

# Roots of Asia's Entangled Globality<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the regional and sub-regional specificities in the context of the overarching global and entangled modernity, and attempts to contextualize Asia's rapid economic development and modernity redefining it as entangled globality. Entangled modernity involves a multidisciplinary approach that considers not only a time orientation but also an interplay of social institutions, culture, and social conflicts. The idea of entangled modernity is particularly relevant to understand two seemingly disparate modes of social transformation in two parts of Asia: South and East Asia on the one hand and the West Asia on the other.

**Keywords:** Globalization. Modernity. Asian development.

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<sup>1</sup> An expanded version of this paper will appear as a chapter in a book on Goran Therborn

## Introduction

**M**odernization, modernity, multiple-modernities, globalization, globality and so on are concepts that have excited the imagination of writers of social transformation for long. Drawing upon the ideas of entangled modernity (Therborn, 2003; Dirlik, 2007), this paper attempts to contextualize Asia's rapid economic development and modernity redefining it as entangled globality. Three of the ten leading economies in gross national income are in Asia, which includes China as number two and Japan as number three, according to the World Bank data<sup>2</sup>. The Asian countries with large populations have posted high GDP growth rate in the recent years. China, India, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Vietnam have posted around or over 6% growth rates in the last two decades<sup>3</sup>.

East and Southeast Asian regions have seen spectacular economic development under soft authoritarian political systems that led to high growth economies, since the late 1970s. The West Asia – popularly known as the Middle East – saw spectacular economic growth in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, thanks to rising prices of fossil fuels that led to a dramatic change

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<sup>2</sup> <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://data.worldbank.org/news/release-of-world-development-indicators-2015>

in social indicators, whereas the rest of that region remains impoverished. This paper seeks to examine the regional and sub-regional specificities in the context of the overarching global and entangled modernity. In the late 1980s, East and Southeast Asian economies were undergoing rapid economic growth and social modernization defying the predictions of the economists and development experts, who labelled these countries, namely, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore, as “Asian Tigers”. While blinded by the dazzle of the “Asian Miracle”, the remarkable but gradual transformation in China and India was neglected. Now, as the world attention is riveted on India and China, significant modernizing and globalizing changes in West Asia, especially in the Arabian Gulf states remain outside the radar.

For quite some time, developments in the Peoples Republic of China were seen through the prisms of Cold War ideology, socialist growth was not recognized, let alone appreciated in a world blinded by ideological blinkers. Yet, remarkable social modernization took place in China in terms of basic literacy, health care, schooling and housing and infrastructure that paved the way for the miracle growth in the post-Mao period, especially since the Deng Xiaoping rule in the 1980s. India, too, often touted as having the so-called Hindu growth rate in the 1970s and 1980s, experienced slow but steady growth accompanied by a Green revolution in agriculture and, since the 1980s, a pro-business stance by the government (Rodrik & Subramanian, 2004). The growth was lopsided and transformation slow; a large number of graduates, as engineers and scientists, who were unable to find employment in their

own country took the route of overseas employment. This, in effect, created a potential for a subsequent back-office status of India in the 1990s and in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Indian experiment of democracy with development resulted in sluggish economic growth, yet it laid the basis of a long-term political stability.

### **The past as present**

India's entangled modernity or globality is rooted in its historical experience. In the words of Pundit Nehru, one of the founders of modern India: "Foreign influences poured in, and often influenced that [Indian] culture and were absorbed. Disruptive tendencies gave rise immediately to an attempt to find a synthesis" (Nehru, 1994, p. 62). India was an ocean where multiple streams of influences converged. "Iranians, Greeks, Parthians, Bactrians, Scythians, Huns, Turks (before Islam), early Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians; they came, made a difference and were absorbed. India, was, according to Dodwell, 'infinitely absorbent like the ocean'" (Nehru, 1994, p. 73). India's success lies in its historical trajectory of tolerance and inclusion. The Muslims ruled in a society dominated by heterodox communities. The indigenous multiculturalism, a syncretic culture was an asset on which entangled modernity was built.

