

Globalisation, the Forgotten Phase: Some Personal Reflections

Thakur S Powdyel

Former Minister of Education, Royal Government of Bhutan, Thimphu.

Email: powdyel@gmail.com

Preamble

This paper is built on the premise that there have been at least two waves of globalisation – sublime globalisation of the earliest times that was truly an expression of global minds, and the modern material globalisation that represents a largely reductive, economic obsession that characterises today's brand of globalisation. The paper begins by looking at the advent of globalisation in a little Bhutanese village, discusses globalisation as it is understood today and makes an attempt to distinguish the two waves of globalisation with the help of some examples. The paper concludes with a vision of a time when the world attains a sense of true globalisation.

Introduction

The visitors from the walnut country had camped at my uncle's house. It was, by local standards, a high-powered matrimonial mission. Back home, the visitors had heard tales that there were in far-away orange country prospective brides who would match the matrimonial horoscopes of aspiring grooms in the walnut country.

Following a thorough survey of all the possible sensitivities and subtleties of relations and after ruling out the slightest misfit occurrences, the visitors finally descended on our courtyard. Armed with all the paraphernalia befitting a marriage proposal, including the invariable two bottles of local wine, they asked my parents for the hand of my eldest sister for their youngest son.

It was inauspicious to turn down the proposal of the first visitors for matrimony, especially as it concerned the eldest daughter. Shocked, shaken and helpless, my parents finally relented and my mother reluctantly kept away the two bottles.

My sister was inconsolable and did not appear in public for all the three months of the intervening period prior to marriage. She was all skin and bones by the time she was offered at the auspicious hour.

Ceremonies over, Thul Didi was to be taken away to an unknown land. My mother suggested that one of the seven brothers accompany and stay with sister for at least a year.



Still small, I volunteered to go to give solace to my sister, and partly to avoid being recruited for school.

For sheltered and secluded and sleepy Dorokha, Okherbotey (*okher* – walnut, *bot* – plant; *Okherbotey*, therefore, means place of walnut plants, in the language of southern Bhutan), in Sibsoo was a strange and distant world even as recently as the late-sixties of the last century.

Today, Okherbotry is a mere four and half hours away and Dorokha is part of the global community. Marriages have become global since the day my sister faced the unknown.

Globalisation today

Thanks to the marvels of science and technology, we live today in a global village, or so we are told. More people around the world are connected to each other now than they ever have been before. There is an instantaneous flow of information and money. Goods and services produced in one part of the world are increasingly available in other parts. International travel and satellite communication are the talk of the town.

Thanks to Charu Tshongdel's initiatives, the aroma of Paro's red rice pervades the dining halls and augments appetites in New York and beyond. Matsutake mushrooms from Genekha reach Osaka in twenty-four hours! Dorokha's mandarin gold travels far and wide and rakes in critical dollars for the national exchequer. Ema datchi, dosas, noodles and burgers could no longer be strangers even far away from the place of their origin.

"Only connect". So E M Forster had told us in his masterpiece *A Passage to India*. Indeed, this integration of people, economies and knowledge around the world is what we know today as *globalisation*.

Globalisation is characteristic of our age in much the same way as the Industrial Revolution, the Great Depression, the Cold War, the Space Age... marked the different phases in the march of our world. Globalisation has made us part of the magical World Wide Web and other smart incarnations of technology.

The term *globalisation* is believed to have become current since the 1980s. It reflects the technological advances that have facilitated and quickened the conduct of international transactions, particularly travel and financial flows. Globalisation refers to 'an extension beyond the national borders of the same market forces that have operated for centuries at all levels of human activity – village markets, urban industries, of financial centres'.

The International Monetary Fund perspective considers trade, capital flows, movement of people, and transfer of knowledge and technology as critical factors influencing globalisation.

The A T Kearney Foreign Policy Magazine Globalization Index "quantifies personal contact across national borders by combining data on international travel, international phone calls, and cross-border remittances and other transfers. It charts the World Wide Web by assessing not only its growing number of users, but also the number of Internet hosts and secure servers through which they communicate, find information, and conduct business transactions", as indicators of globalisation.

