

Globalization and Defunct Democracy in Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract

The paper examines how Arvind Adiga in The White Tiger brings forth the challenges of democracy as a judicious system of governance in the era of globalization. Charting an utterly dark immoral journey of the protagonist from stark poverty to prosperity, Adiga exposes the paralyzed democratic governance in its failure to guarantee fair distribution of wealth and resources. With a light-hearted tone, Adiga pleads for 21st century democracy that can outsmart the detrimental effects that globalization has instigated. The paper primarily employs close reading of the text for its primary data bringing scholars and thinkers on democracy and globalization with critics on Adiga and the text in question as secondary data.

Key Words: globalization, paralyzed democratic system, liberal economy, judicious distribution of wealth and resources, accountable system of governance

Introduction

The paper explores how globalization has shaken the democratic ideals in Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. Despite being an engine of growth, technical advancement, raising productivity, enlarging employment and bringing about poverty reduction along with modernization, globalization in India has deepened democratic defects by undermining democratic capacities of governments, made the institutions of governance less accountable to general public, and emphasized only the procedural aspects of democracy rather than its substantive aspect. Adiga has a strong conviction on democracy as a system, and argues that 21st century democracy should address the challenges posed by the cultural forces of liberal economy and globalization. With its tale of a completely debased Indian hero's journey of success from stark poverty to prosperity with blooming globalization in its backdrop, the novel not only attacks democratic political establishment, but also calls it to be more responsible, substantial, open, and truly democratic. In this context, the paper asserts Adiga has been pleading for a truly democratic system of governance which ensures not only democracy, freedom, and liberal economy, but social justice and judicious distribution of wealth and resources, and under which even the poor and the backward feel free to explore their potential and talent.

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Received on Oct. 23, 2024

Accepted on Jan. 19, 2025

Democracy in Globalized India

With the root of the late 19th century worldwide network of interregional reproduction of power, the history of globalization starts from the early decades of the second half of the 20th century after the breakdown of the Bretton Woods System (1944), the postwar order which was to promote growth by managing exchange rates and trade flows between states through implementing domestic policies. It has close attachment with neoliberalism that speaks of free flow of goods and services across regions or states. Though it has now a wide range of implications in different spheres of life, most of its literature has remained dependent on some economic register. Pointing out the problematic in mapping a unified and comprehensive definition of the globalization theory, Vidya S.A. Kumar in “A Critical Methodology of Globalization: Politics of the 21st Century?” views “globalization theory is a contestable concept, promoting globalization theorists to proffer divergent definitions of the term, each with different strategic implications” (110). However, scholars have attempted to define it with some strategic implications of their own. In the concluding section of “Globalization and Its History,” Michael Lang writes,

Globality describes the interregional reproduction of power that became network worldwide in the late nineteenth century. It denotes the interrelation of social systems on a global scale. It is not a single social organization, and locality is not the hybrid of general condition. Globality has no goal, and it entails no normative implications for governance. (929)

Lang’s definition implicates the interdisciplinary coverage of globalization in present day discourse. Hence it basically signifies a process of internationalization and liberalization through which the interrelation of social systems occurs on a global scale, and accordingly locality gets influenced by the phenomena outside a nation or a territory in terms of flows of technology, of workers, of capital, of trade, or of investment etc.

In India, globalization has had multi-dimensional influences on many sectors. Ruddar Datt “From Unfair to Fair Globalization: Focus on India” has extensively discussed the positive and negative effects of it on sectors such as trade, export, import, foreign investment flows, employment, labour, poverty, balanced regional development, and social sector. He calls for a change in the course of globalization from unfairness to fairness as it is supposed to foster human well-being, accelerate economic growth, reduce poverty, minimize inequalities and promote socio-economic security within the country. Despite this, it has had reverse effects on different sectors in Indian scenario. He writes, “the employment situation in India has worsened in the era of globalization---of 2.04 percent per year during 1983-94 declined to a low level of 0.98 percent per year during the period 1994-2000” (68). Though the era of globalization has witnessed a decline of poverty “from 36.0 percent in 1993-94

to 26.1 percent in 1990-00”, “a systematic process of exploitation of tribal communities has been unleashed, for which the reform process provides legitimacy” (72).