India's entangled modernity was a product of its historical encounter with colonialism and the ideas of modernity, mediated through Western education, institutions and cultural encounters. Changes took place not only in the class structure and a national

consciousness; changes took place in cultures, aesthetics and ideology as well. The shift in historical studies from a nation-centered focus to a discourse of circulations, connections, convergence and differences brought out by comparative studies, as illustrated in the writings of Sunil Amrith (2013) or Andrew Sartori (2008), who provide a nuanced, albeit somewhat complex understanding of global modernity. Rather than viewing globalization as a consequence of modernization, Robertson (1992) argued that globalization can be traced to a much longer historical process. For Prasenjit Duara, “[t]he early modern period is simultaneously the period when expanding and accelerating circulations bring parts of the world closer to each other through exchange of knowledge, technologies and ideas ...” (Duara, 2015, p. 7). The idea of entangled modernity, thus, can be conceived as entangled globality. The distinction between modernity and globality, thus, remains only in the fact that while modernity is space-centric and rooted in specific geo-cultural settings, globality transcends moorings of specific geo-cultural settings, thus phrases such as “deterritorialization” and “transnational”, “multi-local” become the defining features of globality.

### **Theoretical roots**

For Arif Dirlik (2007),

The globalization of modernity needs to be comprehended not just in the trivial sense of an originary modernity reaching out and touching all, even those who are left out of its benefits...but more importantly as the

proliferation of claims on modernity. So-called traditions no longer imply a contrast with modernity, as they did in modernization discourse. Nor are they the domain of backward-looking conservatism, except in exceptional circumstances – such as the Taliban. They are invoked increasingly to establish claims to alternative modernities (but only rarely to alternatives to modernity) (Dirlik, 2007, pp. 90-91).

In tracing the historical debates over Chinese national education (*guoxue*) in the context of the global – national nexus, which began in the last decade of the Ming period, Dirlik (2011) quotes Wang Guowei, one of the protagonists of “Western” education. For Wang, “In learning there is no new and old, Chinese or Western, useless or useful” (quoted in Dirlik, 2011, p.7). Another writer of the period, Zhang Zhidong wanted: “Chinese learning for substance, Western learning for function” (quoted in Dirlik, 2011, p.7). The rhetoric of the last decade of the nineteenth century is reminiscent of the same in the last decade of the twentieth century, when Deng Xiaoping, the Paramount leader of China favored: “Democracy with Chinese characters”. P.C. Chang, one of the protagonists of modern education and a founder of Tsinghua University, who was educated at Columbia University in 1924 and championed the need of education for the modernization of China, was also a protagonist of human rights as a universal idea (Krumbein, 2015).

Entangled modernity involves a multidisciplinary approach that considers not only a time orientation, but also an interplay of social institutions, culture and social conflicts (Therborn, 2003, p.

294). This goes against the Eurocentric conceptualization of modernization. One of the underlying assumptions of classical sociologists was that modernity was a universal process and that it was only a matter of time for peoples around the world, regardless of their cultural traditions, collective norms or civilizational heritage, to become amalgamated into a modern world, embracing the universal ideals of democracy and capitalism. The march of progress and the universal victory of liberalism can be distilled from Hegel to Fukuyama. Therborn's distinction between "globality" and "universality" is useful in the conceptualization of "modernity".

Globality has two basic meanings: finitude and connectivity, both planetary. Universality, by contrast, denotes unlimited extension. Because of its modes of historical generation, modernity has to be seen as a global phenomenon, rather than a universal one. As such, it should be the study object of a global history and a global social science. A global approach to social phenomena means focusing on global variability, global connectivity, and global intercommunication. It also implies a global look at processes of change, of continuity and discontinuity. To capture the actual globality of modernity, the latter had better be seen in the plural, as constituting a set of 'multiple modernities' [...] The emphasis on entangled modernities is meant to highlight, not just the co-existence of different modernities but also their interrelations, current as well as historical" (Therborn, 2003, p. 295)

