Globalised media and ICT systems - Globalisation, Fundamentalisms and Militarisms

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I think this panel holds great significance. Even though post-modern thought has forcefully suggested the demise of the metanarrative, it seems today like globalisation is indeed a constituent of almost all local narratives.

The prominent discourses of globalisation have examined global institutions and processes in great depth, but this depth seems to be strangely shallow on gender analysis. Strange because, feminist scholarship especially about the internationalization of production and about global division of labour has spanned over two decades. It is, I would contend, rather tragic to the endeavour of knowledge that the feminist reconceptualisation of globalisation - as being a capitalist enterprise constituted by the dynamics of gender, caste and race – is completely absent in prominent discourses.

Feminist *discussions* on globalisation have also been unique. They have attempted what the prominent discourses have not. They take place across different sites from academic writing to advocacy. Globalisation is discussed at rallies and mass gatherings, and in countries across the global South, knowledge about globalisation has been democratized, not only in technical and economic domains but in social domains.

Feminist frameworks on Globalisation

Feminist frameworks are critical to the discourse of globalisation for two reasons[1]: They explore how patriarchies combine with the capitalist project. Feminist scholarship has delineated how the strategies of transnational capital draw upon indigenous social hierarchies and how women's work is constitutively defined in terms of gender, race and caste parameters.

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[1] Sharmila Rege, 'More than just tacking women on to the macropicture – Feminist Contributions to Globalisation Discourses', *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 25, 2003, pp 4555-63

The second is that the feminist lens also helps us understand locational experiences. Connections between the experiential and the institutional processes of globalisation and the focus on localized questions of experience, culture, history and identity, feminists point out, are not just about the impact of globalisation, but about what actually *constitutes* globalisation.

Global economy through a feminist lens

The global economy supported by ICTs, stands upon the intersection of the crumbling proletariat of the North and the off-shore proletariat of the South. In recent years, the feminised end of the ITES industry has received considerable academic attention. We know that the IT sector is not exempt from labour market segmentation along gender, caste and class lines. What this means is that women constitute a relatively small proportion of the aggregate workforce in the software sector, and those who get jobs are the educated, urban, women. Even as some women are making it to the white-collared alleys of the industry, most seem to be in not-so-skilled jobs that echo the images of employment at the margins as in the case of low skilled, piece-workers in the production chain. The IT industry takes women's domestic labour for granted and is embedded in the dependable social relations of gender, to pursue its profits. In the meanwhile, Third World governments compete with one another to attract opportunities in business process outsourcing; their IT policies adopt a short-sighted and over-eager approach committing to prepare youth for getting employment in 'sunrise industries', but remain silent on worker rights as also on using IT for building capabilities of future generations.

The feminisation of labour, the conditions of female labour , its flexibilisation and casualisation have been underscored in globalisation literature, as being structural to the new international division of labour . Now, the concept of workplace related to teleworking, is being examined with a gendered lens that differentiates women. Who are the women who can aspire to become "knowledge workers"? How are worker rights to be safeguarded when the home fuses into the workplace? How real is the much-celebrated mobility and flexibility that women are supposed to enjoy in the IT sector? How do two-earner households organise reproductive work? Whose labour do these households depend on, when they buy domestic services?

The politics of geography

The information economy raises fundamental questions about the politics of geography, time, gender, race and caste. Saskia Sassen[2] talks about the dynamic of dispersal and centralization. The spatial dispersal of economic activity made possible by ICTs contributes to an expansion of central functions. Global communication can be made possible only with material conditions that support it. National and global markets as well as globally integrated organizations require central places with vast physical infrastructure where the work of globalization gets done. Sectors and workers who may appear as though they have little connection to an urban economy dominated by finance and specialized services, in fact fulfill a series of functions that are an integral part of that economy. The day-to-day work of the leading services complex dominated by finance, a large share of the jobs involved are lowly paid and manual, many held by women and immigrants. The production process in the global information economy, is thus characteristic of labour-market segmentation along gender and racial lines.

The emerging landscape of global cities exposes glaring contradictions. Even though the services sector may account for only a fraction of the economy of a city[3], it imposes itself on the larger economy. One could be talking about a Bangalore or a Bangkok, or a Mexico City here, as they join New York, London, Tokyo, Paris, in the new geographies of centrality. In the global city, the presence of a critical mass of firms with extremely high profit-making capabilities contributes to bid up the prices of commercial space, industrial services, and other business needs, and thereby make survival for firms with moderate profit-making capabilities increasingly precarious. And while the latter are essential to the operation of the urban economy and the daily needs of residents, their economic viability is threatened in a situation where finance and specialized services can earn super-profits. Thus, polarizations in the global city have various dimensions, including the informalization of a growing array of economic activities, and their growing disappearance from the focus of state support and patronage.

