

# GLOBALISATION OR GOBBLE-ISATION

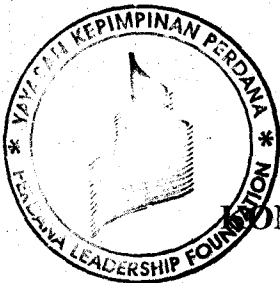
THE ARAB EXPERIENCE

Ash Narain Roy

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# GLOBALISATION OR GOBBLE-ISATION The Arab Experience

ASH NARAIN ROY



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# Preface

**G**LOBALISATION provides a fascinating field of study. However, a great deal of territory that comes under the sweep of globalisation is untouched minefield. I consider 'globalisation and the Arab world' to be one such minefield. I have three reasons for saying so. First, globalisation is a journey. But it is a journey without a compass. Second, globalisation is a highly contested word in the Arab world. It is viewed primarily as a Western project and a one-way cultural invasion. Finally, I claim no expertise on the Arab world, even though I have extensively visited this part of the world as a journalist and I have been researching on globalisation since 1997. It is therefore like cruising in the uncharted sea.

The world economy in the age of globalisation has become like a piano. A good melody can be produced only by using all the keys, not just a few. The nation-states are no longer the sole drivers of the international system. Groups of States like the European Union and international institutions like the World Trade Organisation have developed their own identities and agendas. Globalisation of the world economy is not confined to exports; it includes other factors like research, production, human resources, sourcing and capital markets. Economic globalisation has blurred, if not eliminated, boundaries between nations. Globalisation entails both opportunities and risks. There are nations that view globalisation as an opportunity for growth. There are others who fear its consequences. But at a time when globalisation has emerged as the only reigning ideology, a nation howsoever powerful or well-endowed does not seem to have an option to reject globalisation completely. The risks of increased isolationism and protectionism

are perhaps far greater.

Arab societies have become fragile. The nationalists' dream of pan-Arab unity has been shattered by internal division and Saddam Hussein's megalomania. There is a common perception that the Arabs often blame the colonizers for all their ills. Yes, they do hold the colonial masters responsible but that is not without reasons. France and Britain divided the Arab region after World War I into tiny emirates. Today, the Arab world is berated for being too tardy with the process of economic integration and for their reluctance to open up their economies. But did not the colonial powers put an end to the system which during the Ottoman empire had permitted nearly complete free trade between Anatolia and the Arab provinces of the empire?

There is a myth that Islam poses a strategic challenge to the West. Many analysts have tended to view the post-September 11 world as a face-off between an implacable, militant Islam and the pacifist, liberal Western world. It is also commonly believed that the Arabs are viscerally anti-American. Anti-Americanism is not based on hatred of modernity or American institutions; it is directed at American policy towards the Arab world. As Edward Said says, "to most people in the Islamic and Arab worlds, the official United States is synonymous with arrogant power, known for its support not only of Israel but of numerous repressive Arab regimes and its inattentiveness even to the possibility of dialogue with secular movements and people who have real grievances". Yet another myth doing the rounds now is that if the US succeeds in ousting Saddam Hussein, other Arab regimes would crumble. Similar predictions were made after the Gulf War. The doomsdayers fell on all fours.

The Arab world is facing a new defining moment. Oil is no longer a bargaining chip as it used to be in the 1970s and 1980s. The Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) has lost its leverage. In the 1970s such was its clout that its deliberations were closely monitored by the international media which accorded it a status normally reserved for superpower summits. Now the Paris based International Energy Agency has emerged as a counterpoint to the OPEC by steering the creation of strategic reserves of oil to offset sudden shortages in supply. No less a person than Sheikh

Yamani, former Saudi Oil Minister, now predicts that “thirty years from now there will be a huge amount of oil—and no buyers”. He further says that a combination of recent oil discoveries, the advance of new technology and heavy investment in exploration and production will all lead to a collapse in the price of crude oil.

The globalisation of world economy and the post 9/11 global and regional scenarios may spell the beginning of a new era in the Arab world. The September 11 attacks on the US have brought out into the open a number of problems that had been festering for decades. Time for soul-searching has now come. The Arab world has an additional problem on hand. While the population is growing by roughly 4 per cent, the Arab economies are virtually stagnating. The Islamists tend to exploit economic decline and political/institutional paralysis. The Arab regimes can either remain seated comfortably in their oasis—like cocoons or assert their rightful place in the comity of nations on their own terms.

My interest in this project was purely accidental. Mr. Khaled Hamoud Al-Razni, Director of the Kuwait Information Centre in Delhi, whom I met in a get-together the day after the release of my book *The Third World in the Age of Globalisation*, complimented me on my book focussing on Latin America and wondered whether the Arab world figured in my scheme to do a series on globalisation. On deep reflection and preliminary research I found that while a lot of debate was going on in the Arab world about the phenomenon, very few well-researched works were available in English on how the Arab world viewed globalisation.

I must acknowledge here that a book like this is not the product of a single research project. In May 1997 I attended an international media seminar in Athens on the question of Palestine organised by the U.N. Later I was sent to Cairo and Amman on UN's Fact Finding News Mission where I was able to meet and interact with several senior Egyptian, Jordanian and Palestinian officials and experts on the Middle East. In 1998 I went to Abu Dhabi to cover the Gulf Cooperation Council summit. My visit to the Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR) and long discussions with Arab scholars proved highly enlightening. I have made extensive use of *The Emirates Occasional Papers* published by the ECSSR in my book.