The same Index also “measures economic integration. It tracks the movements of goods and services by examining the changing share of international trade in each country’s economy, and it measures the permeability of national borders through the convergence of domestic and international prices. The Index also tracks the movements of money by tabulating inward- and outward-directed foreign investment and portfolio capital flows, as well as income payments and receipts.”

As I see it, two schools of thought stand at either end of the globalisation scale. The advocates of globalisation hail the benefits of the process and view it as the key to future economic development. At the other end, there are those who believe that globalisation increases inequality within and between nations, threatens employment and living standards, and stifles social progress.

There are still others for whom globalisation would be tantamount to Americanisation and loss of cultural uniqueness and compromise of national sovereignty over decision-making.

Is this all?

GLOBALISATION is one of the heftiest, multi-syllabic, thirteen-letter words in our current world vocabulary. We see that it has more consonants than vowels. And that is significant! We can deal with the number of letters some other time.

The foregoing discussion on globalisation seems to raise more questions than find answers! Is this all that globalisation means or has to offer? What was all the sound and fury, the fever and the fret for, after all? Is globalisation nothing more than increased cross-border trade and bigger flow of money, enhanced mobility of people and technology, more telephone calls, and expanded opportunities for hooking up to the World Wide Web?

Economists Michael D Bordo, Barry Eichengreen, and Douglas Irwin (1999) feel that globalisation today is not really different from globalisation a hundred years ago! The technological changes in the nineteenth century clearly led to globalisation. The transatlantic cable was laid in the 1860s, use of railroads and the telegraph had already made its mark, the Suez Canal was completed in 1869, and the radio telephone linked Europe and North America by 1900.

Further back, between the first century BC and the third century AD, the 6400km Silk Road had already connected China with the Mediterranean, with silk going west and wool and precious metals coming east.

My lack of understanding notwithstanding, if we measure success purely by these economic or technological indicators, what we have today represents a really reductionist, impoverished and decadent face of globalisation.

It appears that true globalisation began and flourished with the advent of the global minds long ago.

What about the minds which discovered the eternal laws of the physical universe, devised the geological time-scale, realised, in one swoop of their vision, the truth of birth and death, obtained

the vision of the Ideal and the Absolute, saw life steadily and saw it whole, captured the essence of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful, laid the foundations of philosophy and scientific enquiry?

What about the minds which conjured up the vastness of the epic, embracing heaven and earth, minds that envisioned the marriage of heaven and hell, minds which conceived the mystic mandala to represent the entire universe, minds that understood the ultimate reality and achieved enlightenment, minds that gave and followed the Sermon on the Mount.

I was thinking too of the minds that established the atomic theory and split the atom, minds that established the Periodic Table, minds that laid the laws of classification, minds that conceived the ideals of the charter of the United Nations Organisation, minds which encapsulate the family of humanity.

I had in my mind individuals who gave to the world the equation $E=mc^2$, minds which invented the concept of zero, minds that produced the future conditional tense of the verb, minds such as Gyelse Laaglen's that made him offer his shirt to the shivering ants on a wintry morning, the mind that conceived the marriage between the notion of Gross National Product and the ideal of Gross National Happiness.

True globalisation happens at these levels.

Some Global Minds

Sitting under a tree, Prince Siddhartha realised the truth of life and found a way to achieve salvation and enlightenment hundreds of years before the birth of Christ. It was a truly global mind which realised the sovereign Four Noble Truths and showed the Eightfold Paths.

The Light of Asia discovered that life is full of suffering; that suffering is caused by desire; that we can put an end to suffering; that there is a way to end suffering, through right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. These answers that the Buddha found are the greatest gifts of the Enlightened One to mankind. What could be more global than the breadth of this mind?

Over six hundred years before Christ, the all-embracing mind of the Awakened One had already seen the oneness of all human beings and the consequences of their deeds.

How chastening and sublime the message of the Buddha is:

No one is noble by birth,

No one is ignoble by birth.

Man is noble by his own deeds,

Man is ignoble by his own deeds.

Philosophers and writers throughout history have echoed and pondered over the profundity and pervasiveness of the equation between action and consequence, including Marlowe and Milton, Shakespeare and Shaw, Tolstoy and Tagore, Gandhi and Gibran, Trulkus and our think-tanks. And we talk of *ley jumdre* with our children today.

