Creating the `Village' for Global Conversations

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One often hears today that we live in the `global village'.  Indeed, one experiences the `presence' of those who are otherwise thousands of miles away, through technologies like television or the internet. The notion of the global village implies a coming together in space. But what is the state of conversations in this global village? *Does the coming together in space also imply a commonality of language, perceptions, meanings and values, as in a real village?*

There are three basic requirements of conversation: a shared language; presence (whether physical or through electronic media) of the parties in the process of conversation; and a participative context in which the conversation takes place. A point to be noted is that the context of the conversation has to be free of domination; the domain of interaction and understanding has to be free from the domain of power[i]. The global `conversations', for example, during the past few centuries of colonialism were characterised by domination, exploitation and misrepresentation. The disastrous consequences of these distorted conversations continue to powerfully influence our lives even today.

With this in mind, we need to ask about the so-called global village: have we been able to provide for effective conversations among the inhabitants of this village? To consider this question, it will be useful to first visualise what the future of the global village will be a hundred years from now. As *the* shape of future society cannot be predicted, this paper presents two likely scenarios of the future; then it examines the nature of global conversations in these two scenarios and, finally; it suggests what needs to be done now to be able to move towards desirable futures.

Two Scenarios of the Future: Year 2100[ii]

Scenario A: The global village has evolved into a highly differentiated and hierarchical society. This consists of a caste/class system, which structurally resembles the division of ancient Indian society into *varnas*[iii] or broad caste groups. The basis of assignment to caste is access to and use of technical knowledge, which correlates strongly with birth within a caste due to social structural factors outlined below. The *techno-bra(hm)ins* (about 5 per cent of the population) are corporate leaders, scientists and technocrats who control the development and use of science and technology. They use artificial intelligence machines to assist them as also the techniques of intelligence amplification (adding to human intelligence by direct or indirect connections of machines/computers with the brain). They are the most affluent class, and exercise the greatest power, overt and covert. Doctors who control genetic engineering and related technologies are part of this caste.   The *techno-knowers* (40 per cent of the population) are technology literate professionals - the middle classes of today: managers, engineers, doctors, lawyers, media professionals, teachers, artists, etc - who populate the large skilled service sector of the economy. The only skilled members of this caste whose skill does not directly depend upon technical knowledge are sports persons and some categories of creative artists.

The *techno-workers* (35 per cent of the population) are low skilled industrial workers who have elementary familiarity with digital technologies and have been taught skills relevant to their manufacturing jobs such as handling robots. The low skilled service providers in transport, tourism, sales etc. are also part of this caste. The *techno-underclass* (the bottom-most 20 per cent) are the farmers, petty, unorganised workers and labourers in the South, the unemployed and some indigenous people who have little familiarity with digital technology. Some of the refugees displaced by ocean level rise also belong to this caste.

The circumstances and trajectory of life is completely different for these four castes, especially for the two upper and the two lower castes. The two higher castes are largely located in the North, the two lower castes predominantly in the South. However there is a sizable North in the South as well as a significant South in the North. *The organising principle of life in the two upper castes is technology; in the two lower castes it is religion.* (A number of techno-religious cults exist, however, among the upper castes.) Theoretically, it is accepted that all human beings have the same rights but in keeping with actual developments the ideology of differential rights for different castes is coming up, being actively promoted by the techno-brains.

Global population has stabilised at 11 billion. Longevity for the upper castes is above a 100 years, for the lower castes it is 75. Options such as freezing and preserving brains/bodies, too expensive for other castes, are exercised by many members of the techno-brains. Genetic screening and engineering of children is the rule among the techno-brains and the techno-knowers, but screening of foetuses among the two lower castes is optional and depends upon religious and other considerations.

The two upper castes live in privatised, environmentally controlled space. The colonisation of space is proceeding satisfactorily; 2 per cent of the population of the two upper castes resides in space colonies, with plans to increase this to 10 per cent in the next 50 years. Most members of the two upper castes work about half time. Leisure activities include space travel, earth tourism, sports, virtual reality experiences - especially virtual sex, mind-sports and explorations in virtual art and techno-spirituality. For the two lower castes, on the other hand, who work more, Leisure consists of watching television/sports, religious festivals, community activities and a more limited scale of tourism. Most of the energy for running this society comes from four sources: hydrogen fusion, nuclear fission, the ocean and solar power plants.

Politically, this global village shows some variation in the pattern of governance of its different niches. Most nations have secular, formally democratic governments guided and controlled by the techno-brains. Mind control experts and tools are used by the rulers to shape public opinion, keep watch on intellectuals and artists and control dissent in society. The representatives of the techno-workers and the techno-underclass, as well as representatives of various ethnic and religious groups are given special consultative place in the government. But in certain pockets government is run by authoritarian technocrats; in other areas - parts of the South where the two lower castes preponderate - it is run by religious leaders.

Scenario B: In terms of technological advancement this scenario is not very different from the first one (energy sources, communications, space colonisation, advances in medicine and genetic engineering and so on). The main differences, however, lie in social structure and control over development of science and technology, cultural codes and political organisation.