My visits to the US and Mexico in November 2001 only two months after 9/11 provided the important opportunity of giving a series of lectures on "The Arab World in the Age of Globalisation." I had useful discussions on my proposed book at the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington with Mr. Laith Kubba, Senior Programme Officer for the Middle East and North Africa. I wish to thank Casa de las Culturas and Libreria Mayambe at San Cristobal and University of Quintana Roo, Chetumal, Mexico, for their invitations. I am also thankful to the diplomatic missions of UAE, Qatar and Lebanon in Delhi for providing useful information and data for the book.

The past one decade or so has seen an explosion of globalisation study. There has been a geometric rise in titles on globalisation. Your favourite Internet search engine will net you thousands of items and hundreds of pages of citations. With too much information available I often wonder whether there is any danger of crowding out knowledge. The overwhelming number of publications on globalisation tends to surround us either in all their glory or gloom. The Internet of course burdens us with loads of information. But data is not necessarily knowledge and information is not necessarily wisdom.

Well-researched books on the Arab world's perspectives on globalisation are few, at least in English. A huge volume of material is, however, available on the Internet. The only difficulty with such information is that much of it lacks credibility. The home pages and web sites of Arab governments are self-adulatory. All kinds of conference and seminar papers are available, but they are often unedited and have questionable data. There is another problem. The Arab academic community finds most analyses by the Western writers as either too patronising or written from an American and Western strategic angle. The writings of Arab scholars are uncritical, often an apology of their governments and institutions. The Arabs living in the West have their own prejudices. This is, however, not to say that there are no objective books. The literature in general is scanty in English.

The present book is a modest attempt to fill this gap. My endeavour is to carefully study and analyse explanatory paradigms

to find out why the Arab world has often bucked global trends. Is it the fear of the unknown that is keeping the region aloof? Or is it because the region is caught in its own quagmire of internal conflicts and inner contradictions? No author works in a vacuum. Every work of this nature is as much a product of one's perception as a result of careful analysis of the available literature and the insights gained from the interviews and discussions with a host of people. I had extensive discussions with Arab leaders, Kuwaitis in particular, experts and diplomats so as to get to the broader picture. Their viewpoints provided me with a range of vision sometimes conflicting, sometimes complementary but critical to the understanding of the theme.

Globalisation means the growing interdependence and interconnectedness of the modern world. It is driven by technological advance. It has been a mixed bag but it can't be wished away. Globalisation is both a challenge and an opportunity. If the Arab world uses it imaginatively, globalisation can provide an opportunity to catch up with the wider world. If managed badly, it would lead to their further marginalisation. The Arab world is experiencing a momentous change. A new generation of leaders has taken over power in some countries. Some others are pushing economic reform. Democratic opening is also being attempted here and there. The book attempts to identify and understand the processes of change under way. Making an accurate prognosis about the kind of change in the foreseeable future is a hazardous exercise in the shifting sand of Arab politics. However, it can be said that the coming years will see change, maybe a radical change in some spheres, but the conservative Arab States will still be different in terms of their political system, economic development model and their worldviews.

The book is divided into five broad chapters. Chapter 1 attempts an overview of the Arabs' perspective on globalisation. Chapter 2 provides an analysis of the various dimensions of globalisation, its benefits as also its pitfalls. In Chapter 3, an attempt is made to analyse factors that account for the Arab world's ambivalence towards democracy as also its low scorecard. Chapter 4 takes a critical look at the liberalisation and privatization programmes undertaken by the various Arab regimes. The final chapter examines

Kuwait as a model for the Arab world. It also analyses the way the Arab world views globalisation.

In the course of my research and preparation for this book, I have become indebted to a large group of individuals, only a few of whom can be mentioned here. I am extremely thankful to the Kuwaiti Information Ministry for providing useful information. My visit to Kuwait and my extensive interactions with Information Ministry officials, academics and experts provided invaluable insights into the complexity of the theme. I am grateful to Dr. Mohammad E. Al-Duwaihee, Planning Minister of Kuwait, for having been generous with his time and enlightening me on a wide-range of issues pertaining to the Arab world. Thanks are also due to Mr. Basem Al-Loughani of the Information Ministry for his support to my project. My extensive interactions with the faculty and students of Kuwait University were highly rewarding. I owe a special gratitude to Dr. Masoumah S. Al-Mubarak and Dr. Lubna Alkazi of Kuwait University for their insightful comments on a wide spectrum of themes. I have also benefitted immensely from the comments of Mr. Ghanem Al-Rumaihi of the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters of Kuwait. I was overwhelmed by the kindness and willingness of all the people I met to speak out on a complex issue like globalisation.

I have also received very helpful advice and comments from Dr. George Mathew, Director, Institute of Social Sciences, and some of my colleagues. I have enjoyed the working atmosphere of the ISS and I am thankful to my colleagues and staff for making me feel comfortable. N. Sunil, P. Nandakumar, Joshy Jose and Molly Bino deserve my thanks for their prodigious efforts in typing and re-typing drafts and final manuscripts. I am equally thankful to Mr. K.P.R. Nair of the Konark Publishers for his keen interest in my book. I also thank the staff of ISS library for their willing assistance. Lastly, special thanks are due to my wife Dina and daughter Martina for their patience, tolerance and constant support and encouragement since I commenced the work. I accept entire responsibility for what has finally been written, as I do equally for all errors and omissions.

—ASH NARAIN ROY

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