Democracy is a participatory, consultative, transparent, and publicly accountable system of governance which entails free and fair elections to choose the holders of power at regular interval. According to Beetham and Boye, it is guided by the twin principles of “popular control over collective decision-making” and “equality of rights in the exercise of that control” (qtd. in U.K. Jha’s “Democratic Defects in a Globalizing World: The Way Out”, 534). Among others, rule of law, legal guarantee to civil and political rights, competitive party system are the main guiding principles of democracy. Further, democracy needs to be accountable to public welfare, this means that it should address certain level of socioeconomic equality to ensure actual equal opportunities in the exercise of citizenship rights; otherwise, it fails to retain the spirit of good governance which all kinds of governance including democratic system ought to take pride over.

However, the process of globalization is undermining the democratic capacities of national governments in many ways. With neo-liberal heart, it advocates of a borderless world with interactive free markets to maximize the surplus value of capitalist production. With all-influencing market mechanism, globalization weakens regulatory power of nation-states to control the economic activity. This gradually makes the nation-states turn their blind eye to being accountable to public welfare. U.K. Jha observes,

Under the impact of the process of globalization, however, the ‘state-centric’ model of democracy has given a way to a multilayered framework in which authority is diffused across substate, state, supranational, and non-state agencies. As a result, many of the decisions affecting the lives of the people are taken away by those who are not their representatives and are not really accountable to them. (531)

To get rid of all these weakening forces that freeze democracy from being accountable, Jha suggests a remedy of “a multilayered framework” to counter “hegemonic policies of the institutions and representing global economic and political power” (537). However, there are critics who, to borrow Michael Goodhart, “recognize the connection between states and democracy as problematic; that globalization’s effects on democracy are characterized in terms of deficits and disjunctures implies a spatial incompatibility between global politics (broadly understood) and state-based democracy” (542). Unlike Jha, he puts forward a balanced view regarding globalization’s effects on democracy. In “Democracy, Globalization, and the Problem of the State,” he thinks the issue is much deeper and more complex; therefore, only after “careful consideration” of the present state of confusion, “we find the connection between sovereignty and democracy beneficial or detrimental to the realization of basic democratic legitimacy, separable or inseparable from its institutional configuration, remains to be seen” (546). In Goodhart’s line of thought, Kathleen C. Schwartzman “examines numerous renderings of the linkage between globalization and

democratization, including favorable climate for democracy, global economic growth, global crises, foreign intervention, hegemonic shifts, and world-system contraction” (159) after 1970s and afterwards transitions in the world including the Eastern Europe in “Globalization and Democracy,” (179) and finds that the insights “domestic political structures become part of the evolving transnational fabric of economic relations” very useful to define the wave of democratization during the last few decades of the twenty-first century.

The discussion above shows that the 21st century democracy should incorporate the agenda of bringing about economic growth, raising productivity, enlarging employment opportunities, poverty reduction through modernization and technical advancement in this borderless state of the world of globalization. It has to redefine its traditional state-centric idea to address the new challenges of empowered global capital and transnationalism if it wants to run smoothly in the days to come.

Text in Context: Defunct Democracy in *The White Tiger*

Balram’s very first delineation of Laxamangarh evidences the dominant control of globalization in the first-decade-21st-century Indian governance. He tells the Chinese Premier that the village is a “typical Indian village paradise, adequately supplied with electricity, running water, and working telephones.” He adds, “the children” are “raised on a nutritious diet of meat, eggs, vegetables, and lentils, --- when examined with tape measure and scales, to match up to the minimum height and weight standards set by the United Nations and other organizations whose treaties” the Indian government has “signed and whose forums be so regularly and pompously attends” (19). But the irony of his portrayal becomes obvious immediately after what he says about all these facilities and services of average modern life standards; “Electricity poles –defunct. / Water tap –broken. / Children –too lean and short for their age” (19-20). As the study maintains globalization as a force of internalization and modernization, it has multi-faceted influences on human behavior in society. In the description, these influences are represented by technological advancement, economic activities such as investment, flow of capital etc., and changing behavioral pattern of life due to greater consciousness of people on health, hygiene, or use of facilities. Similarly, defunct infrastructures in Balram’s portrayal symbolize the paralyzed Indian democracy to be a democracy of substance due to its failure to address the plight of the unprivileged population as shown in the previous sub-section. The glimpses of modernization and technological advancement are due to the policy of rulers with liberal democratic heart that dictates them “so regularly and pompously” to participate in the international forums and to follow the terms of contracts of “the various conglomerations of international institutions – state bureaucracies, transnational corporations, G-8 (or G-20, or G-whatever), the World Bank, IMF, the media moguls, Wall Street brokers, and assorted

CEOs –” that Vincent Walsh bitterly calls “the seductive kidnapper, Paris, in the scheme of the endangered metropolis of ancient Troy” “as a convenient metaphor for our globalized contemporary world” (34).