This scenario is the outcome of historical processes whereby after nearly reaching the brink of extinction due to ecological destruction and nuclear war the nation states have learned to cooperate more closely. This cooperation has led to *a modified and strengthened UN which is now mandated to coordinate global efforts in five areas: demilitarisation and peace-keeping, colonisation of space, genetic engineering and the development of attendant ethical principles, management of global ecology and inter-cultural and inter-religious understanding.* The UN has set up the commission for global ethics, consisting of eminent religious and political leaders, intellectuals and artists to lay down guidelines on ethical issues arising out of the advancement of scientific knowledge and technological possibilities based upon it. The technologies of genetic engineering, artificial intelligence and intelligence amplification, etc. are all used in a limited and qualified way under the guidance of this commission.

In the meantime, the business corporations worldwide have discovered that it is no longer possible to increase profits by manufacturing and selling weapons and consumer goods because of counter pressures from ecologists, cultural lobbies and spiritual and pacifist groups. Instead, they have realised that colonisation of space and development of nanotechnology are the new commercial frontiers; these are the thrust of new products and services offered by them. A very large volume of business deals with educational, medical and entertainment products and services. The design and provision of green products and services - for instance, in trying to undo the ecological mess left behind by earlier generations - is another major sector of business.

With this design of global politics and economics, power in society is broadly shared between the state, business corporations and civil society. The last refers to a wide array of scientific, religious, spiritual, educational, cultural and charitable bodies which play a crucial role not only in the lives of most individuals but also in advising and monitoring the state as well as business corporations. One of the key activities in which they associate with the state is to lay down standards as well as rewards for different types of work. Society approximates to a meritocracy. Good education for all children, including those disabled by birth or accident, and health care for all is ensured. Although the rich earn about 20 times as much as the poor in most nations, the incomes are determined by the social evaluation of a person's talent and his/her contribution to society. Screening of children from all `classes' is done to discover those exceptionally talented and special attention is paid to these children.

Society is predominantly democratic, with extensive use of communication technologies, which are part of the public infrastructure, for public debates and people's participation in decision-making. There are five political tiers from the local to the global: local, provincial, national, regional and global (in the shape of the modified UN). The first two tiers represent forms that combine participative and representative democracy; the next three tiers are run broadly on representative principles. Most economic and cultural activities are handled at the local and provincial levels. At each of the higher tiers, however, there are institutional structures to handle issues of cooperation and conflict, specialised studies and research, and technology development,

etc. At each tier social processes throw up competent and innovative individuals in different tasks who are then assigned responsibility in centres and organisations at higher tiers.

This setup permits the coexistence of different cultural codes and practices. There are great variations in the lifestyles, beliefs, religions, arts, education and family and community life to be found in different local areas, provinces and nations. The well developed mechanisms of cooperation and conflict resolution at all tiers, however, ensure that diversity in culture does not lead to violent conflict.

Future Scenarios: The State of Global Conversations

The `global village' in the two scenarios presented above is very different and so too the nature of global conversations.

Language: In both the scenarios the preeminent language of global conversations is English. Numerous languages spoken by small ethnic groups have died; some of these have been museumised. The two scenarios, however, differ in one major respect. In scenario A only 200 languages spoken by the upper castes survive as living languages and are still used for communication purposes within or between some nations. The other 5800 languages that existed a hundred years ago have died. The ruling castes have completely dissociated from these dying languages and from their historically given, religion-based mythology and folklore, which is still part of the oral and sometimes written tradition of the lower castes.

In scenario B, however, 900 living languages have survived, another 400 have been digitally recorded and museumised, due to two factors. In most nations and sub-regions modern media and digital technologies have been harnessed in the dissemination of folk culture and even for education in these languages. Secondly, among the large number of people who go in for higher education at one point or another in their long lives there has been great surge of interest in anthropological and cultural studies and linguistics. This has helped in the survival and flourishing of some of the languages. Also, many of the national/regional languages have thriving national/regional level electronic networks of communication.

Presence: In scenario A society is structured to eliminate 55 per cent of the global population from the fora, whether geographically localised or electronic, in which conversations across cultures can take place. *Whether it is the world wide web, tourism or international travel (for work, education or conferences), it is the upper two castes who participate, and the large majority of these are from the nations of the North.* The lower castes not only do not have the wherewithal for global conversations, they are at the receiving end of information and symbols conveyed to them, which are manipulated and programmed by the techno-brains to either lull them to apathy or to divide and rule by focussing on religious and ethnic differences.

In scenario B, the number of people who participate in intercultural conversations is substantial, thanks to the way in which global society is organised. One, each local area and province has the access to technology to represent itself on the stage of the global village since communication infrastructure is publicly owned and controlled as much as it is used for commercial purposes.