The global message of the Buddha is particularly relevant in today's world of strife, anguish, pain and suffering. Nothing is more urgent today than the need for *right understanding* and *right action*. In the inescapable logic of action and reaction, the escapable and needless sufferings of human beings imposed by other human beings would be replaced by the fruits of right thought leading to right action. Our world would be a far happier place and life a far worthwhile experience if people thought enough and cared and shared enough.

It was a truly global mind which, as far back as the third century BC, dwelt on the theory of knowledge, the immortality of the soul, and above all, the theory of Forms or Ideas which contrast the transient, material world of particulars with the timeless, unchanging world of the universals or the immutables. Plato (428-347 BC) already conceived of a world of the eternal realities independent of the world perceived by the senses. Plato captured the ultimate perfection of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. He envisioned the Ideal State to be established on the foundations of Justice.

Today, we talk of good governance as if it were a new-found concept. Socrates had tried to inculcate the knowledge of Truth, Goodness, Justice, Honour, Patriotism, Morality, and Virtue in the rulers and youths of Athens in the fourth century before Christ. Moreover, his global mind saw life steadily and saw it whole. His ideas and insights span all time and all space. Socratic wisdom has true global dimensions. We only need to discover and appreciate them for guidance in our trying times.

Almost in the same breath as *Eureka!*, we shout as if we suddenly discovered *globalisation now!* As if... Gigantic ocean-liners and huge fleet-carriers ply on mighty oceans and sustain and transport their cargo from coast to coast based on the law of buoyancy.

What is Archimedes' Principle but the discovery of an old law that *any body partially or completely submerged in a fluid is buoyed up by a force equal to the weight of the fluid displaced by the body*.

Who cheered the scientist, years ago, the impact of whose discovery has been truly global?

Except for the possible command of the king of Syracuse, to determine whether a gold crown was mixed with silver, the third century BC Sicilian mathematician and inventor had no other motive of economic equivalence that today's globalisation often hides itself behind.

Thanks to the Archimedean global mind, a whole world of marine activity is sustained and promoted on the surface of water. It was really a flash of discovery for a man, but a giant leap for mankind. Archimedes did not only run naked through the streets of Sicily shouting *Eureka!* He truly discovered a way forward for the world.

This is the same Archimedes who challenged the world: "Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum strong enough and single-handed I can move the world".

He certainly had something up his sleeve to see the essential connection that informs the universe.

A Pole's interest in calculating the positions of planets led to the formulation of the modern theory of the solar system. Nicolaus Copernicus (1473 –1543) dislodged the Ptolemaic belief in a geo-centric universe and proposed the theory of a helio-centric system and transformed our view of the world forever. It was a discovery of a truly global dimension.

Apples, as all other objects, have always had the habit of falling. They fell before Newton. They do so after him. But it took this child of the Age of Enlightenment in the west to realise that anything falling from a tree is attracted by the same force that holds the moon in orbit.

It took a global mind such as Newton's to discover a law that binds the whole of nature – a law that holds the planets and their satellites, the earth and its satellites. It is the same law that is responsible for the moon's tidal effects on the oceans, and for all terrestrial objects.

The global implications of Newton's discoveries were unprecedented. He established that the whole of the physical universe is an enormous world machine which can be explained by the law of motion. Newton concluded that the physical universe is a system of causes and their necessary effects, completely deterministic in all its operations.

Thanks to Newton, mankind's knowledge of our universe has not been the same.

Science and mysticism have always been seen as strange bed-fellows. Not for global minds though. Alexandra David-Neel writes in her *Tibetan Journey* (1936) about having met a lama who called himself a "master of sound".

So says the lama: "All things... are aggregations of atoms that dance and by their movements produce sounds. When the rhythm of the dance changes, the sound it produces also changes... Each atom perpetually sings a song, and the sound, at every moment, creates dense and subtle forms."

This is a rare marriage of science and spiritualism such as only an awakened mind can apprehend.