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[2] Saskia Sassen, "Place and Work in the Global Information Economy", METROPOLIS, First International Conference,Milan, Italy, 1997
[3] What is often not highlighted is that the contribution of the new economy in countries like India is marginal. Optimistic predictions notwithstanding, in India, the ratio of gross IT sector output to GDP stood at 3 per cent in 2001-02. The rapid rates of growth recorded are from very small bases, and the impact of the IT sector on employment-generating growth is also uncertain.

Scattered yet connected hegemonies

Critiques of globalisation points to how survival sex and entertainment work suggest the feminisation of survival. The household, state and global policies interlock to exploit women's labour and their bodies. Debt is a unifying theme – at the household level, women are pushed by poverty and indebtedness into survival sex and at another rlevel, nation states in Asia look at marketing women's bodies as routes for debt-servicing. Transnational feminist perspectives look at cross-cultural relations of race, gender and class, and provide an analysis of how global economic institutions, nation-states, patriarchal households and traditional structures that are seemingly scattered, link up to support women's exploitation.

And even as trafficking in women and children has assumed alarming proportions, and we are just about beginning to consolidate our strategies to address challenges, we are having to deal with the normalization of sexual exploitation of and violence against women and children on the Internet. The global entertainment industry, poised on the power of new ICTs, is a force to reckon with .

Pimps and criminal syndicates violate laws prohibiting sexual exploitation and violence with impunity, by locating their servers in host countries with less restrictive laws, to avoid regulation. The new technologies have thus enabled the creation of online communities free from community interference or standards where any and every type of sexual violence goes and where misogyny is the norm[4].

The commodification of knowledge

The intellectual property regime has commodified social knowledge, and in the global market, only certain forms of knowledge are recognised.

I wish to highlight here that, a large majority of the poor and the dalits in South Asia have always lived within indigenous social hierarchies that have undervalued their knowledge. Their access to new knowledge and information has always been stifled. In highly stratified contexts, the marginalized have had to manage their survival. The patenting regime and the corporate control of agriculture have effectively decimated the last link for the poor of the South to survival. Alongside unimaginable environmental damage exists the stories of the suicide of poor farmers and their invisible widows.

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[4] "The Internet and the Sex industry". From the website of Berkman Center for Internet and Society.

The latest is that the international scientific community has come up with the idea of setting up the Public Sector Intellectual Property Resource for Agriculture, (PIPRA) - an initiative to support public sector research, being floated by some scientific institutions with support from the Rockefeller Foundation and the McKnight Foundation, in the United States. Third World commentators have already held this initiative as yet another charity. The initiative does nothing to address the threat biotechnology patents pose to research in future, neither is it concerned at the Third World's claims over biopiracy indulged in by American universities. It is aimed at pushing unwanted agricultural technology that has public opposition in the developed countries, on to the developing countries.

In the loss of livelihoods and the market control of agriculture is hidden yet another story of scattered yet connected hegemonies.

The challenge of Fundamentalism

Globalisation has facilitated the global movement of material resources. Money laundering and the movement of arms have never been so easy. For fundamentalism, the new economy has provided opportunities for easy networking and collaboration.

At the national level, the dynamic has been different. Socialist feminists in India have pointed to how the relinquishing by the government of its sovereignty to international aid institutions has coincided with a reconstruction of nationalism along chauvinistic religious lines[5]. A state that is increasingly incapable of addressing survival issues of the poor is eager to offer the marginalized quick routes to 'empowerment', through the Hindutva ideology. Dalits who have adopted Christianity are being converted back as Hindus, in a virulent ideological attack against minority religions under propaganda that is packaged as *ghar-vapasi* [6](home-coming). Dalits and tribals/adivasis are being roped in to fight Muslims and propaganda with the aid of modern information technologies like CD ROMS is being carried out during elections[7]. Thus, in electoral campaigns in far-flung areas, in India, traditional media like printed literature have been replaced by potent technologies that cross barriers of literacy.