### **India in entangled globality**

Therborn's views of entangled modernity can be contextualized in various historical and geographical settings. The views of

the first Indian Prime Minister, and a visionary of Indian modernity, Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru, traced Indian history as sedimented by layers of cultural and institutional influences. Indian historians have traced the entangled history by recounting the admixtures of historical experiences and enmeshed institutional developments. In the realm of ideas, Kris Manjappa (2014) has explored the cultural and intellectual connections that linked Germany and India from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. India and Germany sought to challenge an Anglo-centric world. Indian physicist Satyendra Nath Bose and German physicist Albert Einstein collaborated in the 1920s to develop Bose-Einstein condensate and Bose-Einstein statistics. The particle “boson” is named after Bose. Bose, a polyglot, translated Einstein’s papers of relativity from German to English for the Indian scientific community. From science to arts and humanities many such collaborations and interconnections took place. Nobel Laureate Tagore visited Germany to recruit German professors for Visva Bharati, the university he set up in a rural town. Such connectivity and intercultural entanglement began with Max Muller and other keen students of oriental affairs. Syed Mujtaba Ali, a Bengali writer and a disciple of Tagore went to Germany in 1929 and studied German literature in Berlin and Bonn. Ali, a Goethe specialist and a polyglot joined the Tagore’s University and wrote novels and stories of his sojourn in Germany and elsewhere. Such illustrations of entanglements signaled a cultural globalization based on cosmopolitan worldview.

### **Entangled globality in East Asia**

Following Therborn's taxonomy of multiple routes to modernity, we highlight two, namely the colonial modernity, in which modernity came "out of the barrels of guns" (Therborn, 2003, p. 299), and the Reactive modernity, which we rather view as *modernity by choice* as it is revealed in the historical experiences of China and Japan. True, the push for modernity in the case of China, or more so for Japan, came with colonial incursions, best illustrated by the well-known forays of Commodore Perry from 1853 to 54, even before the at least twenty-five attempts made, either privately or officially, to establish contacts with Japan (Holcombe, 2011, p. 215). Hence, there are clear evidences of reactive modernity, since the Japanese officials knew the fate of China during the Opium war in 1842. Yet, it would be useful to recount the Japanese interest in acquiring Dutch knowledge of medical sciences and military sciences in the early eighteenth century, during the Tokugawa period (Holcombe, 2011, p. 213). Even in the twentieth century, there are several examples of globalization by choice. Most of the Newly Industrializing Economies in East and Southeast Asia, and later China and India, pursued the strategy of inviting and negotiating with neo-liberal globalization, while for the smaller nations it was a conscious drive to economic globalization keeping certain arenas sealed off from the global influences. For example, Singapore sought to be the Switzerland of Asia, followed an open, market-friendly economic policy, and adopted English as the lingua franca, yet promoted Confucian values to maintain political order and social harmony. A preference for indigenous political system unaffected by the call for universal human rights and liberal democracy

was a feature of most of the Tiger economies. Malaysia's simultaneous "look East" policy for economic development and anti-Western rhetoric championed by Mohamed Mahathir, in the 1980s and 1990s, were conscious effort to partake in a selected version of global modernity.

While partaking in the process of global modernity in a robust manner, the leadership in the "Tiger Economies" invested a great deal of ideological energy in the discourse of Asian values showing how Asian high economic growth performers were "different" from the West. In the revitalized binaries, the West was (re)created. One writer captures that debate succinctly as follows:

The category of Asian values was born, during the 1990s, from the attempt of the political-governmental elites of some Southeast Asian countries to characterize their identity on the international scene in opposition to individualistic values, considered dominant in Western societies. Indeed, those that refer to Asian values believe they can discern some arguably typical traits in them, such as: the embodiment of the traditional cardinal virtues of Confucianism; the primacy of collective on individual interests; the care for order and stability; the continuity between generations; the openness to sacrifice; and the deferment of instant gratification. Asia, therefore, would be governed by the principles of social harmony and the respect for authority and family; while the West is depicted as a place in which community values are eroded by the spread of rampant individualism, where the proliferation of rights is not compensated by a hierarchy of community duties and constraints (Fornari, 2007, p. x).

