UNDERPINNINGS

Nature, Culture Capital, Empire*

Kavita Philip

A charged scene in *Kal Ho Na Ho* (a 2003 blockbuster Hindi film) shows the character played by superstar Shahrukh Khan telling a struggling immigrant family in New York City that their restaurant will never succeed until they learn to objectify and leverage their uniquely Indian identity. In doing so, his narrative suggests, they will not only attract a consuming public trained to recognize markers of commodified ethnicity in the New York restaurant scene, but will also, in the process, come to be truly Indian, purer in the diaspora than in the original space of the nation. His rousing patriotic/entrepreneurial soliloquy is punctuated with racist comments about the Chinese family that runs a successful restaurant next door. The audience learns what is at stake: the Indians must distinguish themselves absolutely from other immigrant "types"—that is, by emphasizing pure difference in recognizably oppositional ways, the immigrant family can rise out of their pre-capitalist, anti-competitive unproductiveness to claim their share of the bountiful multicultural future.

The hero's discourse has the familiar ring of Anglo-American liberal multiculturalism; but it also echoes the bromides of development economists, who for some decades now have been advising the Third World to leverage its cultural capital. As Jim O'Connor commented in the September 2000 issue of *CNS*, the World Bank teaches the global South that "human health and well-being and education are components of 'human capital,' … and that community is 'community capital.'" The third component of that World Bank mantra is the construction of the environment as "natural capital," which I will return to. -

How can we understand multiculturalist human capital? There is a proliferation of discourses that postulate culture as the static determinant of difference. Where once biology played this role, "explaining" why women's role was in the home, prognathus jaws determined criminality, and races were ordered hierarchically, these narratives are now discredited as part of the rejected sexisms and racisms of yesteryear. Now "culture" steps in to explain girls' approaches to mathematics, the causes of poverty, and the new civilizational hierarchies.

What is going on here, and what is at stake? What's going on is partly just a transposition of prejudice from biological to cultural determinisms. But it's more than that.

In the last decades of the 20th century—even as the humanities pulled the foundationalist rugs out from under scientific positivism and anthropological ethnocentrism, questioning the "hardness" of scientific facts about the body and the world—the biological sciences increasingly rendered the body in terms that suggest malleability and change rather than foundation and stasis. Cosmetic surgery rewrites the norm for bodily aesthetics; genetic counseling promises to restructure the contingencies of health; and military science seeks to engineer an indestructible, sleepless soldier. As the body appears more and more fungible in the popular imagination, "culture" has, paradoxically, been rendered in increasingly static terms. As we become more adept at inhabiting/imagining changeable bodies and altered genetics, mainstream discourses seem to make more frequent references to a supposedly static and unchangeable cultural realm.

Mainstream political science discourse refers to the Huntingtonian "clash of cultures" as the cause of global strife, and popular multiculturalism hypostatizes cultural difference so as to commodify it more efficiently. Globalization, theorized by its early opponents as a dangerous homogenizing force, smugly proves itself sensitive to "difference." Multinational corporations hire cultural consultants to provide guides to business etiquette, religious codes, and body language in different parts of the world; these consulting experts eagerly consume sociological texts and travel guides in order to prepare lists of culturalist *dos* and *don'ts*. Natural resource use is tied today to the development of a new stage of capitalist globalization, but popular analyses are often couched in terms of so-called civilizational and cultural conflicts over "revering" versus "using" nature. Culturalist theories abound in mainstream academic debates such as the universalism versus particularism debates over "Asian Values" in international relations and human rights law. Culturalist assumptions form the racialist bedrock of a new imperialism that seeks to protect and propagate the "American values" of democracy and freedom, and to guard the West against freedom-hating hordes who espouse "alien" or "terrorist" cultural values.

The intertwined histories of nature, culture, capital and empire seem consistently to function via a political economy of sameness and difference. Indeed, the politics of knowledge in the 21st century can be understood via an engagement with the colonial environmental histories of the 19th century. In tracing historical congruences, I am not suggesting structural or eternal continuities; rather, I think that we as global citizens are constantly being recruited to reproduce certain moral and political economies of racialized, gendered sameness and difference.

