CULTURE HOMOGENIZATION:
THE PARADOX OF GLOBALISATION

By Ankita Agrawal,

MA Housing & Urbanism
Course- Cities in Transnational World
Globalization has assumed monstrous proportions in the purview of trade, commerce and communication. Where it assumes though the “role of a monster” is in trampling the diversity of cultures of places that it conquers. The phenomenon of globalization in several ways has lead to, either by force or by popularity, a homogenization of culture across nations- covering the regions it affects with a singular blanket of prominent western culture. The transforming force here, is most often not direct, but robed – as economic, urban, culinary, sartorial, or any other form of stimulant- that shakes the foundation of long established existence of people, and completely changes their life and identity- for better or for worse.

Paradoxically, globalization itself faces a large threat from this homogenization of culture- its own seed may one day grow up to uproot its very existence! My purpose here is to focus on the irony of this standardization of culture, presenting a dialectic that rationalizes and establishes such phenomenon, talks of its repercussions, and then elaborates its incongruity with the very basic requirement of globalization. As many factors influence this change in culture- people going to different countries to work, the capitalist marketing, food and clothing, TV, brands’ siege, etc; my focus here is on the role of buildings and urban projects, that architects and developers from developing countries pick-up from their western counterparts, to symbolize advancement. It is important to note here that that this process is universal, i.e. it applies to all nations, but is more magnified in case of advancing nations, that are jumping to accept this image of westernization, which they believe is the same as development. So, I concentrate on these developing nations and consider cases from India. The place of context is a city, which is at the center of globalization, and faces maximum upheavals of “development”. As Malcolm Miles proclaims ‘...cities are seen today not simply as accumulations of buildings and spaces but as sites of occupation where processes of identity and culture formation occur. These processes lend meaning to built forms and social environments while being at the same time conditioned by them.’

**Culture Homogenization and Its Ill Effects**

Culture affects all aspects of our existence. On a very common scale, it has strong underpinnings in the customs and rituals of our religions, which dictate how we should behave and live. Apart from the historically developed aspects, culture also renders to us our collective social beliefs, thoughts about what we like and dislike, our characters, our work style, our ethics, vices and attitudes, how we dress, eat and laugh, even how and whom we marry! It forms and is the basis of all our identity; which in collective form markedly constitutes our national identity. It comprises of the attitudes we develop over generations, but also of those we evolve with our learning, education and intellectual skills. There are material manifestations of culture also. We see its influence on our dress sense, our food and even our buildings- our temples, monuments, museums and public spaces. It bears impact on every aspect of our existence.

Culture is rooted in the place and geography of our existence. Harvey aptly records Heidegger’s views, “Place” he says “is the locale of the truth of Being.” Traditionally, culture has differed from region to region, even within a country! So, the culture of China has differed from that of Pakistan which has differed from that of India. Even within India, we have found a very rich diversity of culture as we moved from north to south of the country. It
has been this difference that gave us a sense of our nation, and has made this world an interesting, stable place. However, this eclectic diversity is under threat of homogenization due to the advent of globalization. The culture of west particularly of America, has emerged as the winner. This new homogenized culture does not adopt from several cultures, rather establishes the western culture as supreme single power, together with its ills and vices, and flattens the diversity of other nations, especially of the developing ones. Ironically, for most of the world, it is this Americanization or modernization that is revered as the notion of “development”.

This homogenization of culture makes us ponder over the reasons behind such phenomenon. Of course, the culture has history as its main foundation. Since, the present is also a history in the making, culture is bound to be influenced by the happenings of the present – such as globalization. Adaptability is an intrinsic nature of culture. Also, it is interesting to note that while many cultures may be receptive to change, several others may be very rigid and conservative, and can totally repel any stimulus for transformation.