By accepting Western science, technology, education and popular culture unquestioningly, and rejecting their political views

and cultures, an ambivalent position took shape. Such ambivalence was deeply rooted in the discourses of coloniality and postcoloniality. The colonial modernity cannot be simply viewed as a one-way imposition as viewed by the Marxist-Dependency theorists. Immanuel Wallerstein, the founder of the World-Systems theory, envisaged “development by invitation” as a strategy for the periphery to move into semi-peripheral status. The problem with Marxist colonial history and the Dependency theory was that they denied any agency to the subjects. Interestingly, Marx’s position was more ambivalent when it came to the impact of colonialism, especially with regard to India. The interplay between the local traditions and the western tradition of modernity evolved in a delicate interplay. Ideas and institutions clashed and influenced each other and a distinct Indian modernity evolved, thus modernity was not just an imposed burden. Therborn himself makes us aware of this entangled process and cautions us against the overgeneralizations of both modernization theories and their nemesis Dependency/World-Systems theories. The cases of modernity of China and Japan illustrate what Therborn calls reactive modernity, or what I would call: modernity by choice by leveraging on the ideas and institutions of modernity assembled from the wide world.

China’s modernity was also built upon a conscious design that started in the first decade of the twentieth century and that resulted in the Republican revolution of 1911. China provides a civilizational continuity unmatched in other cases. China experienced centuries of civilizational continuity. The waves of modernity reached Chinese shores as Europeans came to seek new markets and raw materials. Here colonialism exposed its ugly face in

the imposition of the opium trade and commodity production. The growth of Chinese cities such as Shanghai was linked to the new political economy. Hong Kong was a trading outpost (Mills, 1942) as was Singapore in the colonial trade route (Buchanan, 1972; Wong, 1978).

The spread of modern education began in Asia with the missionaries, and the beginning of higher education with the setting up of the new western style university system in Peking and Shanghai and Hong Kong. It was in Hong Kong from that Dr. Sun Yat Sen, the future father of modern China, was trained in medicine after secondary education in Hawaii, US. Many prominent wealthy Chinese families sent their children, both sons and daughters, overseas for western education. Modern education had a variety of multiplier effects. It created a new class, consciousness and a sense of identity as a people. The entangled nature of Chinese modernity was revealed in the ideological crosscurrents. Both India and China were exposed to an ensemble of modernist ideas that included the communist ideas.

An illustrative tale is that of Manabendra Nath Roy, or M.N. Roy, an anti-colonial revolutionary who came to stay, in 1916, with a former-revolutionary friend and a student at Stanford University, where Roy was introduced to his future bride, Evelyn Trent, a Marxist who provided Roy with an education in Marxism (Manjapra, 2010, p. 32). Trent helped transform Roy from anticolonial nationalist to a communist. Together they went to Mexico, where Roy, a Bengali, was eventually elected as the first General Secretary of the Socialist Party of Mexico, in December 1918. From Mexico, the Roys went to Germany on their way to Moscow,

where Roy met Lenin and "differed with him on the role of the local bourgeoisie in nationalist movements" (Nath, 2001). By 1926, Roy "was elected as a member of all four official policy making bodies of the Comintern – the presidium, the political secretariat, the executive committee and the world congress" (Nath, 2001). In 1927, Stalin sent him to Canton, China to promote socialism.

Whereas most Indian communists were schooled in England, Chinese communists went to France to experience western modernity and were indoctrinated with communist ideologies. One of the founders of Chinese communist party, Chen Duxiu (1879 – 1942) upon his return from France to China launched a magazine "*La Jeunesse Nouvelle* (New Youth, or *Xin Qingnian* in Chinese), and for the first issue, he also wrote an article on "The French and Modern Civilization" (Holcombe, 2011, pp. 238-239). This journal was aimed for the young people and was published in French. Similarly, upon return to India, in 1915, Gandhi launched, in 1919, a weekly magazine in English titled *Young India*, ostensibly aimed at the young people in India. While European education helped Asians literacy in modernity, the new periodicals helped create a discourse in modernity.

