertisements occasionally become erotic discourses and the same treatment is extended to cars, motorcycles, alcoholic beverages, food, cell phones, watches and other gadgets. Advertising strategies and advertising subjects “become living display units of the postmodern man.”

Fashion houses use supermodels and movie stars as brand ambassadors and astounding sums of money are being spent to create awareness about these globally marketed products. While fashion is a reliable refector of change, it is also the marker of a continuity of control exerted by the affluent and the powerful. The discourse of power is created by no less than one of the multinational fashion houses in the coinage of the term “power-dressing,” and while this may be deceptive or even imaginary, it forcefully enacts the cultural image of the successful individual who wields power in a world which is there for the taking, (thus extending the metaphors of the primal horde myth).

Globalization in the Khasi context, therefore, has provided glimpses of a global market that does not affirm the sharing of resources or humanness but of accentuating the cultural differences and marginality. While westernization of some of the urban elites here has resulted in their integration with globalization, most of our people, the marginalized poor have been effectively left out.

In the dichotomy between tradition and change, the irony clearly resonates in the lost song of the tailors in Bara Bazar. There a tradition is lost. We cannot retrieve and preserve that song any more except being deafened by the blare of Globalization!

Endnotes

1 Saxena, Ranjana — “Globalization and culture” Culture Studies (Themes and Perspectives); 2003 ed. Chandan Kumar Sharma, page 85.

2 (see Kharmawphlang, D L : Why Folklore? Image Creation and Perception, 2005)

3 (see Kharmawphlang, DL: Notes from Ri Bhoi, pp21 Manuscript,1997)


5 Lefebvre, Henri1984: Everyday Life in the Modern World