However, any change is impossible without the consent of its subjects. Similarly, any alteration of culture can only happen when the population practicing it offers its support. I believe, there are four varieties of people who assist such homogenization of culture. Firstly, there is the “influenced” group, which has already been to west, and is well acquainted with the western culture and the different lifestyle it offers. Such person may become so used to it, that it is then a matter of convenience or need for him to have such west-inspired urban structures in his vicinity. Typically, this is a group that scorns at or shows less respect towards traditional culture. Second is the ‘experimental’ group which is willing to give anything new a try. This group welcomes any opportunity to test change, accepts what it likes or else moves on. The other is the “experiential” group that wants to enjoy the same experience as its peer group, and accepts change only in an effort to belong to the “smart set”. This is the group that will display maximum scorn towards the traditional culture and seem over excited to be a part of the western paradigm. Though in its heart, it may still feel more comfortable with its own roots. Very often you will hear a person of this experiential group proclaim that “visiting museums is an activity for only the old and boring.” Lastly, there are the “adaptive” people who just absorb silently what is offered to them. Here, it is also important to stress that the western culture has come to be so widely accepted majorly because of the liberty and independence it offers on various levels. So, it has come to be accepted without much resistance by especially the youth of the developing nations.

In the context of built environment, the developers and reckless designers of the developing nations imitate building concepts from their western counterparts, and apply it to their countries, without understanding the logic behind such development, and with little or no customization to the local context! Their motives are only profit driven, and the social, cultural and also the environmental aspects of design are completely ignored. They are aided in their escapades by the international capitalists whose economic objectives bear fruition- this homogenization gives them more consumers for their goods, thereby increasing their margins. These new “west-inspired” built forms begin to act as social triggers that completely transform the way people behave. Such cultural stimulants bring about large change in people’s lifestyle and attitude towards life and work- and leads to homogenization of culture.

The burgeoning Mall Clusters are indeed the most conspicuous example of such urban social- triggers. Strangely, it is not the case of a solitary mall coming up here or there, but in India, they cluster together, forming large shopping districts! Interestingly, each mall within the cluster boasts of the same up-market brands. Again, the economic forces are at play; but here, even the Government colludes with the developers since it gets to sell land at high premiums to them, and commands high revenue from their retail sales. These malls are designed entirely as per their western templates, and give no respect to the local shopping styles. In fact, in addition to the death of the local shops, they completely transform the way people carry out their shopping. The earlier culture of shopping from small near-by vendors one trusted out of long formed relationship, has given way to the trust for big brands! Also, the courts and cafeterias of these malls form the new preferred meeting places. What Peter Hall says about the Americans has now become true for Indians also:

Ankita Agrawal, MA Housing & Urbanism
In consequence, the market comes to perform many of the functions previously performed by the family; in rich high density service cities, more time is spent in restaurants, bars and other commercially managed meeting places, reducing the significance of the private home.

The impact of such Mall mania on public culture is very indelible. The simple hard-working people of yore have now become fashion crazy, harbor jealousy, and rivalry, which begins with fashion rivalry, but transmits to their general demeanor. In a bid to belong to the “smart set” that can sustain the expenses of the mall-life, the youth are increasingly resorting to lies in a bid to swindle money from their parents. Many simply use the plastic card and amass large debts; though the ones with a higher conscience join part-time jobs, particularly in call centers, to fund such lifestyle. Where earlier, most time was spent in focusing on studies and ensuring a stable future ahead, the impressionable of the country now squander it in directionless jobs or pastimes! The old, who mostly have not been able to adapt to this massive urban change, find themselves excluded from it all.

The influence of western design is also prominently visible in the upcoming housing development colonies. Traditionally, Indians lived in large, several-roomed independent houses that could accommodate an entire joint-family, comprising all people of the 4 generations, often even 25 or more! Again, the apartments never exceeded 4 storeys. However, the new developers are now offering tall multi-storied buildings with small flats for accommodation. This has not been possible earlier, but the state governments have modified the rules, again at the behest of developers who want to maximize margins from same size of plot. These flats are typically accessed by lifts or long narrow double-loaded corridors. These high-rise structures are typically clustered around a club-house, with its open swimming pool forming the focal point which most houses overlook. Not long back, the pools would be hidden from all possible view to provide complete privacy. But the general lack of privacy in such closely built tall buildings has now made the residents accustomed to it. They have now developed a lack of concern about what others think and see. Additionally, the family ties are suffering atrophy, with nuclear families or even single households becoming the norm. This is progressing towards a culture of individualism- each person just thinking about his own self.

