The Other Sides of Globalization: Communication, Culture, and Postcolonial Critique

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The launch of the new International Communication Association journal Communication, Culture & Critique heralds the creation of a much needed international forum for critical media scholars—political economists, cultural critics, and ethnographers—from a wide variety of theoretical orientations and perspectives—postcolonial, Marxist, and feminist—to debate the “social, cultural, and political dimensions of our media-saturated world” (from journal description online). The journal’s accommodation of multiple genres of writing (research papers, commentaries, critiques, and work in progress) and its explicit commitment to the goals listed below are especially heartening to scholars in postcolonial studies:

- to examine the role of communication and cultural criticism in today’s world;
- to consider the role that communication and culture can play in our local and global world;
- to publish well-argued, rigorous, and thoughtful work that asks more questions than it answers;
- to recognize the place of poverty in knowledge economies and the historical antecedents of contemporary events (paraphrased from journal description online).

For postcolonial feminist communication scholars who work in and on South Asia, the above goals of the journal can be channeled into a rigorous and critical interrogation of the myriad popular, policy, and state discourses that shroud globalization in its misty smog of authority, inevitability, and legitimacy. As globalization creates First Worlds in the Third World and Third Worlds in the First World, postcolonial feminism, in the words of Shome and Hegde (2002), must remain committed to the task of contesting the discursive processes that sustain exclusionary trajectories of progress and modernity: “The issue is not that difference, marginality, disempowerment, et cetera, do not matter; rather, the issue is how they matter, how..."
they are evoked ... and how they are reconstituted through the differential logics in globalization” (p. 176).

Although globalization’s economic imperatives have enabled certain sections of the population in India to gain upward mobility, its ideologies of prosperity have not benefited the vast majority of poor urban and rural Indian citizens who continue to struggle for their basic needs (food, water, shelter, primary education, and medical care). In what ways have globalization’s excursions to India exploited and exacerbated the legacies of colonialism? How has globalization created a flat world only for those who are privileged to participate in its technocratic and consumerist agendas? How do media texts produced in the United States and in India represent the priorities of the global economy’s “emerging markets” for their transnational audiences? How do powerful institutions mobilize the semiotic resources of gender, race, nation, and class to craft hegemonic representations of globalization’s democratic possibilities? Unpacking the limitations of one powerful narrative on globalization’s rapid journey to India, this essay argues that Communication, Culture & Critique offers a productive space for postcolonial scholars to debate globalization’s implications for social justice and economic inequality and thus contribute to the emerging interdisciplinary field of critical globalization studies (Applebaum & Robinson, 2005).

The other side of outsourcing: Thomas Friedman travels to India

Friedman’s 2004 Discovery Channel documentary The other side of outsourcing chronicles the media pundit’s journey to Bangalore, India, the fetishized “global city” that has become an emblem of the information economy’s flexible and migrant modes of production. Friedman’s sojourn in Bangalore, as the introductory scenes of the video explain, is intended to enlighten U.S. citizens who are incensed about jobs being shipped overseas to Indian workers, that outsourcing has many other sides including hidden benefits to the U.S. economy. At pivotal moments in the video, Friedman argues that Indian workers’ increasing demand for goods exported from the United States will boost the domestic economy here and in turn support the creation of new and innovative jobs for U.S. workers. The other side of outsourcing is a stimulating and entertaining narrative on India’s aggressive embrace of globalization in the past 15 years. The documentary’s high-quality creative and production features—Friedman’s animated interviewing style, intimate ethnographic scenes of young Indians performing their routines of work and leisure, and the range of interviews with business leaders, call center workers, activists, and philanthropists—combined with its topical and controversial content earned it among the highest “views” (107,690 on August 27, 2007) on YouTube’s list of videos for the search phrase “Thomas Friedman.” Although it is beyond the scope of this brief essay to offer a detailed critique of Friedman’s widely disseminated corpus of writings on globalization (most notably the book The World is Flat), I unpack the hegemonic representational politics of selected
segments of the video narrative *The other side of outsourcing* to address the larger issue of how audiences may come to understand the meanings of globalization’s impact in South Asia.