Idealist constructions of cultural difference have material effects. For example, as Seymour Hersh said in a 2004 article in *The New Yorker* magazine, "The notion that Arabs are particularly vulnerable to sexual humiliation became a talking point among pro-war Washington conservatives in the months before the March 2003 invasion of Iraq." Anthropologist Raphael Patai's 1973 book, *The Arab Mind*, had become, according to Hersh's academic informants, "the bible of the neocons on Arab behavior." It inspired the neocons' culturalist justification for torture and sexualized brutality. As Seymour Hersh's academic informant described it, neo-conservatives held two axioms: "one, that Arabs only understand force and, two, that the biggest weakness of Arabs is shame and humiliation."

The violence of imperialist violence has, at least for the last 200 years, invariably been undergirded by a set of persistent assumptions about difference. The coding of that difference has shifted somewhat from a biologist to a culturalist rhetoric; yet we cannot fully understand the task of forging new modes of resistance if we misrecognize the continuities and shifts in this rhetorical-material matrix.

To oppose current culturalist discourses and imperialist claims about the diffusion of modernity requires more than relativist prescriptions for cultural autonomy and the proliferation of diversity and difference. We need, rather, to assess the mixed modernities of colonialism, the new modes of imperialism, imperialism's relationship to nationalism, its reliance on the interdependence of Northern and Southern capitalism, and its opportunistic perpetuation of existing semi-feudal hierarchies of gender and caste. We need to see systems of knowledge about nature as neither mystically rooted in tradition nor serenely transcendent of political interests. Shifts in attitudes toward nature were part of shifts in the management and definitions of cultures, which were an integral part of a shift in modes of production and representation that occurred through a process in which nature was redefined as a manageable resource.

Eighteenth and 19th century changes in attitudes toward nature were not based on "cultural" shifts from "tradition" to "modernity" or "harmony" to "control." In saying this, I am arguing against not only mainstream capitalist discourses but also many progressive, but overly culturalist, critiques of post-Enlightenment science. I am arguing for the more complicated and messy task of describing the networks, exchanges, and cross-fertilizations that contaminate the supposed purity of the terms "tradition," "modernity," "science," "indigeneity," etc. The rhetoric of scientific and cultural progress is even today couched in terms of a naturalized progression from superstition to free markets, from racialized masses to individuated "free" citizens. We saw this in the Cold War discourse of communist cultures as faceless grey masses of automatons yearning to be individualist consumers, and we see it today in the racist assumptions of primitive tribalism that underpin the discourse of anti-terrorism.

As historians of the Middle East have always known, European Renaissance science would have been impossible without the sophisticated scientific and cultural knowledge practices of the Arab world during the so-called Dark Ages. And as recent colonial histories of science have shown, Enlightenment science was not of purely Western origin. Local knowledges from the peripheries of empire were constitutive of both the form and content of science at metropolitan centers. For instance, indigenous Indian knowledge of forests and cropping techniques influenced early British environmentalism, and Caribbean and South Asian plant species radically changed the shape of European botany in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Although the non-Western dependence of Western science was openly acknowledged as late as the 17th century, administrative and ideological imperatives served to obscure this hybrid constitution and, by the 19th century, to rewrite modernity as a story of pure diffusion, in which Western scientific knowledge (rationality) and political forms (freedom, democracy) were held to flow from higher to lower concentrations, aided by benevolent bureaucrats and obstructed by sullen savages.

For example, integral to the building of European scientific forestry was the redefinition of 19th century Indian forests as factories, and forest products as commodities. In this process, the categories of labor, production, and property were key. One might plot the development of forests' "modernity" according to the increasing technological content and global reach of forest activities. But such a plot does not reveal a corresponding liberalization in labor laws, or a diffusion of power to local users of the forests. Modernization was accompanied by the entrenchment of coercive, propagandistic regimes of labor and the continuation of a moralizing rhetoric of progress from savagery to civilization through the discipline of work. The appearance of modern categories was not inevitable or natural. The new structures of representation redefined personhood through property, identity through labor, and progress through the imperatives of global production.

