

When Technology, Media and Globalisation Conspire: Old Threats, New Prospects

By Anita Gurumurthy

This paper was presented during the panel on globalised media and ICT systems and structures and their interrelationship with fundamentalism and militarism organised by Isis International-Manila during the World Social Forum in Mumbai, India in January 2004.

Globalisation Through a Feminist Lens

Feminist frameworks are critical to the discourse of globalisation because these 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 defined in terms of gender, race and caste.¹

A feminist lens also helps us understand locational experiences. The connections between the experiential and the institutional processes of globalisation, and the focus on localised questions of experience, culture, history and identity, feminists point out, are not just about the impact of globalisation, but about what constitutes globalisation.

The global economy supported by information communication technologies (ICTs) stands on 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 Information Technology (IT) industry received considerable academic attention. We know now, for example, that the IT sector is not exempt from labour market segmentation along gender, caste and class lines. Women comprise a relatively small proportion of the aggregate workforce in the software sector, and those who get the jobs are the educated urban women. Even as some make 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 such as the 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. In the meanwhile, Third World governments compete with one another to attract the outsourcing business; their IT policies are short-sighted and over-eager, committing to prepare the youth for employment in 'sunrise industries' but silent on workers' rights and on using IT for the capacity-building of future generations.

The literature of globalisation has established the feminisation of labour, the conditions of female labour, its flexibilisation and casualisation as main features of the new international division of labour. Particularly in the IT sector, if the workplace was examined from a gendered lens, the pertinent questions would be: Who are the women who can aspire to become "knowledge workers"? How are labour rights to be safeguarded when the home fuses into the workplace? How real is the much-celebrated mobility and flexibility that women in the IT sector supposedly enjoy? 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 notes the contradiction between the nature and effect of ICTs: the spatial dispersal of economic activity made possible by ICTs contributes to an expansion of central functions.² Global communication can be made possible only with material conditions that support it. National and global markets, as well as globally integrated organisations, require central places with vast physical infrastructure where the work of globalisation gets done. Although certain sectors, like the unorganised sector appear to have little connection to an urban economy dominated by finance and services, they in fact fulfil a series of functions integral to that economy. In the day-to-day work of the finance-dominated services complex, a large share of the jobs involved are lowly paid and manual, many held by women and immigrants. Thus, ICT-assisted globalisation counts on a 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 a city's economy, it imposes itself on the larger economy.³ Cities such as Bangalore or Bangkok or Mexico City, as newer constituents of the

global information economy are not any different from New York, London, Tokyo, and Paris in the new geographies of centrality. In any of these global cities, the presence of a critical mass of firms with extremely high profit-making capabilities contributes to the pressure on prices of commercial space, industrial services, and other business needs, thereby making survival for the smaller firms precarious.

Scattered Yet Connected Hegemonies

Critiques of globalisation point 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

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pushed by poverty and indebtedness into survival sex and at another level, 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 normalisation 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, but a force beyond the grasp of law and regulation.

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 norm⁴.

The Commodification of Knowledge

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

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 marginalised have had to manage their survival. The patenting regime and the corporate control of agriculture effectively obliterate the last link of the poor to survival. Alongside unimaginable environmental damage are stories of the suicide of poor farmers and their invisible widows.

The latest is that the international scientific community, with assistance from Rockefeller Foundation and McKnight Foundation, is floating the idea of a Public Sector Intellectual Property Resource for Agriculture (PIPRA) to support public sector research. This initiative, it has been argued, is yet another charity that does nothing to address the threat biotechnology patents pose to research in future, nor is it concerned with the Third World's charges of biopiracy. PIPRA is aimed at pushing agricultural technology that has met public opposition in the developed countries.

In the loss of livelihoods and market control of agriculture is 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 as easy. For fundamental-

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ism, the new economy has provided easy networking and collaboration opportunities.

At the national level, the dynamic has been different. Socialist feminists in India point to how the government’s surrender of sovereignty to international aid institutions coincides with the reconstruction of nationalism along chauvinistic religious lines.⁵ A state incapable of addressing survival issues of the poor will be only too eager to offer the marginalised quick routes to ‘empowerment’ through the Hindutva ideology. Dalits who converted to Christianity are being converted back as Hindus in a virulent ideological attack against minority religions under propaganda packaged as *ghar-vapasi* (home-coming). Dalits and tribals/adivasis are being roped in to fight Muslims with the aid of modern ITs like CDROMS.⁶ Thus, in India, traditional media like printed literature are being replaced by technologies that cross barriers of literacy.