Many of us have sat by the ocean and looked at the waves come and go. And there an end! But it takes the mind of a Capra to discover the wider pattern. There is a profound story of an epiphanic experience he went through:

*I was sitting by the ocean one late summer afternoon, watching the waves rolling in and feeling the rhythm of my breathing, when I suddenly became aware of my whole environment as being engaged in a gigantic cosmic dance. Being a physicist, I knew that the sand, rocks, water, and air around me were made of vibrating molecules and atoms, and that these consisted of particles which interacted with one another by creating and destroying other particles. I knew also that the earth's atmosphere was continually bombarded by showers of 'cosmic rays', particles of high energy undergoing multiple collisions as they penetrated the air. All this was familiar to me from my research in high energy physics, but until that moment I had only experienced it through graphs, diagrams, and mathematical theories. As I sat on that beach my former experiences came to life; I 'saw' cascades of energy coming down from outer space, in which particles were created and destroyed in rhythmic pulses; I 'saw' the atoms of the elements and those of my body participating in this cosmic dance of energy; I felt its rhythm and I 'heard' its sound, and at that moment I 'knew' that this was the Dance of Shiva, the Lord of Dancers worshipped by the Hindus. (This from *Uncommon Wisdom*, Capra, 1989)*

Capra (1982) explores the parallels between eastern mysticism and modern physics and discovers in the dance of Shiva an enormous variety of patterns which fall into a few distinct categories, revealing a great deal of order.

This is Capra: *Movement and rhythm are the essential properties of matter in modern physics: all matter, whether here on earth or in outer space, is involved in a continual cosmic dance.*

In the dance of Shiva is seen a great rhythmic process of creation and destruction, death and rebirth, the eternal rhythm of life and death that goes on forever in ceaseless cycles.

The meeting of the eastern and western minds could not be more striking and all-embracing. This is globalisation of a supreme order.

On another plane, we have a wonderful notion of the world being a family of nations. We are very generous and think that it is fashionable to call ourselves citizens of the world. The Indian universalists had already in the Vedic times conceived and projected an all-encompassing ideal of the global mind.

The ideal of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakaam* – the world is my family – knits together all human beings in all space and time into a single family unit, in “the holiness of the heart’s affections”, as in the language of Keats, or as “the beloved community”, as in the dream of Martin Luther King Jr.

American poet, Carl Sandburg recognizes the oneness of the human family. To Sandburg “the first cry of a new-born baby in Chicago, or Zamboango, Amsterdam, or Rangoon, has the same pitch and key, each saying: ‘I am! I have come through! I belong! I am a member of the family’... ”

He pays tribute to the fact that we are alike on all continents in the need of love, food, clothing, work, speech, worship, sleep, games, fun, dancing. From the Tropics to the Arctics, humanity lives with these needs so alike, so inexorably alike.

This is the unity of man seen from a global angle.

We are all “unavoidably side by side”, said Emmanuel Kant. This is the nature of our life and the nature of our relationships as human beings. Irrespective of our situation in whatever time and whichever place, we are all bound together at the fundamental level of our being.

It was the same truth that John Donne taught us nearly four hundred years ago when he said: *No man is an island, entire to itself. Every man is a part of the continent, a part of the main. Any man’s death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind. So, therefore, do not send to know for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee.*

In as much as I am a human being, I am a member of the family of mankind. That is why when somebody dies, in any corner of the globe, a part of me dies in the death of that person. We are together as human beings.

By the same token, when somebody accomplishes something noble or good, be it in any part of the globe, I participate in that achievement and derive a sense of joy by virtue of my being a part of that person.

This is a global truth.

Victorian Matthew Arnold heard in the waves in Dover Beach a ‘grating roar’ which at once connects the lot of modern man with those on the Aegean shores that touched Sophocles. That is why

We are here as on a darkling plain

Swept by confused alarms of struggle and flight

Where ignorant armies clash by night.

It was a similar scenario of *sharpening of tools and confusion of aims* that Einstein saw as characteristic of the modern age!

The globalists saw it all.

"Man does not live by bread alone", so the ancient message of the gospel goes. Indeed, the current Bhutanese equivalent of this belief is the all-embracing ideal of Gross National Happiness envisioned by His Majesty the Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wangchuck. Happiness is, indeed, the ultimate goal of all human beings, from tropic to tropic, in all parallels and meridians, in all space and time.