**Historical knowledges: globalization, colonialism, and modernization**

It is the first day of class at a large public university in the Midwestern region of the United States. I ask my students enrolled in a large undergraduate media course, “Why are Indian workers receiving your phone calls when you call the customer service numbers of airline, computer, or insurance companies?” The typical and accurate response, “Because American companies have discovered they can pay these workers less.” Then, I ask a follow-up question, “What are the historical events that have made it possible for American companies to outsource to India?” The typical response to this question is silence. Unlike the silence in the classroom that speaks to a lack of historical knowledge on globalization’s links to earlier colonial and national projects of modernization, Friedman’s documentary does invoke a 30-second factoid on 200 years of British colonialism in India as the reason for middle-class Indians’ fluency in English, and hence, their allure as a labor pool (he does not say “cheap” labor pool) for U.S. multinationals. Yet, this program’s superficial gesture toward historical knowledge does not enlighten audiences about globalization’s exacerbation of language-based class, caste, and urban/rural social inequalities that were set in motion after Lord Macaulay made his famous statement on the purpose of English education in India in 1835. Macaulay’s Minute, which preceded the formal introduction of English to the Indian middle and upper classes, captured the imperial mission to use the English language to produce “a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions we govern, a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals, and in intellect.” I do not mean to suggest here that fluency in English alone is responsible for globalization’s preferential treatment of particular Indian citizens, but the close alignment of India’s urbanized professional–managerial class of workers and consumers with English language skills captures the continuities between colonialism’s hierarchical policies and globalization’s appetite for South Asian workers in the information industries.

But Friedman also moves too swiftly from his fragmented sound bite on India’s colonial history to Bangalore’s current preoccupation with fiber-optic cable, satellite dishes, and the infrastructure of a high-tech economy. The video’s painless transition from a colonial empire’s benevolent linguistic legacy to call center workers in Bangalore’s ebullient capitalist economy gossips over India’s postcolonial democratic *socialist history*, the post-1947 Nehruvian era of self-determination and self-sufficiency when the Indian state invested considerable resources in creating a national culture focused on scientific modernity (Khilnani, 2004). It is in this quasisocialist period of dramatic political change (albeit its abysmal flaws, failures, and limitations) that India witnessed the germination of a scientific ethos of progress.
Negating this historic period of active nation building and modernization, Fried-
man’s Orientalist opening descriptions of India’s “ancient civilization,” its citizens’ 
“relatively unchanged” ways of life, and its “age-old culture” of “deeply held tradi-
tions” promote the contemporary moment of globalization as India’s primordial 
encounter with progress. It was the postindependence Nehru administration’s 
emphasis on industrialization and scientific modernity as a means to achieve eco-
nomic equality, itself a sharp break from Gandhi’s resistance to Western models of 
economic development, that led to the establishment of India’s scientific and tech-
nical institutions (public universities and colleges, technology centers, and research 
institutions), and hence, the impetus for the global economy’s migration to South 
Asia in search of cheap skilled labor.