Does this mean, one might ask, that the colonies "failed" to enter a truly "scientific" modernity in the early 20th century when European countries were bringing their social systems into line with the modern technologies of production and management? It would follow from such a hypothesis that the "pre-modern" elements of colonial societies would be expected to wither away with the continuing development of scientific systems. Such an assumption is indeed commonly made in popular accounts of post-colonial societies. Far from being an anomaly or a failure of colonial modernization attempts, as conservative economic historians would suggest, this "pre-modern" aspect of the relations of production was a structural requirement for the corresponding global expansion of the colonial economy.

These so-called pre-modern elements persist even today in India, alongside an explicit state policy of embracing large scientific and technological development projects, giving top priority to

science education, and imparting an almost sacred cultural status to science. They were not just manifestations of an accidental persistence of older forms. Nor are they innate anti-modern aspects of tribal identity, inherently inimical to science and inaccessible to analysis. Rather, the rigidification and retention of so called pre-modern elements were an essential part of the functioning of the colonial economy. Through the interweaving of political, economic, cultural and technological discourses and practices, we can see the construction of "primitive nature" and "tribal culture" as resources for colonial production. Post-colonial modernity incorporates both a mythos of technoscientific progress and the specter of feudalism, not because the colonies could never quite get modernity right, but because modernity was necessarily constituted that way.

The nostalgic critique of modernity obscures both the instrumental rationality of indigenous epistemologies (as it effectively relegates native knowledge of nature to non-rational cosmologies) and the political and economic basis of modernity (as it represents ideal modern life as a set of practices which accord with notions of "high culture" and sees native appropriations of these as inherently inauthentic). While modernizers would assert that the persistence is evidence of the State's failure to completely erase all elements of a pre-rational world, nostalgic environmentalists see these remnants as the only hope for a return to a pastoral pre-technological utopia.

Modern-day narratives of modernity, technology and nature persistently fail to acknowledge the material conditions that make particular hybrid forms of modernity undergird particular class and race interests. The following example from the present century clearly illustrates this.

On December 26, 2004, a massive earthquake off the coast of Sumatra created a tsunami whose devastation crossed the Indian Ocean, causing the worst humanitarian disaster in recent memory. The Bush administration was initially unconcerned, but, increasingly aware of the public relations opportunities in a region of the world that reported high "negative opinions" of the U.S., later accelerated its aid, with a public display of concern for nature's victims. Images of friendly Marines delivering care packages to thankful Asians promised to replace disturbing snapshots of American soldiers abusing Iraqi prisoners in Saddam's former prison, even as more evidence of abuse was coming to light. To recall, this was the time of Specialist Charles Graner's court-martial, in which details of high-level accountability were unfolding. It was also the same time that Alberto Gonzales, author of the infamous "torture memo," stood poised for confirmation as U.S. Attorney General, and prisoners at the Guantánamo Bay prison camp entered their fourth year of detention.

It seemed from U.S. headlines as if the imperial military machine had been forced to temporarily pause in the face of natural disaster. In reality, tsunami aid spearheaded both the largest build-up of U.S. military presence in and around Asia since the end of the Vietnam War, and the largest propaganda effort to create a benevolent image of the U.S. military since September 11, 2001.

Media coverage of the tsunami in the U.S. was constant and comprehensive in the first weeks of the new year. Here is the standard narrative we heard: Nature strikes without warning, randomly, and for no reason. States and individuals are powerless in front of the awesome forces of nature—indeed, it is these prodigious shows of force through which nature reminds us of our helplessness, and of the primitive roots of our nature-worship. So Larry King invites theologians and monks to help us find out whether God was in the tsunami; hard-working families squeeze contributions from their strained holiday budgets; news anchors express heartfelt hope that the gales of ethnic hatred in Indonesia and Sri Lanka will be washed clean by the waves; and Internet petitions circulate urging the Third World to yield to humanitarian interventions. Well-meaning commentators wring their hands in genuine sympathy, but the default assumption is that when nature strikes, the calculus of death is random, the

devastation cutting across caste and class boundaries. The tragedy of the Third World is that it is close to nature, and it can't afford advanced technology to protect itself against nature's power. The images of the decolonized world that appeared on U.S. television screens were presented as being inherent to Southern nations' disaster-prone character: helpless poverty, political unrest, and states ignorant of nature's ways. News reports often concluded with a pious hope that the poverty-stricken natives will, with sufficient charitable aid, be able to tap into their inherently ennobling innocence, resilience and flexibility.