The edifying concept of Gross National Happiness is the vision of a global mind operating against a national background. For a world long accustomed to measuring progress by economic indicators, the idea of national happiness is as revolutionary as it is sublime and ennobling. The Gross National Happiness ideal could be Bhutan's greatest gift to a thirsty world.

The Great Divide

If credit is to be accorded to the minds whose profound insights and disinterested endeavours through the ages have laid down the foundations for making sense of our universe and given direction to life and living, we discover at least two distinct phases of globalisation: Sublime Globalisation, and Material Globalisation.

The first phase was pioneered and powered by the great minds which looked at the universe and saw it whole. They envisioned and discovered the laws running underneath all of nature and of life. They saw at once the relationships and affinities which enable comprehension and make the world more intelligible for us.

What they did in the solitude of their place and time is uttered and appreciated by the multitude of all times and all places. In their disinterested search for the ultimate and the perfect, the great minds laid down for us rules for our spiritual and philosophical guidance as well as social and civic aspirations.

This was globalisation of a universal kind taking in its sweep all the fundamentals of the physical and the philosophical, the spiritual and the ethical universe. The power and the promise of the human mind was channelled and committed to achieve the best that was possible and desirable in all spheres of life.

This globalisation was a translation of the sovereignty of the human mind and the supremacy of the human heart. It was unconditional, it was integrative, it was positive. This globalisation was an act of faith; it was an act of love. It was truly global.

With all the good that it has done by harnessing the resources of the material world, the current phase of globalisation is a euphemism for the power of market economy.

Today's globalisation is the child of the appetitive spirit of man. It was born out of a desire to reach out to have more, to possess more, to control more. Its ideal is consumption and its god is money. Its basis is matter and its product is desire.

Globalisation, as one understands it today, seems to be powered and sustained by economic considerations and the glorification of the physical and the material. This globalisation is exclusive, materialistic and mundane. This is the globalisation of matter and the gratification of the senses.

Granted that globalisation has brought the nations and peoples of the world closer together than ever before; granted that communication and comfort have made life and work easier, the wonderful things that we thought globalisation would usher in are not in sight yet.

Some of the best minds of the world today are engaged in the most dangerous of pursuits. Despite the rhetoric and public professions, the building and stock-piling of lethal weapons continues unabated. The poor of the world remain poor as the rich get richer. Famine and starvation, death and disease, pain and suffering are still the constant narratives of the lives of millions of people around the world.

We were told that the size of a person's world is the size of his heart. But today, hands may be globalised, but the heart does not seem to move. While poverty and hunger are the reality of people in many parts of the world, obesity and extravagance are the concern in others. Even in the most painful Covid-times, some of the richest people in the world have become ever more rich!.

Equality of nations and peoples were supposed to be the principles on which globalisation would flower. Today, we are all equal, but some are more equal than others. In every sense of the term! Even globalisation chooses to exploit the weak and the voiceless.

In the logic of competition and struggle, this globalisation too will ensure the survival of the fittest. Remember the consonants!

Epilogue

It is often in the nature of human beings to throw the baby with the bath-water. This is an act that cannot be condoned. Mankind has been a beneficiary of the marvellous developments which have come in the wake of globalisation. The level of efficiency and sophistication that we have achieved in our interaction and communication with peoples and nations around the world is absolutely amazing.

Thanks to the blessings of a connected world, we are united in pain and in joy as a family. We grieved and lit butter lamps and prayed when Princess Diana died, and when September 11th was unleashed on America, as we did when hundreds of our fellow-beings perished with the planes that crashed into fathomless seas, just as we shudder at the plight of women and girls in Afghanistan today. The world came together when we celebrated the royal wedding of His Majesty, our beloved King, as it did when Malala and Kailash Satyarthi won their Nobels.

We have had many reasons and occasions for celebrations as well as for sorrows. We live and feel together. This is the way it should be. This feels human. This looks global.

“What region of the earth is not full of our calamities?” Imperial Rome’s supreme poet, Virgil, had asked several centuries ago. Globalisation also carries with it the negations and the agonies of mankind from one corner of the globe to another.

Greater mobility of people has meant not only the increased transfer of knowledge and technology, but also the movement of fatal diseases, and often deadly and subversive ideas, throwing panic and insecurity all around. These too we share. This is part of being global.

