Globalization Has Harmed Developing Nations


"Small farmers ... are the immediate and dramatic victims of globalization but the damage is far more widespread."

In the following viewpoint Lila Rajiva, an Indian immigrant living in the United States, contends that multinational corporations, not developing nations, are the primary beneficiaries of globalization. In fact, she argues, globalization in its current form hurts developing nations. For example, large factories built by multinational corporations consume water that local people need to drink, Rajiva maintains. Moreover, she claims, the governments of developing countries protect multinational corporations at the expense of their own people. Small farmers and local businesses cannot compete with state-supported multinationals, Rajiva asserts. Rajiva, a writer, teaches English and politics at the University of Maryland and Towson University.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. What are some of the signs of progress Rajiva observed on the road from Madras to Vellore?
2. According to the author, how have some farmers expressed their outrage at the destruction of their lives by multinationals?
3. What type of production does the author believe is the enemy of the global village?

The road from Madras to my hometown Vellore in the southern part of India makes for a bumpy ride, regardless of one’s choice of transportation—be it a sturdy socialist-era Ambassador car or a newer lightweight import, a crowded dirty bus or an air-conditioned taxi. There are no lanes and the traffic moves erratically and at will, as the black tar fades indistinguishably into the neighboring sand and thorn bushes.

One side of the road has been dug up as part of the preliminary work for the Golden Quadrilateral. Hundred-year-old trees have been cut down to make way for this ambitious national highway that is expected to span the length and breadth of the country. My mother claims that this summer feels a lot hotter thanks to the ceaseless construction. But to what avail this additional three degrees of boiling heat in July when the monsoon fails? Nobody pays attention to the two lanes we have now; why should they care about getting four more?

Signs of "Progress"

Another sign of "progress" along the way is the Hyundai factory. It is one of the many gleaming new buildings—including medical colleges catering to non-resident Indians (Indians who have emigrated outside their country)—dotting the road in this part of the country. Globalization is alive and well in the villages of India.

The meals on the trains used to be served in moistened banana leaves that were plucked in front of you and thrown away after; today they are wrapped in tin foil or come in plastic or cardboard containers like the cheerfully colored juice packs. The Suzuki-owned Marutis [an Indian-made automobile] have been joined by a wide array of...
foreign makes. I read of high-flying elite and their Porsches and Mercedes Benz—although why anyone would risk taking them out on an Indian road is hard to imagine. I see the plastic knives and forks and cloth napkins in a small town restaurant, internet access in little shops and booths everywhere you go, a small but well stocked air-conditioned supermarket with shopping carts, bored store girls and wide empty aisles.

For a foreign-return Indian, these symbols of "progress" soothe one's guilt for leaving behind the millions who live an attenuated existence in these paddy fields, huts and impoverished villages. It makes us feel that, finally, the world is getting better thanks to technology and capitalism. The campesino and the conglomerate are working hand in hand as the free market triumphs again.

A Darker Picture

But the gaudy veneer of liberalization is wafer-thin. Lurking beneath is a darker picture, easily visible to anyone who truly wants to see.

Let's take the Hyundai factory as an example. Ever since it opened for business, water has been in short supply for miles around. The locals don't have the water to drink, cook or bathe. In the scorching heat, this shortage is not an inconvenience but a death sentence. [In 2003] the death toll from an unexpectedly hot dry summer reached the thousands.

How does globalization feel when you have to walk a mile to the well with a squalling infant tugging at your sari and nothing to cover your head from the ferocious sun except a thin piece of old cotton? The Hyundai factory guzzles water, electricity and land. But it's good to have something more than the trundling old Ambassadors to drive around. People tell me it's a fine place to work. And won't it be splendid to see the Hyundais zip up and down the Golden Quadrilateral when it's completed.

Jobs, transportation and industry are what globalization brings with it for some, but who stands by to measure the immense fallout borne by everyone else? The collateral damage of multinational companies cannot compete with the devastation inflicted by war. Cancun can't compete with Iraq [where unrest continues after a 2003 war] for the media's attention. But is death from dehydration any less painful than being killed by a bullet?

In the state of Karnataka, small farmers like the campesinos at Cancun have committed ritual suicide to express their outrage at the destruction of their lives by multinationals. They are the immediate and dramatic victims of globalization but the damage is far more widespread if less visible. Some indigenous medicines and herbs used for centuries are now in the danger of becoming the exclusive property of corporations eager to patent them.

A Battle for Intellectual Property Rights

A recent case involved turmeric, the yellow spice used to color rice and other foods in India. In 1995, two expatriate Indians at the University of Mississippi Medical Center, Suman Das and HariHar Cohly, applied for a patent for the use of turmeric as a salve for wounds—an age-old Indian remedy. The Indian Council for Scientific and Industrial Research promptly challenged the patent, even producing an article written in 1953 in the *Journal of the Indian Medical Association* that quoted ancient Sanskrit texts that referred to such use. The patent was eventually withdrawn. But nine other such patents on turmeric have since been filed. Patents have also been granted for specific uses of other indigenous products like basmati rice and neem leaves.
Intellectual property rights are at the core of the World Trade Organization debate between the developed and underdeveloped countries. American trade lawyers argue that since patent laws are not frequently used in poorer countries, their governments do not understand them. They claim that only new applications of traditional foods and herbs are being patented, not pre-existing practices. They argue that without patent protection, drug companies have little incentive to undertake long-term and expensive research.

Hidden behind the rhetoric of the free market is a demand for the state to protect the corporation and grant it monopoly rights. And contrary to the rhetoric of the competitive market, it is the biggest companies—such as the pharmaceutical mega-corporations with their wealthy executives and fat profit margins—that will profit most from this type of state protection. Meanwhile, millions of children are deprived of the simple vitamins that could save them from disease and death. If the market really worked as it should, freely, the campesinos would win much more frequently than they do now.

A Humane Globalization

But to frame the debate as one between campesino and conglomerate, between the countryside and commerce is to have already lost the war. For capital-G Globalization—like Modernity, Science, Progress, or any other capitalized abstraction—casts itself as irresistible and irreversible. Only Luddites, medievalists, agrarian romantics and the Birkenstock brigade are foolish enough to stand in its way. These are the straw men created by corporate apologists in order to dismiss the anti-globalization movement as irrational or adolescent.

We need new ways of speaking. Modernity is not the enemy. It is the relentless nature of a certain type of economic production, which is propagandized and supported by the state. Without agricultural subsidies, the big farmers would be out of business, beaten out by the small farmers. The conglomerates would be routed by the campesinos.

The resistance to multinationals is not a resistance to globalization. It is a demand to retain the perspective of the village, the perspective of all that is human. What we need today are activists for globalization—but a humane globalization, not an inhuman one.

Further Readings

Books

- Amory Starr Naming the Enemy: Anti-Corporate Movements Confront Globalization. London: Zed Books,


Periodicals
- Jagdish N. Bhagwati "What Enriches the Poor and Liberates the Oppressed?" Times (London), March 5, 2004.

Footnotes
1. In September 2003 at a World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting in Cancun, Mexico, fourteen thousand farmers and indigenous people from developing nations around the world came to protest conditions they
face under the WTO. Kyung Hae Lee, a fifty-six-year-old rice farmer from South Korea, stabbed himself.


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