Empowerment at the call center: Faking identities and 
consuming happiness

Friedman’s video editorial proposes that young Indian female call center workers, 
who have “hot jobs” and earn more money than their parents and older workers, 
express their generation’s empowerment through their escalated freedom to pur-
chase lifestyle commodities and branded goods in the global marketplace. The 
video’s vivid narrative catalog of the closely guarded facilities and business practices 
of multinationals’ operations in India represents the call center as a site of class and 
gender emancipation. The audio–visual segment on the global telephone service 
sector stitches together panoramic shots of high-rise buildings and their luxurious 
interiors, interviews with call center managers, and observations of recruitment and 
“accent neutralization” training sessions. Friedman’s bland description of the gru-
eling night shifts of young Indians at the 24/7 call center who work at night to 
accommodate U.S. customers’ daytime calls conceals multinationals’ opportunisti-
(and neocolonial) manipulation of world time zones: “Every evening around 6:00 
p.m. local time, 1800 young workers man the phones working through the night 
handling tens of thousands of customer service and sales calls for dozens of multi-
nationals.” At the end of a follow-up interview with a personnel supervisor, who 
points out that call center employees work at night and spend their money on 
consumer goods in the daytime, Friedman and the supervisor agree that the com-
|bination of “disposable income, disposable time, and 20-year olds” make this job 
a “hot” prospect for Indian youth. To support his optimistic perspective on Indian 
women’s economic empowerment with visual evidence, Friedman turns to ethno-
|graphic data—he introduces viewers to call center employees Sophia Ross and her 
sister, new citizens of the global economy who like to work hard at night and spend 
hard during the day. Viewers witness Sophia Ross and her friends shopping for shoes 
and jeans in Bangalore’s busy commercial district. When Friedman asks the Ross 
sisters whom they would pick as a role model, Bill Gates or an Indian guru, a binary 
opposition that reeks of Orientalism, they vote enthusiastically for Gates thus affirm-
ing their belief in the “American dream.”
Friedman’s assertion that call centers have provided relatively lucrative employment to hundreds of young women and men is indeed accurate, but to pitch the call center job as hot without any consideration of the stress that night shifts, highly repetitive work (with little scope for mobility), and assumed “American identities” have caused paints a unidimensional picture of globalization’s effects in South Asia. Pradhan and Abraham (2005) observe that the cultural impact of outsourcing in India is not “rosy.” Drawing conclusions from their survey research, they write that call center workers’ routine adoption of American or British names, accents, and personas over a prolonged period, that is, the “remaking of Sulochana into Sally in the image of their customers’ requirements,” has led to multiple personality disorder in some workers. The lack of a daytime social life for those who sleep during the day and the packed schedules of those who forgo sleep to maintain ties with family and friends have led to “complaints of stress, panic attacks, depression, relationship troubles, alcoholism, and eating disorders.” Sandeep (“Sandy” at night), who dropped out of college for a call center job, reports his frustrations with his night schedule: “I had lost touch with my relatives. I used to get home at four in the morning and when I woke up, my family was out at work and it was just TV or computer games for me” (Basu, 2004). After Sandeep experienced suicidal feelings, he quit his job to go back to college, a move that 35% of call center workers said that they were likely to make in 2004.

Indian call center workers who are forced to assume European identities to please their customers in the United States and Europe, a business practice that sustains racism in the first place, are also increasingly facing “abuse from Americans, whose tantrums are sometimes racist and often inspired by anger over outsourcing” (McPhate, 2005). Pradhan and Abraham (2005) document Indian call center workers’ repeated exposure to racist, and sometimes irrational, abuse: “Reports tell that the number of abusive calls to Indian call centers reached an all-time high after terror attacks in the U.S. and U.K. … websites have sprung up in the U.S. specifically to cater to phone abusers.” It is these costs of outsourcing that remain hidden in Friedman’s humorous presentation of an “accent neutralization” workshop in Bangalore; he sits smiling in the corner of the room as an upper-class Indian woman teaches new call center recruits how to camouflage their Indian identities. In a performance of spontaneous and funny reportage for the camera, Friedman takes over the role of the trainer to demonstrate his Minnesota accent to this appreciative young audience. Although Indian women display their empowerment in the marketplace in The other side of outsourcing, front-page newspaper reports in India cite the safety issues—carjacking, mugging, looting, abduction, and assault—that late-night call center workers have to contend with on their nightly commutes (Call centers call for help, 2007). For some Indian women, call center work also carries sexual stigma due to late-night hours and the extended proximity with young men in the workplace, and the stigma brings with it the likelihood of being distanced by family and community (Pradhan & Abraham, 2005).
Globalization’s other side: cultural imperialism versus cultural purity

The other side of outsourcing fails to do justice to the less savory “other sides” of call center work, but the video does attempt to grapple with the harmful consequences of globalization as a whole for India’s social, cultural, and economic fabric. For his first and most prominent collective voice of opposition to globalization in India, Friedman turns to the right-wing Hindu fundamentalists, who argue that the cultural imperialism of the global economy is wiping out Indian culture. When Friedman joins members of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in their office to solicit their opinions, they complain that the recent emergence of Valentine’s Day has corrupted traditional notions of love and fidelity, and that the younger generation’s abdication of Hinduism’s religious customs and rituals for a “call center lifestyle” would eventually destroy Indians’ unique national identities. Agreeing with his informants even as he quips that India could have “Kama Sutra Day,” Friedman turns to the camera to tell his viewers “for all the joking around, they have a serious point.” What gets left out in his open-minded and conciliatory engagement with the RSS is the complicated web of economic and cultural factors that underlie the rise of right-wing Hindu communalism in the past 2 decades. Ahmad (2003) argues that the modern phenomenon of Hindutva terror—its exclusionary rhetoric of national unity, its hegemonic grip on popular culture, and its representations of Indian Muslims as menacing—cannot be separated from the arrival of neoliberal globalization that has largely benefited India’s Hindu upper- and middle classes. Friedman’s rejoinder to the right-wing Hindu position is not to interrogate them further about the patriarchal or parochial aspects of Indian culture they want to preserve or how right-wing religious ideology has manifested in communal violence; instead, he holds up “glocalization” in the electronic animation industry as an illustrative example of globalization’s collaborative relations with local/indigenous customs and traditions. The video’s narrative of the company jadooWorks reveals traditional artists’ creation of animated cartoons and games that feature characters and stories from Hindu mythology, commodified products of corporate multiculturalism that ultimately target the Hindu middle-class beneficiaries of globalization.