On the other hand, the glimpses of globalization exist in greater degree and intensity in Adiga’s “an India of Light” (14). Balram’s present city of dwelling, Bangalore, as a city of scientific innovations and technological advancement, is a dominant symbol in this context. Being a “Living in the world’s center of technology and outsourcing, Electronics City” (3) where “thousands and thousands of” “entrepreneurs” “in the field of technology” “have set up all these outsourcing companies that virtually run America now” (4) and where “men and women” “live like the animals in a forest---sleep in the-day and then work all night, until two, three, four, four o’clock” (298), Bangalore stands for the metaphor of modernization and internalization. Despite Balram’s morally deprived story of success and the West-hold of the Indian economic activities that that the quote implicate, the lines hint at the powerful force and intensity of globalization depicting the city as a transit to the world saturated with modern technology and foreign investment flow of capital in outsourcing business, a potential for a future prosperous nation where many entrepreneurs like Balram have testimonies of their success stories from stark poverty and a primary-level-school-drop-out to “an entrepreneur” and “A Thinking Man” (3), and where people have ample opportunities for employment.

In addition to Bangalore’s configuration mainly for technological advancement, Adiga’s Delhi signifies modernization and the flow of the capital which are other important consequences of the of globalization. A site of “an India of Light” in the novel. Though Indians generally think of Delhi as “the capital of our glorious nation,” “the sit of Parliament, of the president, of all ministers and prime ministers,” “the pride of our civic planning” and “the showcase of the republic, Balram finds it “a crazy city” (118) in his first driving experience with his masters there. In the fourth night mail, he seems to have completely lost in the midst of confusing names and make-up net of streets and Americanized way of life of the rich. He exclaims,

See, the rich people live in big housing colonies like Defence Colony or Greater Kailash or Vasant Kunj, and inside their colonies the houses have numbers and letters, but this numbering and lettering system follows no system of logic. For instance, in the English alphabet, A is next to B, which everyone knows, even people like me who don’t know English. But in a colony one house is called A 231, and then the next is F 378. So one time Pinky Madam wanted me to take her to Greater Kailash E 231, I tracked down the houses to E 200, and just when I thought we were almost there, E Block Vanished completely. The next house was S something. (118-19)

The passage shows the failure of the people from the Darkness Like Balram in navigating the intricacies of numbering and lettering involved in urban residential setting of post-modern lifestyle. He further talks of the confusion even for urban dwellers including “masters or servants” (119). When a stranger asks a person the way to Nikolai Copernicus Marg, even “a man who lived on” the same street “his whole life” will say “*Hahn?*” (119) to express his uncertainty. With the newness in the infrastructures of streets and houses, Balram points out the changing scenario of Indian urban lifestyle. The rich people have adopted Western cultural practices in their ways of life like eating or drinking and living. He asks,

Which geniuses were responsible for making F Block come after A Block and House Number 69 come after House Number 12? Who was so busy partying and drinking English liquor and taking their Pomeranian dogs for walks and shampoos that they gave the roads names that no one could remember? (120)

The passage shows a stark contrast to the lifestyle of the Darkness where people are extremely careful to look after their “fat buffalo” and take food only after “they fed the buffalo” (26). Being used to the way of living in the village, Balram is shocked seeing people providing similar care to their dogs by taking them for walks and shampooing them. Two quotes above reveal the changing scenario of urban living in their adoption of Western lifestyle due to the influences of modernization and internalization.

Similarly, Balram’s make-up of Delhi also evidences the increment in economic activities and the pace of living. In the midst of physical infrastructures like huge bridges, overpasses, busy streets linked to “grassy circles” one after another, drivers “keep getting lost and lost” (119). There are big buildings and shining shopping malls, grand star hotels serving “kebabs of chickens, mutton and beef in their restaurants” (200), and big cinema halls with “plenty of places to drink beer, dance, pick up girls--- a small bit of America in India” (203). Once Balram enters into a mall wearing “black shoes and a T-shirt ---mostly white with just one English word on it” (151) just to outwit the guards from preventing him, and experiences the glamour of trade and commerce inside the Mall. He describes his experience,

I was conscious of a perfume in the air, of golden light, of cool air-conditioned air, of people in T-shirts, and jeans who were eying me strangely. I saw lift going up and down that seemed made of pure golden glass. I saw shops with walls of glass, and huge photos of handsome European man and women hanging on each wall. (152).