The tsunami disaster reveals the structural unevenness in technological access and international communication in the age of neoliberal economic planning and development. It was neither random coincidence nor simple conspiracy that, in an age of hyper-accurate science and instantaneous communication, information available to Pacific data stations failed to reach the victims of the tsunami. The Indian Meteorological Department in Port Blair, Andamans, had only an old analog system rather than a digital one; it printed out a blank piece of paper, because the scale of the earthquake and its aftershocks exceeded the range of its calibration. Why had a nation that takes pride in its cyber czars and cyber "coolies" not updated the Andamans geophysical equipment?

The information fiasco in the hour that preceded the waves that hit the Tamil Nadu coast was a classic case of the gaps—structural, not accidental—produced by neoliberal underdevelopment. It is true that the Indian Meteorological Department's staffs' handling of the situation was marred by inexcusable gaps in address books, faxes, and chains of command that precluded timely warnings from being issued. But, if we think historically about the heavy infrastructure investments to facilitate multinational information technology (IT) investment, the reduction of tariffs that made India's white collar labor pool attractive for IT outsourcing, the Rupert Murdoch-style media globalization that created huge markets for corporate lifestyle brand products, it is clear that they are rooted in the New World Order's valuation of information systems as commodities rather than potentially transformative social practices.

India actively plunged into the "informatization route" to development beginning with Rajiv Gandhi and Sam Pitroda. Investing heavily in communication technology from the late 1980s, India signed on to global information technology agreements that clearly benefited only its upper classes. The information crisis that created India's unpreparedness for the tsunami was neither natural nor inevitable. The distribution of scientific and economic resources creates the material conditions for both progress and devastation. It would do little good in this context to represent information systems as inherently evil instruments of Western science, and Asian coastal inhabitants as essentially anti-technological. This sort of narrative would align itself with mainstream culturalist narratives rather than offer any real critique.

On the other hand, materialist histories of technology expose the contingencies and choices involved in technological development as well as the effects of imperial power. In the 1970s and 80s, a bloc of post-colonial, non-aligned states formulated an alternative model of global telecommunications. They critiqued imbalances in the global flow and proposed the "right of all peoples to participate in international exchange of information on the basis of equality, justice, mutual benefit."

Their critique imagined national self-determination and sovereignty at the level of information, advocating that developing countries develop their own infrastructure and make their information and communication media suitable to their needs and aspirations. One of the group's key authors, Tunisian Information Minister Mustapha Masmoudi, counterposed the model of vertical North-South flow of

information to a "horizontal" flow that would remedy the power imbalances between center and periphery. The "problems, concerns, and aspirations of the developing countries," he wrote in 1979, were marginalized in this one-way flow in which information was treated by the transnational media as a commodity and subjected to the rules of the market.

Shaped by the meetings of the non-aligned nations in Algiers in 1973, and Tunis in 1976, a political intervention emerged that led UNESCO to officially acknowledge the need for a new global communications order. But Western states strongly opposed this alliance, seeing a Soviet-led conspiracy to usurp the logic of the market and a Third World takeover of the means of communication. Needless to say, this transformation in global information flows was never implemented. But its articulation of a vision of information and communication technologies as potentially transformative, in the interests of disenfranchised classes and nations, reminds us that there are other relations of production in which technology could be embedded and developed.

In dramatic contrast, even as the waves died down in the Indian Ocean, one could see to whom the windfalls of the disaster might accrue: the Indian government invited Microsoft to digitize its collection of satellite images, remote sensing data, and information about the country's terrain.

The distribution of scientific and economic resources creates the material conditions for progress and for devastation. The internationalization of technology functions for the entrepreneur but not for the fish worker, who has equal, or more, need of it. This is a result of historical struggles, not a transhistorical inevitability. Yet commonsense notions of science and nature remain idealist: we assume that scientific and natural laws function independent of the social conditions of their existence. But in the context of the 19th as well as the 20th century, satellites and tsunamis, nature, race, gender, and class cannot be analyzed independent of the histories of capital and empire.