Winding his way through globalization’s uneven trajectory in India, Friedman eventually takes on the sheer magnitude of urban and rural poverty that persists alongside call centers, affluent gated communities, landscaped campuses of high-tech companies, high-rise apartment buildings, and malls. He presents charity work and philanthropy as the most effective routes to funnel globalization’s benefits to those who live on the periphery. His conversations with a well-meaning educator (Lalita Law) and a former businessman (Abraham George) coupled with heartwarming images of poor Indian children receiving free education at Shanti Bhavan, the school that George founded, suggest in a metonymic fashion that such experiments can be replicated easily to encompass all of India. Friedman’s dismissive and shallow representation of the progressive (leftist and
feminist) critique of globalization’s economic models reduces a vibrant collective voice of opposition within India to a hollow caricature, a movement that suffers from nostalgic idealization of the past. In contrast to his respectful significations of business leaders (he refers to the CEO of Infosys as a friend) and the conservative right, the video’s chronicle of Friedman’s short visit to Vimochana, a women’s rights group, portrays activists on the left as knee-jerk reactionaries. When he talks to antiglobalization critics at Vimochana, Friedman does not take notes on his laptop nor does he joke or smile to signify a grudging agreement with their position. Viewers are also not provided with the larger context of the robust opposition to globalization in India that has emerged from several quarters; Arundhati Roy, Vandana Shiva, Sainath, and Ahmad along with scores of other South Asian activists and intellectuals have become leaders in a worldwide movement for global justice. At the end of his visit to Vimochana, after Madhu Bhushan offers a critique of Bangalore/urban India as an unrealistic model of economic development for those who live in villages, Friedman offers a patronizing response that leaves no room for viewers to sympathize with the left: “I’m sure you’re all wrong, but I’m really glad I talked to you because there’s something deep you’re touching on.”

Friedman’s condescending dismissal of leftist opposition to globalization perpetuates the idea that the right-wing position (the fear of imperial American culture) is the only authentic and relevant source of critique. Khilnani (2004) argues that such binary visions of India’s integration into the global economy—capitalist/imperialist versus conservative/authentic—limit the nation’s potential to forge genuinely alternative models of progress that can ensure the longevity of agrarian as well as industrial and high-tech economies:

On the one hand, there is a shrinkwrap software-package India, where ‘brain-arbitrage’ is the new spice trade and where India is a global brand-name advertising the world’s electronic ‘back office.’ On the other hand, there is a self-inflated, venomous redefinition of India in terms of the ideology of Hindutva. And yet, the alternatives are more complicated; and, especially after 11 September 2001, the calculus of choice must be more nuanced. (p. x)

The other side of outsourcing does ask the important question of how to make globalization sustainable and accessible to those Indians who cannot work in call centers, animation companies, or software multinationals, but in presenting the most legitimate options as commodity tradition or philanthropy, the video diminishes the spectrum of different positions on globalization that Indian farmers, feminists, leftists, academics, and labor movements have articulated. In making this move, the video’s narrative does not illuminate the extent of opposition to globalization in rural India, which is precisely the knowledge viewers would need to understand the national elections of 2004 when the ruling party was overthrown for prioritizing market and economic reforms at the expense of farmers and the rural poor.
Critical globalization studies and postcolonial critique in media studies

