Article - 7

THE FUTURE OF THE BOOK IN THE AGE OF ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION : DIALECTICS OF SPATIAL CONSTUCT (BOOKS) AND TEMPORAL CONSTRUCT (ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION)

(The Colloquium on The Future of the Book, held at Sahitya Akademi Auditorium, at 4.00 p.m. on Saturday, 15th September 2001)

I will be presenting my views on the subject matter of today's colloquium, by focusing on the concept, which was communicated by Sahitya Akademi initially i.e. Destiny of the book in the age of electronic communication and internet as well as new themes emerging in the new millennium related to the writing and publication of books.

Here, I would like to dichotomise Books and Electronic communication as two distinct constructs – i.e. by juxtaposing Books primarily as spatial construct i.e. construct in space and Electronic communication primarily as temporal construct i.e. construct in time. Printed books capture the flow of life & time in space and thus help us in transcending time and life past, present and future. They give us space to be with ourselves and experiences of the world while being with them, and thus printed books, or writing as Bourdieu remarked,"tear practice and discourse out of the flow of the time."

Electronic communication on the other hand, is a communication of flux and change, speed and motion and is thus overpowered by time, and is basically medium of instant gratifications, in tune with contemporary consumerist culture.

We are all aware that Information Technology has facilitated reader in the remotest part of the globe to have any book at his/her desk at any time he/she wishes. Mid-twentieth century witnessed the publishing business experience a revolution, and 21st century might also witness a new revolution, the dimensions of which are difficult to foresee at this stage.

Dynamics of contemporary life, is such that all prevailing hegemonies, are becoming sites of contestation through the emergence of alternative hegemonies in all walks of life. Whether it is subaltern versus dominant cultures or post-colonial versus colonial or e-communication versus books. Books face real challenge today from combined competition of electronic media, Internet, e-mail, e-chat, which I will term jointly as Electronic-communication.

The very fact that we are gathered here to deconstruct the future of the book – is an occasion impregnant with sense of threat as well as potentialities of books as means of communication. The predicament of books today, is akin to predicament of secularism as a discourse two decades ago, when everyone including intellectuals presumed that, it is uncontestable in the age of modernity

and democracies. But look, what is happening all around the world. Fundamentalism of all kinds is staring the world in its face. Like the predicament of secularism, most of authors, if asked, today, presume that books will retain their hegemony over other means of communication without articulating the real threat to it today, from the global culture of mass consumerism, where Electronic-communication, has emerged as a discourse, strong enough to challenge the books. Interviews of Noam Choamsky or Edward Said today are available through Electronic-communication at the click of the mouse, so who waits till it gets published in form of books.

Books as means of communication themselves are a product of technology of industrial age. During Nineteenth and first half of 20th century, text as a medium retained the hegemony over other means of communication including image and music. Only the Age of Globalisation, heralded in last decades of 20th century has presented serious challenge to books as medium of communication, in competition to Internet and electronic communication. But, the text as medium of ideas and unpacking the social reality of the day, will survive all changes in techno-economic power structure of societies we live in, provided books continue to objectify and overpower the Age in which we are living, the way Dostovesky, Tolstoy, Karl Marx, Gorky, Sartre, Foucoult have done in previous centuries.

The challenge, therefore, is multidimensional. Shrinking readers' profile, despite phenomenal increase in literacy, the world over, presents a big challenge. How, do we wean away the new generation, away from Internet and e-communication ? The challenge may not be visible right now, but writing on the wall is very clear. While writers' fraternity is caught in its own shrinking appeal, readers want books, which help them unravel the speed and flux of life, in early 21st century.

The very fact that books these days are known and read over by wider public only once they get some award, recognition or publicity is indicator of the crises of readership. Unless and until, we produce Dostoveskeys and Kafka's of electronic age, serious literary books face real threat from books of gurus of all kind – from management to Vedic astrology, to self-help. A Shashi Tharoor book drawing more audience and attention than a Nirmal Verma book – is not only a problem of languages- English and Hindi, but is symptomatic of – the age of publicity, the age of marketisation of books - which itself is a by-product of the consumerist culture of late – modern capitalism.

So, the threat to the future of books is not only from competition from alternative mediums of internet and electronic communication rather from the very culture of consumerism, fostered by economic globalisation. Here, I would like to address the tecno-economic perspective of the Future of the Book.

