

## DOES GLOBALISATION PROVIDE ANY OPPORTUNITIES?

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Globalisation per se is not a negative process even though the rhetoric has dubbed it so. It is when globalisation is preferential, as it is now, and threatens the poor as it does now, that it becomes an instrument of oppression rather than of opportunity. Pragmatism would however dictate that as we continue to wage a struggle to undo the worst aspects of globalisation, we also in the meantime examine what opportunities it offers us. This would be particularly pertinent if the opportunities could be tied up with the benefit of those communities that are most threatened by the globalising process. A few things come to mind.

The first lesson from globalisation should be to quickly restore research funds to public sector institutions, particularly in the sensitive sectors of food and health. There has been a regrettable decline in public funds invested in agricultural and pharmaceutical research leading to an increasing privatisation not just of these sectors today but also of the R&D base that would determine the fate of these sectors tomorrow. Private funds create private goods shackled by intellectual property rights (IPRs) which are not accessible to the public. It is important to create public goods and technologies with public money so that public needs can be addressed.

There are opportunities now to set the pace in some areas of commerce with the protection of the environment, a goal dear to everyone's heart as would be evidenced from the great push for linking trade with environment in the WTO. A few years ago, Germany and other European nations banned the use of Azo dyes on the grounds that it could lead to cancer. This ban most likely was a protectionist move. However India should take this opportunity to turn the situation to its advantage, arguing that not just Azo, most chemical dyes should be phased out of the international trade in textiles. India should start championing the cause of the environment and asking for natural dyes because it has a competitive advantage in this area. Vegetable dyes and their use in textiles continue to be a living tradition here so the skills and technologies are present.

Properly negotiated, globalization could provide an opportunity to work an agreement on natural dyes and turn the textile trade in our favor. India could become a supplier of natural dyes as also a producer of naturally dyed fabrics like silk and cotton. India has several advantages compared to other countries, especially western countries where natural coloring traditions have almost died out. It has the opportunity today to emerge as a big producer of these plant-based dyes.

The flora of India should be scanned for potential dye yielding plants. The *adivasi* communities are a mine of information on the availability and use of vegetable and mineral dyes. *Adivasi* areas should be developed as sources of high quality natural dyestuff for the domestic textile sector and for export. Using vegetable dyes is a highly labor-intensive, low technology process and therefore ideally suited to

generating employment in tribal and rural areas, among the very people that have the skills and knowledge in this field.

Continuing with the environmental argument and our competitive advantage, another area of application is agriculture. India has a rich history of sustainable technologies in agriculture, ranging from pest management to increasing soil nutrition. With concern for the environment growing with the excessive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides and the subsequent degradation of soil and water, a strong case can be made for substituting chemical inputs with more sustainable biological alternatives.

These are already around but not promoted. Biofertilisers and biopesticides are natural, microbe, plant or animal based products that are known to agricultural communities in developing countries. The adivasi communities in India know the pesticidal properties of several plants and use them in their agriculture. We should get our act together on this front too and argue for a phase out of agro-chemical use from the international trade in agricultural produce, especially food. Biopesticides alone can emerge as an export earner for India, as the WR Grace patent on a *Neem* based pesticide would indicate.

Related to agriculture, I can think of another opportunity to turn the tables on negative globalisation. At the moment we are at the receiving end of the standards for agro-chemical residues that is enforced through the Agreement on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Standards (SPS) in the WTO. We should get involved in the standard setting exercise in the SPS (we should do that any way) and ask for phasing out and bans on many categories of agro-chemicals that we are not using. Let me explain. The high intensity agriculture of countries like the US, Canada, EU uses far more chemical inputs than we do. Two can play the game of protectionism. Let India ask for reductions in these chemicals.

Another field is that of health care. It is clear to anyone who will think about it, that India's health care needs cannot be met by conventional, allopathic systems of medicine because these are too expensive and too slow. Rather like China, which used the globalisation process to introduce internal reforms, here is an opportunity for India to do something similar. The patents on medicines are likely to push up drug costs further and the entry of large players will be a setback for smaller pharma companies. The situation in the health sector will worsen. This should provide a trigger to force a policy shift for basing our health care largely on the Indian Systems of Medicine instead of allopathy as it is at present. This should have been the policy right from independence but let us do it now.

Conversely, the global interest in herbal products (turn over estimated at 5 trillion US\$ by 2020), should prompt more ready responses in India than is the case at present. Here is a clear-cut opportunity of entering the large herbal product arena and becoming an important player. Trade in herbal products can provide an economic opportunity for the local communities whose indigenous knowledge is the basis for the herbal products industry. At the end of the day however, opportunities translate into advantages and revenue only when they are determinedly backed by aggressive, proactive policy and confident negotiations in the international arena.

Both these are still question marks in the Indian context and that is the worrying aspect.