Japanese modernizers at the onset of the Meiji reforms in the late nineteenth century, for example, Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835 – 1901), wanted Japan to "leave Asia" culturally, from the ranks of the Asian nations, and to join the civilized nations of the West (Holcombe, 2011, p. 220). Fukuzawa's modernist ideas were formed after his trips to Europe and North America. The Meiji modernizers embarked on a linear trajectory of modernity, which in course of time became entangled in the mid-twentieth century,

when a new wave of modernization was imposed by the occupying power in the aftermath of Japan's defeat. A nation that managed to escape colonialism for centuries was reduced to a virtual colony of the US under the command of the Allied Forces. Yet the consequence of this historical irony has been an entangled globality for Japan. As the first industrial country outside the Western world, Japan did leave other Asian countries behind, becoming the second largest economy for a while.

### **Entanglement in Middle Eastern globality**

The entangled globality in West Asia or the Middle East is manifested not just in the debates over tradition and modernity, and the extent of institutional transformations of these societies. Modernity in the Muslim West Asia has been relatively recent and more entangled, as religious worldviews presented a formidable challenge to modernist ideas. The debates that took place in Indian sociological circles, in the 1950s and 1960s, between tradition and modernity, were replayed in Southeast Asia in the 1980s and 1990s, and in the Gulf region in the beginning of the twenty-first century.

South Asia or East Asia and the Middle East have followed different trajectories of modernity underpinned by their different historical and politico-economic formations. Societies are interconnected but their tryst with modernity varies from context to context. Even in Europe, which viewed from outside looks like a homogenous entity, presents interesting diversity in the differential routes to modernity followed by its countries (Therborn G., 1995). The looming doubts over the future of the European Union may

be an aspect of that historical legacy. Therborn's view of entangled modernity opens a new vista and presages the formulation of an entangled history, which can be easily accommodated in what we view here as entangled global modernity.

Rather than pursuing ideas such as modernity with Chinese characters or Indian characteristics, it is plausible to claim that the modern institutions in the context of local traditions and culture assume somewhat different features, but remain recognizable as modernity, if disassembled. For example, one of the features of modernity has been gender equality. The rights that women gained through years of struggle cannot be reversed. Similar arguments can be made with regard to the universal adult franchise. Many of these irreversible processes accompanied by a determined emphasis on education are found all over the continent of Asia. In the Middle East or West Asia, it may be of some value to understand democratic transition more as a societal phenomenon, where a march towards equality between gender and decline of authoritarian patriarchy is clearly visible. The new technology, especially the information technology, is another factor that has contributed to the egalitarian trends. Yet the new media has also been contentious, which reflects the embedded contradictions in the forces of globality. When, in 2011, a number of countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) experienced protests that came to be known as the “Arab Spring”, many commentators concluded – somewhat prematurely – that the whole region will be engulfed in social upheavals that would remove the old regimes much like the

East Europe in the 1990s. Few, however, cautioned of such generalization stressing the specificity of the nations (Khondker, 2011).

The idea of entangled modernity is particularly relevant to understand two seemingly disparate modes of social transformation. The changes in East and South Asia, India and China are creating opportunities for new formulations of democracy and capitalism; in West Asia, economic and educational developments have created new opportunities for social equality. In West Asia, state, rather than the class, is the main actor in the interface of globality. In the words of Ehteshami, “Globalization has been pouring into the deep geopolitical grooves of this complex regional system in which culture, force, and economy form the pillars on which nation-states have been building their competitive and comparative advantages” (Ehteshami, 2013, p. 67).

The two areas of globality that need special mention with regard to the Arab Gulf States are the expansion of higher education with a focus on science and technology, and a shift towards sustainable energy. Huge investments have been poured in both these areas. King Abdul Aziz University of Science and Technology (KAUST), in Saudi Arabia, and Masdar Institute of Science and Technology in Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates, are two examples. One of the slogans of the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement in China, in the early twentieth century, was science (the other was democracy). In the early twenty-first century, one of the slogans in the Arab Gulf states is science and technology along with sustainable development.

The growing economic relationship between Saudi Arabia and China or the growing economic and cultural relationships between the United Arab Emirates and China and India are clear signs of an increasingly entangled globality, a process that would be reinforced by the declining influence of the North-Atlantic nations, although their role as reference points in the Asian globality is likely to remain unchanged.

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