The way globalisation has polarized the rich and poor nations and rich and poor among each countries, it poses serious threat to small scale publishers, who may not withstand the competition from multinational publishers. Thus polarization of publishing business in hands of few multinationals, which has already happened in USA and Europe, is a much more serious threat than the Internet & *e-books,* as a medium. We, therefore, ought to consistently deconstruct the political economy of publishing business in the New Age of electronic communication.

Book publishing in the U.S. is today dominated by five empires and as the publishing business gets in the hands of multinationals, in India also in near future, the whole structure as well as the culture of the books will undergone a sea change. We must keep in mind that book publishing, cannot be equated with other business enterprises. Here the relationship between the author and the publisher and the seller will remain personal.

Couple of years ago, in Western countries e-books were heralded as a technology that would make the traditional printed volume obsolete. Major publishing houses like Random House, Time Warner, Simon & Schuster and other major publishers, began developing an e-book line. Enthusiasm was stoked by an Andesen Consulting study done for the Association of American publishers. It concluded that by 2005, 10 percent of book sales, or $ 2.3 billion a

year, would be electronic. Another study said 107 million specialized devices for reading e-books would be sold by then.

The book business in 21st Century is thus at a crossroads following the arrival of e (electronic) books, which accounts for 15 to 20 per cent of the trade in the West. However, Jason Epstein, one of the most qualified persons to review the transformation of the book business from a cottage industry, believes that the printed book will survive for a long time to come.

Imagining a civilization without printed books is, terrifying. Like museums, art galleries, archaeological sites, bookstores are essential artifacts of human nature. The feel of a book taken in the hand is a magical experience, linking writer to reader.

In my view, Internet & e-books, with reference to printed books may play a role like T.V. serials in comparison to films, but cannot become a substitute of books. E-Books, may be the testing ground before launching printed books in the market on a large scale. If used positively, publishers of e-books, may search for "internationally marketable" books from vernacular languages and thus introduce them to a larger audience, world wide. Thus challenges before traditional printing/ publishing world is not from Internet, *e-books perse*, but from overall macro-economic globalisation of trade and commerce of publishing business. The threat

from publishing houses, which are Multinationals can be gauged from the perspective of what Warner Group of Star TV network has done to Indian TV channels. The challenges posed by internet and electronic communication, thus, are not from the technology *perse,* but from the techno-economic power structure of late modern capitalism. We are faced with serious challenges of homogenization and commoditization of culture, by hegemonic eurocentric post-modern discourse.

The nature and culture of books will thus become more important than the future of the books. Books will survive like newspapers and periodicals have survived despite Internet. But, the taste of the readers may undergo a fundamental change, causing change in the consumer profile of buyers of books. It is too early to say what it will entail for the future of the books, but the colloquium organized today by Sahitya Akademi, on "The Future of Book" is timely and will set the pace for reflection on part of publishers, writers, readers and public at large on the subject.

If we produce one, Tostoy or Dostovesky or Marquez or Ravindranath Tagore or Prem Chand of the Age of electronic communication, in early days of 21st century, the books will be back with the bang, till then dialectic of the book and e-communication will remain unresolved.

I hope colloquium ignites soul-searching amongst the organic intellectuals to deconstruct the problematic of the future of the books, in a series of similar attempts, as it is a real big-fight, between quick-fix measures of e-communication and deeper and articulate means of communication and thought provided by books – particularly serious literary books. Without penetrating the wider cross section of readership, Book as a means of, discourse however, face a real threat to its hegemony as means of communication, prevailing since last two centuries. What happens fifty years from now is difficult to fathom, but what will save the day for Books is that the books are spatial construct, while e-communication is a temporal construct and as Baudeliar said “aim of spatial constructs is to abolish time within time, if only for a time, so that we feel more at home in it”. The Books, will, in all probability despite competition from e-communication, thus be with us for all times to come, because we feel at home with them and can transcend the flow and flux, speed and motion of time and its uncertainties. Further aesthetic and cultural practices have always prioritized space over time.

To conclude with, I would like to quote Anthony Smith who observed two decades ago at the beginning of onslaught of electronic communication in late 1970s as follows:

“The threat to independence in the late twentieth century from the new electronics could be greater than was colonialism itself. We are beginning to learn that de-colonization and the growth of supra-nationalism

were not termination of imperial relationships but merely the extending of a geo-political web which has been spinning since the Renaissance. The new media have the power to penetrate more deeply into a "receiving" culture, than any previous manifestation of Western technology. The result could be immense havoc, an intensification of the social contradictions within developing societies today."

Anthony Smith, The Geopolitics of information : How WesternCulture Dominates the World (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980)

-X-X-X