Being Delhi’s newly emerging section with shopping malls and American corporations, Adiga’s selection of Guragaon for Mr. Ashok’s residence in Delhi is meaningful. One evening outside a mall in Guragaon, Balram reflects on all-night going-on construction work, “big lights shine down from towers, and dust rises from pits, scaffolding is being erected, men

and animals, both shaken from their sleep and bleary and insomniac, go around and around carrying concrete rubble or bricks” (192). As a nearby city from the capital witnessing rapid urbanization, Guragaon is a leading financial and industrial hub in India. Looking at the view from the balcony of the thirteenth floor of Ashok’s temporary residential apartment, Balram sees, “the lights were shining from Guragaon’s malls, even in broad daylight. A new mall had opened in the past week. Another one was under construction” (243). As the center of Adiga’s “the Light” with all these on-going constructions of infrastructure and other economic activities, Adiga’s portrayal of Delhi evidences the blooming globalization in India.

Now the question arises whether the contemporary Indian Governance is well-equipped to minimize financial instability and potential increment in inequality and marginalization of the unprivileged by establishing active regulatory and supervising bodies and by creating “growth in cross-border capital movements and internationally active financial institutions” (328), as pointed out by Nisar-ul-Haq. In the light of the issues raised by Nisar-ul-Haq, subsequent paragraphs explore Adiga’s replication of malfunctioning contemporary Indian democracy.

Throughout Balram’s narrative, Adiga relentlessly reveals the pervasiveness of bad governance in almost all of India’s institutions: schools, hospitals, police, elections, industries and every administrative sector. Practices such as bribery and fraud are entirely commonplace. Even the sectors like education and public health do not remain unaffected in this regard. Unveiling the corruption endemic to the Indian education system, Balram describes how his school teacher, Mr. Krishna steals the government money allocated for school lunches and uniforms.

There was supposed to be free food at my school –a government programme gave every boy there *rotis*, yellow *daal*, and pickles at lunchtime. But we never ever saw *rotis*, or yellow *daal*, or pickles, and everyone knew why: the school teacher had stolen our lunch money.--- Once, a truck came into the school with uniforms that the government had sent for us; we never saw them, but a week later they turned up for sale in the neighboring village. (33)

Mr. Krishna’s stealing of school fund is not a sole case in Laxamangarh alone, but this happens all over the “paradise” (32), the Darkness. All this gets approved when “a man wearing the finest suit” (33) pays a surprise inspection to the school. Seeing the classrooms without dusters and chairs and the students without uniforms, the inspector just scolds the teacher for stealing the school fund, and seems satisfied. Instead of bothering to take any further step for the improvement of the school, he promises to recommend Balram for scholarship to go to “a real school somewhere far away” for “a real education” (35) because he finds Balram “an intelligent, honest, vivacious fellow” among others. This makes Adiga bitterly say, “if the Indian village is a paradise, then the school is a paradise within a

paradise” (320). Similarly, the episode of Balram’s father death from tuberculosis reveals pervasiveness of corruption in public health. Despite “three different foundation stones for a hospital, laid by three different politicians before three different elections” in Laxmangarh, Balram and his brother Kishan have to take their father Vikram to a government hospital across the river, it means, a part of an India of the Light. But when they reach the hospital with the bad smell of goat faeces and broken windows, the ward boy informs them that “a doctor might come in the evening” (48) after receiving ten rupees’ bribe from them. They wait for the doctor sitting on newspapers with other patients. Because of a corrupt scheme of politicians like “the Great Socialist” from the day of their appointment there, doctors are allowed to work at the private hospitals in the state capital to make extra money and rarely visit the government hospitals. Balram relates an old Muslim visitor’s testimony as:

‘Now, imagine that I’m a doctor. I beg and borrow the money and give it to the Great Socialist, while touching his feet. He gives me the job. I take an oath to God and the constitution of India and then I put my boots up on my desk in the state capital.’ He raised his feet onto an imaginary table. ‘Next, I call all the junior government doctors, whom I’m supposed to supervise, into my office. I take out my big government ledger. I shout it, “Dr. Ram Pandey”’

He pointed a finger at me; I assumed my role in the play.