This, indeed, is the paradox of life itself. We try to reconcile the loveliness of this world with its transience, its joys with sorrow, our desire to enjoy the beautiful with the fear that we cannot do so unless we are also prepared to face much that is not so beautiful. This is the best we can do, perhaps.

Maybe we can do a little more. We can remind ourselves that in the ultimate analysis, globalisation can sustain itself only if it is grounded on a human foundation. It can flourish only if it is fed by the wisdom and insights that the great minds of the past brought to bear on the world that they conceived and comprehended it.

I still believe in the genius and the marvels of the human mind to guide the destiny of our world. Real globalisation is the function of the mind, not so much the function of matter.

“Something human is dearer to me than all the wealth of the world”. This was Joseph Conrad. We need globalisation with a human face to sustain itself and fulfil its promise. Wholesome globalisation is based on the spirit of cooperation and a community of feelings.

The golden age of globalisation will be here when everybody cares enough and shares enough; when the golden rule – do unto others as you would wish to be done by – becomes a reality.

The day we realise - from hemisphere to hemisphere, from continent to continent, nation to nation, people to people - that we have more to gain by discovering ‘the similarities that unite us rather than belabouring the differences that divide us’, will be a watershed for the cause of globalisation. A call from heart to heart, from people to people will unite the world into a veritable paradise.

Indeed, there was only one world. But the moment we realised it, we broke it up into nations. There was only one family of human beings. We broke ourselves up into races.

True globalisation should be a rediscovery, reaffirmation and reassertion of the oneness of the world and the unity of all human beings. Globalisation could be the first Virtual University of the twenty-first century for the re-education of the world.

We will have achieved the culmination of globalisation when we believe and act with Carl Sandburg in the spirit of the self-evident truth that

There is only one man in the world,

And his name is All Men.

There is only one woman in the world,

And her name is All Women.

There is only one child in the world,

And the child's name is All Children.

This could well be our **globalisation anthem**.

References

Capra, Fritjof (1982): *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism*, Flamingo, an Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, London.

____ (1989): *Uncommon Wisdom: Conversations with Remarkable People*, Flamingo, an Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, London.

Chopra, P N (1982): *Contribution of Buddhism to World Civilization and Culture*, S Chand & Company Ltd., New Delhi.

Gandhi, Arun (ed.) (1995): *World Without Violence: Can Gandhi's Vision Become Reality?* New Age International (P) Limited, Publishers, New Delhi.

Kinga, Sonam et al (ed) (2002): *Globalization: the argument of our time*, Centre for Bhutan Studies, Thimphu.

Lavine, T Z (1984): *From Socrates to Sartre: the Philosophical Quest*, Bantam Books, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group Inc., New York.

Powdyel, T S: Personal Diaries

Globalization: What is it?

<http://globalization.about.com/cs/whatisit/a/whatisit.html>

Globalization: Threat or Opportunity? An IMF Issues Brief

<http://www.imf.org/external/np/exr/ib/2000/041200.html>

The Return to a Global Economy, by Ian Vasquez

<http://www.cato.org/research/global/vas-0011.html>

Measuring Globalization: The A T Kearney, Foreign Policy Magazine Globalization Index

http://www.foreignpolicy.com/issue_janfeb_2001/atkearney.html

Leaving Home: E M Forster and the Pursuit of Higher Values, by Dharmachari Abhaya
http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol2/leaving_home.html

Prof. Thakur S Powdyel is an educator by choice, conviction and passion with particular interest in Education as the Noble Sector, Gross National Happiness, and Ethical Literacy. As the former Minister of Education, often referred to as the most widely foot-travelled education minister in the world, International Gusi Peace Laureate Powdyel moved Bhutan towards fulfilling the MDGs and the country's Constitutional mandate for education. Professor Powdyel's little book *My Green School* has been translated into some 14 major languages around the world, with other translations underway. He is the author of *As I Am, So Is My Nation, Right of Vision & Occasional Views*, *Gyal-Khab: Reflections on State, Citizen and Citizenship Education* and the principal author of *The Light of My Life*. Professor Powdyel has been a Visiting Professor and is a member of several international panels and advisory boards.