Identity politics and cooptation of the marginalised provide a useful route to deflect attention from the fail-

ure 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 mechanisation, are compounded by the rise of communal violence.

The overtly homogenising 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.

While the advances in ICTs have shrunk distances, these have not necessarily brought people together. Highly individualised and parochial niches, combined with the accent on homogenisation, have lowered the threshold for diversity. South Asia, home to about 45 percent of the world’s poor, is within the reach 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 in South Asia—regional, communal and linguistic—is mind-boggling. Against the social landscape of South Asia, which reveals religious, linguistic and ethnic faultlines, these communication channels pose a huge threat to social capital and the legitimacy of nation states.

This is a serious problem for feminists. The question is whether this access to global information channels could result in real empowerment and lead to significant improvements in the quality of life, or if it will only further lower the diversity threshold. How can feminist frameworks offer alternatives that respect plurality but uphold women’s autonomy?

Militarism in the Context of Globalised Media and ICTs

The unabashed use of militarism by the U.S. is 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” strategy in Iraq rode on the marvels of ICT-assisted precision bombing, marking the glamorisation 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 have to endure not merely the pains of reconstruction but the challenge of fundamentalist revivalism propped up as the fitting rejoinder to Western and U.S.-led militarism.⁷ The over-valorisation of cultural identities has trampled Asian women's human rights not only in their home-countries but also where they are living as migrants or refugees.⁸

Feminist Perspectives of an Alternate ICT System

The primary challenge is the paradox inherent in the global ICT system—the absence of an ethical framework vis-à-vis the promise of empowering, even subversive, opportunities.

The skewed 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 challenge to democratise software architecture and ownership. Recent attempts in the U.S. to introduce legislation on government's 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 democratise the information sphere including ownership, control and use
- Knowledge from the global South needs to be accorded its legitimate place in the global information society architecture.
- The idea of a global commons needs to be kept alive as a bulwark against the appropriation of public space 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 but the dimensions of accountability and equity of e-governance are seldom discussed.

At the local level:

- ICTs need to be appropriated for the architecture of local commons, the democratic bottom-up face of the global commons. Women need to spearhead the construction of local commons.⁹
- ICT design must be informed by local contexts and the needs of marginalised women.
- ICT initiatives need to address both economic and

socio-political empowerment of women. In this sense, they have to have transformatory potential.

- ICTs must be used to restore plurality and reinvigorate social linkages in the South.

The multiple tasks for civil society have just begun to crystallize. The non-negotiable touchstone to these tasks is feminist frameworks. ♪

Anita Gurumurthy is a founder member of IT for Change, an NGO in India that seeks to influence the information societies debate through research and action. Anita's core interests have included research and writing on development with a Southern perspective, with specific focus on areas such as gender, health, globalisation, and information and communications technologies.

Anita acknowledges Gopakumar Krishnan and Parminder Jeet Singh for their substantive contributions to this article.

Footnotes

- 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.
- ² Saskia Sassen, "Place and Work in the Global Information Economy," *Metropolis: First International Conference*, Milan, Italy, 1997.
- ³ Often missed is that the contribution of the new economy in countries like India is marginal. Optimistic predictions notwithstanding, in India, the IT sector's output to GDP stood at 3 percent in 2001-02. The rapid growth rates recorded are from small bases, and the impact of the IT sector on employment-generating growth is also uncertain.
- ⁴ "The Internet and the Sex industry". From the website of Berkman Center for Internet and Society.
- ⁵ The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a national political party promoting a chauvinistic notion of Hindu religion referred to as the Hindutva ideology, has led this ideological campaign in the tribal dominated state of Chattisgarh.
- ⁶ The BJP used CDROMs (multimedia CDs with audio and video features) during the campaign in the recent elections in Chattisgarh state. The BJP replaced the Congress party after the elections.
- ⁷ 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 was the nuclear bomb in India by the BJP, the ruling party.
- ⁸ See Gigi Francisco, "A Deafening Silence on Women's Human Rights," *DAWN Informs*, November 2003.
- ⁹ Gopakumar Krishnan and Gurumurthy Kasinathan, "Local Commons—A Bridge across the Digital Divide," 2003, <<http://www.ITforChange.net/resources>>.