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[5] Gabriele Dietrich, "Loss of Socialist Vision and Options before the Women's Movement", Economic and Political Weekly, October 25, 2003, pp4547-54

[6] The BJP has led this ideological campaign in the tribal dominated state of Chattisgarh.

[7] CD ROMs were used by the BJP, a national political party promoting a chauvinistic notion of Hindu religion, referred to as the Hindutva ideology, in the electoral campaigns in the recently concluded elections in Chattisgarh state. The BJP replaced the Congress party after the elections.

Identity politics and cooptation of the marginalized provide a useful route to deflect attention from the failure of the nation-state. Growing inequities characterised by increasing rural indebtedness, landlessness, dismantling of food security, increase in child labour and casualisation of work, as well as loss of work due to mechanization, are compounded by the denudation of social fabric in the rise of communal violence.

The overtly homogenizing trend of globalisation and the global media has also created a backlash in the reassertion of identities. The global has subsumed the local, and fundamentalist forces have sought to reinterpret culture, invariably through the control of women's spaces.

The perplexing diversity of communication channels has shrunk distances but not necessarily brought people together – highly individualized and parochial niches combined with the accent on homogenization has resulted in a low threshold for tolerating diversity. South Asia, home to about 45% of the world's poor, is within the footprints of at least 50 broadcast satellites. It is estimated that by 2007, there will be 550 million viewers in South Asia with half of them hooked on to Cable TV and able to watch 350 channels.

The emancipatory potential of the new media seems to support the increasing multiversity of identity politics. The spectrum of communication channels – regional, communal and linguistic– in South Asia is mind-boggling. Against the backdrop of the social landscape of South Asia, which reveals glaring faultlines of religious, linguistic and ethnic assertions and conflicts, these communication channels, pose a huge threat to social capital and the legitimacy of nation states.

For feminists this I think, is a serious poser. The moot question is whether this access to global information channels result in real empowerment and lead to significant improvements in the quality of life. Will it lead to enhanced social capital and community networks, or will it provoke further lowering of the diversity threshold? How can feminist frameworks offer alternatives that respect plurality but are rooted in women's autonomy?

Militarism in the context of globalised media and ICTs.

The unabashed use of militarism globally by the US is very much a part of its imperialist and neo-liberal agenda. Militarism is an agent of the political project of globalisation and is consolidated by the centralised power of the new ICTs. The "shock and awe" mode of US's war strategy in Iraq rode on the marvels of ICT-assisted precision bombing, marking the brutal glamourisation of the annihilation of life, destruction of the

environment and razing of national sovereignty. Aid and trade benefits are dangled as baits for use of air and land space for military operations. Global militarism is crafted jointly by new weapon supports, satellite systems, the global media and the use of economic clout.

In war-affected countries of the South, women are having to endure not merely the pains of reconstruction, but the challenge of fundamentalist revivalism that is erected as a fitting rejoinder to Western and US-led militarism[8]. The over-valorisation of cultural identities has trampled Asian women's human rights not only in their home-countries, but where they are living as migrants or refugees[9].

The Insidious face of Militarism

For women from the South, militarism, also has a more insidious face: the increasing abandonment of their sexual and reproductive rights, at discursive and political levels. Militarism is not only about war over territory; but over people's spaces and autonomy. Hard-won sexual and reproductive rights in the language of the ICPD's programme of action are being attacked by the Bush administration, which contends that key concepts and language referring to reproductive health services, reproductive rights and reproductive health have to be removed as they can be construed as promoting abortion. The US has withheld previously approved aid to the UN programmes that it claims promotes abortions. Public information about sexual health and rights have been quietly expunged over the past year, a covert war on condoms – essential in the strategies to prevent the spread of AIDS - is being waged[10]. Meanwhile, the positions of human rights organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch are increasingly converging with US policy objectives. Feminist scholars[11] have pointed to how fact sheets on CEDAW prepared by Amnesty International USA and Human Rights Watch stress that CEDAW is abortion neutral and does not require the legalization of prostitution.

There is a deafening silence in the MDGs on sexual and reproductive rights of women.[12] The constant clamoring in the ICT for Development corridors for marshalling the promise of ICTs to realise the MDGs, signals the risk of burying the needs and

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[8] Fundamentalism also creates and defines its own genre of militarism built upon exaggerated perceptions of threat to national culture and security. The Taliban state was built on such premises as also the nuclear bomb by the BJP, the ruling party in India.