The work life environment also doesn’t remain untouched by globalization. In fact, the urban components where globalization thrives are the SEZs and Software parks. In most cases, these economic havens are located outside the main cities, giving rise to new developments at the margin. Again, the youngsters employed in them have to either leave their parents and family to live close to work-place, or they have to travel for long distances for work. Apart from creating huge traffic problems, this long daily travel produces chronic stress and irritability in these workers. Also, it ruptures their family ties. The availability of high paying jobs located in such economic enclaves brings economic independence with a huge shift in family culture. As Peter Hall aptly says, “The strongest factor in social change, in most countries and most time periods, is economic change.” This new found economic liberty has made the people more individualistic and materialistic than ever before. The feeling of upmanship and animosity towards those who are doing better has become very common. A nation which apotheosized altruism as “paropkaar sarvopari” is now marked with individualism! With the spreading arms of such attitude, it has taken over the general sentiments also. Many now lack any affinity towards history and culture, and often regard traditional customs and behaviors with disrespect. Paradoxically, this cultural transformation diminishes the competitive advantage of these nations.
Globalization thrives on diversity - in fact it requires diversity as a necessary condition to enhance choice for the multi-national capital to move to locations offering better advantages. Competitive advantage and creativity are the two main pillars of globalization. Cultural diversity plays a large part in reinforcing the strength of these pillars. The destruction of diversity will reduce these two strengths to such miniscule levels, that the finance will tend to shift lesser, thereby discouraging more globalization. The globalization is giving rise to an effect that will curb its own growth and progress!

Competitive advantage of cities plays a crucial role in attracting global capital. Every day, cities are working hard to outpace others, and emerge as most attractive areas for investment. As Peter Hall says, “that cities have to run in order to keep still.” While other factors like cost factors, relaxed regulations etc can be easily over taken by other cities, the one factor here that offers more intrinsic advantage, and hence better resilience, is the worker skills and ideas, developed over time as per the culture of the place. The Global capital tends to delegate work according to the ideas and skills of the work- force offered by these different regions. So, a manufacturing job may go to a hard-working Chinese; while the software- building job will land into the kitty of an appropriately skilled Indian. These attitudes and values are rooted in the culture of a place, and with homogenization, this valuable competitive advantage of a city will dwindle.

Additionally, the ethics of a nation are based on its culture. As we had seen previously, our behaviors, our values, the sense of right and wrong, our complete attitudes are pinned in the culture of the place we belong to. These ethics and values are also reflected in our work culture, and contribute immensely to the formulation of the company’s business ethics. After all, there are people managing it and comprising it, and their collective belief in term of culture will reflect thoroughly on the company ideology. Charles Landry aptly describes it as follows:

These views about how life is managed do not happen by accident. They are response to history and circumstance. If the culture esteems taking of hard work and responsibility, the outcome will be different than if it assumes others will take decisions for you. If a culture has an ethos that assumes no one is to be trusted, collaboration and partnership is hard to achieve and bureaucracy likely to be extensive; by contrast where trust is high, regulation tends to have a lighter touch.

The collective views and behaviors of workforce affect the company performance largely – if its workforce is more individualistic in nature, it will be extremely challenging for the company to get any team work done! If its employees harbor jealousy and rivalry, they will not help others, and not work towards the common goal of the company. Good employee base is the backbone of a successful company.

Cultural Diversity also contributes enormously to the creativity of a city. The scope of creativity here is not confined to just the arts and media industries; creativity today is the ability to think differently and intelligently to come up with innovative ideas that become “products and services.” People with diverse cultures- different thoughts and behaviors bring more diverse ideas and skills to a single platform. This helps in innovation and imagination, thereby creativity of the company. Also, diverse people work better as a team. Especially in case of crisis, better decisions can be reached by thinking about the issue differently. The global capital feeds on this diversity to a large extent. Here again, standardization of culture removes these benefits of having diverse workforce. Additionally, as we saw previously, with dying family cultures and increased stress due to this homogenization, right environment that is conducive to creativity is not established. We need to nurture this diversity and remember that in future, this diversity may make us stronger in globalization.
**Solutions to the dilemma**

In the wake of the phenomenon of homogenization of culture, the challenges that lie ahead of urbanists require manifold solution. Firstly, we need to understand how culture affects urban design of the area and why, we as urbanists should understand the intrinsic culture of the place in context. Then we need to design with sensitivity and responsibility towards the same, such that we are able to preserve the inherent local culture, and yet promote good effects of development. In this effort, we face several challenges that need to be overcome.