I saluted him. ‘Yes, sir!’

He held out his palm to me

‘Now, you – Dr. Ram Pandey –will kindly put one-third of your salary in my palm. Good boy. In return, I do this.’ (49-50)

The tale reveals the pervasiveness of corruption in the entire mechanism of contemporary Indian democracy including the levels like policy-making, supervising and implementing.

Malfunctioning democracy in education and public health sectors recurs in business sector as well. Despite the flow of capital in different economic activities in the contemporary India, the regulating and supervising governmental bodies are largely corrupt and remain inoperative or negligent to ensure the democracy to be accountable for the betterment and welfare of the unprivileged. These bodies take no trouble to make business firms or employers realize their social responsibility. Besides the increment in the instances of exploitation of the workers in private firms and companies as discussed in the first part above, businessmen and executives of private companies manipulate laws of the nation for their benefit. They easily influence policy makers like politicians and civil servants at the implementation level like the police or tax officers through bribery. In the Fourth Night correspondence on the way to home at Buckingham B Block in Delhi from the President’s House, Mr. Ashok cannot hide his discontent over their paying of “half a million rupees in a

bribe” to a minister to settle their business matters. Driving past Mahatma Gandhi’s statue, Mr. Ashok asks his brother Mukesh,

‘We’re driving past Gandhi, after just having given a bribe to a minister. It’s a *fucking joke*, isn’t it.’

‘you sound like your wife now,’ the Mongoose said. ‘I don’t like swearing –it’s not part of our traditions here.’

But Mr. Ashok was too red in the face to keep quiet.

‘It is a *fucking joke* – our political system –and I’ll keep saying it as long as I like. (136-37)

As an American University graduate, Mr. Ashok can examine the Indian democratic practice in the wider perspective of democratic practices in other countries; therefore, he sees the practical fallibility which his brother Mukesh takes as self-evident. To further prove how the rich influence the Indian administrators and civil servants to start up and settle their business in India, there is another typical example in the last chapter. To learn what business to start up with the money he has snatched by killing his master Mr. Ashok, Balram decides to listen to the “Bangalore’s voice” (297). Eavesdropping on street conversations, he determines that he should get involved in the outsourcing business. Learning that call centers workers trade shifts end at 3 a.m., which has made transportation difficult and dangerous, he decides to start a taxi service to these workers to home. Unfortunately, when he offers his driving services to the outsourcing companies, he learns that they have already hired other taxi companies for their workers. Using a lesson, he has learned during his time in Delhi, Balram then bribes the police to shut down the other taxi services by raiding their offices and penalizing them for hiring unlicensed drivers. As a result, the outsourcing companies are compelled to hire his company –White Tiger Drivers –for their workers. The irony is that Indian democratic practice cannot even stop a person like Balram, for whom the police department has issued an urgent warrant order of arrest with a “WANTED poster” (300) all over the country from bribing a police officer for establishing his business. He visits the police office with “the red bag” full of bribe money to bribe under his own “WANTED poster” on the walls of the police office.

Conclusion

Despite being an engine of growth, technical advancement, raising productivity, enlarging employment and bringing about poverty reduction along with modern ways of life, globalization in India has intensified democratic defects by undermining democratic capacities of governments: making the institutions of governance less accountable to general public and emphasizing the procedural aspects of democracy rather than its substantive aspects. The situation of underprivileged gets worse and worse with no one to support

and social ills like unemployment, discrimination, exploitation etc. have become more frequent and more intensified in the society. Knowing his “Roster Coop” plight similar to all other unprivileged Indians with no other way-out from poverty, lack of education, unemployment, superstitions, discrimination, exploitation and other ills of society, Adiga’s protagonist Balram Haluwai manages his own release from the Darkness to the Light by hook or by crook. Being a “rarest” man in the jungle of the Darkness, he exploits all-corrupted officials, politicians and government institutions in the same way that the rich have been doing to continue their world of exploitation so far. By doing so, Balram not only manages to save himself but also utilizes the benefits of globalizing culture to achieve financial success when he escapes with money after killing his own master Mr. Ashok.

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