[9] See DAWN Informs, November 2003, " A deafening Silence on Women's Human Rights" by DAWN's regional coordinator for South East Asia, Gigi Francisco.

[10] See DAWN Informs, November 2002, page 2 for a complete update on the prepcom for the 5th Asian and Pacific Population Conference.

[11] "Gender, Human Rights and Therapeutizing Development", by Vanessa Pupavac, School of Politics, University of Nottingham, NG7 2RD, vanessa.pupavac@nottingham.ac.uk

[12] See DAWN Informs September 2003, pp 6-8

fundamental rights of women in the South in the new strategies to build information societies. The global consensus to use ICTs for promoting health and addressing health information needs of communities in countries of the South rests on a strange paradox: a recognition of the challenges of HIV/ AIDS, unsafe abortions, denial of the rights of sex workers and the increasing delegitimization of the sexual and reproductive rights of women.

Feminist strategies

Feminist explanatory frameworks have no doubt expanded our understanding of the global economy. The challenge at this juncture is to conceptualise differences among women in a way that allows for the articulation of universal concerns; concerns that will make way for a Southern perspective and feminist reconceptualisation of the global economy.

But this challenge is accentuated by the larger socio-political reality of the South, in the aftermath of the global war on terror. In the contestation of cultural identities, that owes its emergence to the global war on terror, we see a tension between two polarities of women's voices in the South – one that is privileging age-old customary laws and traditions, which are seen at one end as constituting the alternative and the other that offers the international women's human rights paradigm, often critiqued for its Western notions of women's equality, at another end, as the option[13]. For the feminist project, this tension poses a tremendous conceptual and political challenge.

At one level, the intersection of women's identities and rights have to be understood within a power relations framework; at another, the ethical premises that need to inform the global economy have to be articulated.

Even as this task is well underway and involves multiple players – academics, social movements, networks etc -, the ideological onslaught of globalisation and the media politics that go with it make innumerable experiments in constructive work and the articulation of alternatives, nearly invisible. This contributes to considerable confusion on how to look at the ongoing process of globalisation. Globalized media have no doubt enabled voices from the South to be heard, but the very nature of the media 'narrowbands' perspectives. The complex multitude of voices seem sometimes to be competing and a "converging voice" seems conspicuously absent.

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[13] See DAWN Informs, November 2003, " A deafening Silence on Women's Human Rights" by DAWN's regional coordinator for South East Asia, Gigi Francisco.

Feminist perspective on an alternate global ICT system

I think the primary challenge is the paradox inherent in the global ICT system – the absence of an ethical framework and the concomitant promise of empowering, and even subversive, opportunities.

The alarming skewness in ownership of global media is a fundamental threat. Globally, media ownership reflects supranational ownership patterns and mega-mergers with other worldwide businesses. The monopoly of Microsoft illustrates the tremendous challenges for democratizing software architecture and ownership. It is but one of the anomalies that describes the crisis, but perhaps one that describes it well. Recent attempts in the US to introduce legislation relating to government adoption of open source software were scuttled by Microsoft-funded lobbyists. So, whither the promise? What kind of ICT system will help realise the goals of social transformation?

At the global level:
- We need to democratize the information sphere. (ownership, control & use).
- Knowledge from the global South needs to be accorded its legitimate place in the global information society architecture.
- The idea of the global commons needs to be kept alive as a bulwark against the appropriation of public spaces by commercial/ sectarian interests.
- There is a need to question the deployment of ICTs as a tool to promote neo-liberal agenda in developing countries. E-governance is now being packaged as a tool for greater efficiency. Accountability and equity dimensions of e-governance are seldom discussed.

At the local level:
- ICTs need to be appropriated for the architecture of local commons[14], the democratic bottom-up face of the global commons. Women need to spearhead the construction of local commons.
- ICT design must be informed by local contexts and the needs of marginalized women.
- ICT initiatives need to jointly address both economic and socio-political empowerment of women. In this sense, they have to have a transformatory potential.
- ICTs need to be used for restoring plurality and reinvigorating social linkages in the South.

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[14] Gopakumar Krishnan and Gurumurthy Kasinathan, "Local commons – A bridge across the digital divide", 2003 See www.ITforChange.net/resources

The multiple tasks for civil society towards advocacy and change have just about begun to crystallize. The non-negotiable to these tasks is the touchstone of feminist frameworks.

- Anita Gurumurthy[15],[16]

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