Nearly all individuals are computer literate and have some access to global communication networks. As a result, *there is not only a spatial organisation of societies, but also a thematic organisation based on intellectual interests which creates `virtual communities'.* Besides, since survival of different bio-regional cultures and inter-cultural understanding are encouraged, special opportunities are provided for people to travel to and learn about and from other cultures.

Context: In scenario A most conversations take place within the ideological universe of the same caste or the same culture. Since the organising principle for the upper castes is science while for the lower castes it is religion, there is a divergence of meanings and perceptions. `Conversations' that take place during commercial interactions or tourism, etc. are conversations located in the context of domination/subordination and are thus `meaningless' and distorted. The few attempts at genuine global conversations are drowned in the din of the large volume of `junk' and manipulated images projected at the lower castes with the intention to titillate and confuse.

In the democratic and culturally plural scenario B, on the other hand, the context of global conversations, whether it is electronic or geographical is participatory and designed for the sharing of perspectives and convergence of meanings.

From Conversation to Action: Creating Desirable Futures

I would submit that at the present moment we stand between two possible futures, which, although not exactly like one of the two scenarios above, would, very likely, be quite close to either one or the other. If we prefer the democratic, plural, convivial global village to the hegemonic, caste/class-ridden, expropriating one, then radical and drastic steps (which are closely inter-related), of the kind suggested below, will be necessary. These steps are not what any human being can achieve alone, but neither can these steps be taken at all unless each one of us makes our corresponding choices in life.

Firstly, the affluent classes/nations will have to seriously consider the question of ecological survival that the naturalist E O Wilson poses as follows: is humanity suicidal? As he suggests, we might well take care of global warming and ozone depletion, but if we continue with biodiversity and ecosystem destruction, the answer to that question may be `yes'. Thus, it is imperative that you and I choose an ecologically benign lifestyle. Also, economics will have to shift focus from financial to ecological resources.

Secondly, we will have to modify the economistic assumptions, which underlie the whole of this century's developmental philosophy, and *redefine notions of both `wealth' and `poverty' in terms of well being. More specifically, the rich and the powerful should agree to the imaginative proposal to tax global financial transactions[iv], as also international air travel and communications.* This way `globalised' individuals like you and me, and especially the rich who participate in speculative global financial markets will directly contribute to the financial resources needed in the short/medium term for urgent tasks like eradicating destitution, strengthening human development and ecological restoration.

Thirdly, we will have to reaffirm universal human rights and principles of democracy not just in words but in deeds. Sooner or later, if we are to have a democratic world at all, we will have to demilitarise, move away from a unipolar world and hand over the role of global peace making to a world body mandated for this. To do this, *you and I will have to keep a watchful eye on our governments as well upon the trans-national corporations and pressurise them to behave democratically and responsibly.*

Fourthly, each one of us will have to shift from ethnocentrism to a genuinely anthropological perspective, so that we may have dialogue across civilisations and cultures, rather than a `clash of civilisations'. This is essential also for a democratic world. As Ashis Nandy writes, `*...the global democratic process will only be enriched if the worldview, lifestyles and visions of the future of [the] vernacular communities are brought into the mainstream culture of politics.*' [Nandy 1996] We, as individuals, will have to make a special effort to understand the `languages' of the dispossessed.

Fifthly, science is advancing at so rapid a pace that it is demolishing the old certitudes of religion; it is demolishing the city of god, and substituting for it the dazzling city of man. But this is dangerous. Science can only be brutally cold and disenchanted, it cannot provide the sacredness, meaning, and passion which religion provides to fulfil deep-seated human urges. Thus, not only the dialogue between cultures, you and I will have to keep alive the dialogue between science and religion too.

I end with a statement by Vaclav Havel, which brings together many of the above concerns: `Politicians at international forums may reiterate a thousand times that the basis of the new world order must be universal respect for human rights, but it will mean nothing as long as this imperative does not derive from the respect of the miracle of Being, the miracle of the universe, the miracle of nature, the miracle of our own existence. Only someone who submits to the authority of the universal order and of creation, who values the right to be a part of it and a participant in it, can genuinely value himself and his neighbours, and thus honor their rights as well.' [Havel 1996]

Notes

References

Most of the references listed here have not been indicated in the text. A very large number of inputs have gone into envisioning the scenarios presented in the paper; only the more important of these are being listed here.

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i. A point elaborated in Habermas's theory of communicative action.

ii. These scenarios present, with perhaps a little exaggeration, what is likely, not necessarily what would be desirable.
Secondly, for reasons of space, it has been difficult to mention the many differences that will invariable be found across nations and societies.

iii. Ancient Indian society was organised as a hierarchy of four *varnas*, in order of religious purity: *brahmins* (priests), *kshatriyas* (warriors and administrators), *vaisyas* (traders) and *sudras* (servants).

iv. This proposal was made by UNDP's Human Development Report, 1994, based on an idea originally put forward by the economist James Tobin in 1978. He suggested that a 0.5 per cent tax on foreign exchange transactions has the potential of raising $ 1.5 trillion an year, besides slowing down speculative capital movements.