As proponents of the reflexive agenda of critical globalization studies have argued, the term “critical” implies a commitment to interrogating the historical specificity of our current material and political conditions, and hence, a rigorous correction to the hypothesis that globalization is an inevitable and timeless force without a beginning and an end (Mittelman, 2005; Robinson, 2005). Applebaum and Robinson (2005) argue that the field of critical globalization studies must find ways to challenge the proposition that an inevitable liability of progress is the creation of abjection and poverty for some and not for others. What remains in the shadows in Friedman’s optimistic story of globalization’s life in the metropolitan context of Bangalore is a deeper analysis of the other village India that continues to be home to a “third of the world’s poor and where some 300 million people live on less than $1 a day” (Ramesh, 2006). Just a few hundred miles from the upscale residential settlement of Aamby valley in the state of Maharashtra, a private settlement that boasts of golf courses, year-round cool temperatures, water parks, hiking trails, five-star restaurants, a hospital, and an airport, is the village of Vidarbha where an alarming number of poor farmers, unable to compete with cotton growers from the United States and the European Union after the “last vestiges of Indian government support were withdrawn,” have committed suicide, thus adding to the toll of thousands of Indian farmers who have taken their own lives in the past decade (Ramesh, 2006). Similarly, Pradhan and Abraham (2005) note that “alarmingly, the most important negative impact” of call centers is reflected in the widening economic chasm in urban India between an affluent middle class and the impoverished poor, who are paying for the costs of siphoning state and private resources to develop a world-class technological infrastructure.

Indian journalist Sainath, recipient of the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 2007 for the category “Journalism, Literature, and the Creative Arts,” was selected to receive the award in recognition of his “passionate commitment as a journalist to restore the rural poor to India’s national consciousness” (Sainath gets Magsaysay award, 2007). Sainath has written extensively on caste violence, food and water shortages, hunger and economic inequality, and rural women’s conditions in some of the poorest districts in India. Voicing his critique of India’s misplaced priorities in the editorial essay “The decade of our discontent,” Sainath (2007) writes:

The early decades were at least decades of hope. There were improvements, significant if not impressive in literacy, life expectancy, and other human development indicators. There was a sense that “India lives in her villages.” The slogan that caught the nation’s imagination, even if in wartime, was “jai jawan, jai kisan” (Hail the soldier, hail the farmer, my translation). The farmer was seen as carrying the nation’s future on his or her shoulders … 60 years on, rural India is a shambles. The most severe agrarian crisis since the eve of the Green Revolution rages on, but does not hold elite or media interest for long …. The government tells us over 112,000 farmers have committed suicide since 1993.
A gross underestimate but the figure is bad enough. These are suicides driven by debt. (p. 10)

Sainath notes that inequality is neither new nor unknown in India, but what makes the past decade different is the “ruthlessness with which it has been engineered” and the “cynicism with which it has been constructed” (p. 10). Friedman’s narrative also does not consider the problems of rising poor and working-class inequality in the United States; his claims that Indians’ consumption of exported commodities will fuel the U.S. economy are not reassuring to the thousands of U.S. workers who have lost jobs, health insurance, and a viable means of earning a living wage. Even Scheve and Slaughter (2007), academics and policy makers who want to “save globalization,” argue that in “contrast to the earlier decades, today it is not just those at the bottom of the skill ladder who are hurting … By some measures, inequality in the United States is greater today than at any time since the 1920s” (p. 34). Their comprehensive analysis of wages and income in the United States from 2000 to 2005 shows that only 3.4% of workers—those with a PhD and MBA/JD/MD—experienced any growth in their mean real money earnings; an overwhelming majority, more than 96% of U.S. workers including those with college education, saw their earnings fall thus leading to an “astonishing skewness of U.S. income growth” (pp. 40–41).

Progressive critiques of globalization and its utopian representations in a wide range of transnational media must find their way into academic/activist/policy discourses. Postcolonial feminism originated in the humanities, primarily in literary theory and criticism. However, its more recent migrations to cultural studies and the social sciences has expanded the field’s scope of inquiry to include global and national consumer and popular culture, newspaper and advertising texts, Internet communities, media audiences, and global marketing and corporate practices. In stretching its intellectual muscles to critique the flexible and mobile flows of global media and capital, postcolonial feminism’s methodology, as Grewal and Kaplan (1994) argue, must grapple with the complexities of globalization and gender in relation to “scattered hegemonies such as global economic structures, patriarchal nationalisms, ‘authentic’ forms of tradition, local structures of domination, and legal-juridical oppression on multiple levels” (p. 17). The pages of Communication, Culture & Critique can serve as a vehicle to uncover and debate the other sides of globalization that have difficulty in gaining a foothold in the mainstream cultural imaginary.

References