Culture bears impact on all aspects of our lives- the built environment is not spared from its effects either. I agree entirely with Charles Landry’s\(^4\) views:

> Our culture shapes how we create and make our places- from the physical level – from the design of street furniture, to icon buildings- to how we feel about ourselves and the place. So, the scope, possibilities, style and tenor of social and economic development in a city is culturally determined.

The culture is seen in the physical form the spaces take- our customs and praying styles impact our religious places; our concepts of domesticity manifests in our habitats, from the windows to size and number of rooms; our streets, our market places, even our industries and agricultural fields bear strong marks of the culture of the place. Culture defines the aesthetics of our buildings like their colour, quality and texture etc. But, more importantly, culture reflects in their designs, forms and layouts. For instance, even in contemporary Mumbai households, it is common to find a separate toilet and a separate bathroom, unlike the combined toilet-bath format of west- as the first is considered as the “dirty” place, while the latter is the place for purification. The accommodations which are built as per the tenets of “Vaastu”, the ancient science of harmonious building, are also increasingly popular with Indians. Even on urban scale, Mumbai city is full of mixed use development, having retail shops on ground level with residential accommodation above them. This kind of development has evolved because the customers on the residential levels want to be able to buy their daily needs within walking distance, and even the shopkeepers prefer to stay in the residential quarter right above their commercial establishment!

As urbanists, it is vital for us to gain a “cultural literacy”\(^4\) of the place. Charles Landry uses this term to emphasize that we need to inculcate skills that help us to understand and evaluate the local culture so that we can discern what is “meaningful and significant” for the people there. Cultural Literacy also helps us to identify the historical rationale behind existing urbanism, the way economic and social structure of the city works, and what the city demands to ensure its future prosperity.

Great onus lies on urbanists to ensure the future development of the city in context of globalization by preserving its intrinsic diversity, which is extremely vital to maintain and nurture its competitive advantage and creativity. However, we face a big challenge in how to adopt the good aspects of modernization like latest transportation systems, construction techniques etc, such that the city advances and progresses; yet it maintains its inherent cultural ideologies, such that the local culture is preserved. In the name of preservation, we cannot go back to our historical town forms; rather, we need to incorporate in the new those cultural aspects that maintain the behaviors and attitudes of the populace.

There is a new tendency we need to be careful of – that of using culture as a part of symbolic economy. Many a state are making iconic museums and art centers, like the Guggenheim Museum in Barcelona, as a city marketing strategy in a bid to attract tourism, market themselves as creative hubs and thereby attract global investment. However, our purpose is deeper than that. Apart from preserving our arts and its material manifestations, we need genuine culture preservation that keeps our desirable values and ethics intact. This will

---

*Ankita Agrawal, MA Housing & Urbanism*
help to ensure long term sustainable development. Additionally, we face the challenge of making the migrants feel at home, so that they do not feel excluded.

Singapore can be considered as the only nation which has exhibited genuine cultural preservation on urban scale- though it started with iconic building construction in 1985s, soon realizing the low success of such scheme, the nation began Renaissance Project, which helped people preserve intrinsic values of their culture. With this preservation, the nation was also able to establish all round development.

Great onus lies on urbanists to ensure the future development of the city in context of globalization by preserving its intrinsic diversity, which is extremely vital to maintain and nurture its competitive advantage and creativity. However, we face a big challenge in how to adopt the good aspects of modernization like latest transportation systems, construction techniques etc, such that the city advances and progresses; yet it maintains its inherent cultural ideologies, such that the local culture is preserved. In the name of preservation, we cannot go back to our historical town forms; rather, we need to incorporate in the new those cultural aspects that maintain the behaviors and attitudes of the populace. Tough as it is, we need to develop the sense of keeping the desirable, and nullifying the deleterious influences. Landry\textsuperscript{9} words it aptly,

\begin{quote}
“Go with the grain of local cultures and their distinctiveness, yet be open to outside influences. Balance local and global.”
\end{quote}

References:

4. Landry, Charles,(2006) p.246 \textit{The Art of City Making}
7. Landry, Charles,(2006) p.247 \textit{The Art of City Making}

Bibliography-

• Harvey, David (1991), p.13, ‘From Space to Place and Back Again: Reflections on the Conditions of Postmodernity’, Centre for Social Theory and Comparative History & School of Architecture and Urban Planning

