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PRIORITIES IN COMMUNICATION RESEARCH: A SRI LANKAN PERSPECTIVE

By Sarath Amunugama

In the absence of recent academic studies in Sri Lanka in the field of communication - largely a result of the best communication scholars leaving the country, I will present a 'Case Study' of a national debate relating to popular culture, mass media and cultural studies conducted through local newspapers and magazines. Issues raised in this debate impinge on many of the latest developments in the field of communication research.

The 'Popular Aesthetic'

In July 1987 I contributed a short article to "VICHITRA", a popular Sinhala Magazine, which brought out a special issue to mark the death of a local 'pop singer', H.R. Jothipala. Jothipala sky-rocketed to fame as a popular musician and a 'play back' singer for leading male stars of the Sinhala cinema. He had a mass following, particularly among the youth, and his sudden death created an outpouring of grief, rarely witnessed in the country.

In my essay, I highlighted the fact that media, in this case film, radio, TV and Audio cassettes, had created a mass constituency for Jothipala and that his work had to be examined not in terms of a political aesthetic or "elite culture, aesthetic" but in relation to what media researchers, such as James Curran, call the "Popular Aesthetic" (1990:146). This notion of the "Popular Aesthetic", which has recently entered the research agenda of communication scholars, has been described by Ien Ang in the following way - "Thus Watching Dallas (1985), in which letters from viewers about the American prime-time Soap opera were analysed, was an attempt to probe the ways in which audiences interpret and give meaning to a popular TV text, but its broader political context was the then rampant public outrage about the 'Americanisation' of European Public Broadcasting. In showing how Dallas fans were silenced and thus disempowered by a dominant official discourse which categorically rejected such programmes as 'bad mass culture', I had hoped to disarticulate the often assumed conflation between the logic of the commercial and the pleasure of the popular. The aim was to open up the possibility for a less deterministic mode of thinking about these issues; a political stance against the increasing commercialisation of broadcasting at the level of policy should not, as so often happens, preclude the recognition, at a cultural level, of the real enjoyment people take in commercially produced media material - a recognition that is sustained by making understandable the textual and social cultural parameters of that pleasure" (1990:242).

The attempt to explain the undisputed popularity of Jothipala in terms of "reception analysis"* in Sri Lanka, which is still deeply rooted in conventional approaches to the analysis of cultural phenomena - be it liberal pluralist, elitist or Marxist, created a furore among the local intelligentsia. In this paper I shall attempt to situate these criticisms in the arena of modern communications research.

The Elitist Critique

The Elitist critique, exemplified by the response of Dr Ediriweera Sarathchandra - the doyen of Sri Lankan cultural critics, drew heavily on some media researchers have characterised as the 'moral panic' approach. Here the underlying concept is of a traditional society to which the media, like a hypodermic syringe, injects alien cultural values. Sarathchandra's view was that Jothipala's type of 'film music' tended to corrupt classical Indian music and therefore contributed to the lowering of public taste. He projected a Reithian, or traditional BBC, view that public broadcasting should be the guardian of the highest tastes and that the intrusion of popular culture was indeed an occasion for 'moral panic'. The best example of this type of approach to media in communication research was the early TV and violence argument which tended to blame the new medium for the rise of crime. Later research - particularly of Gerbner et al - tended to qualify such correlations. One can understand Sarathchandra's concern since this ascription of great influence to media on

audience cognition and practice is still the dominant assumption underlying most of Asian communications research, which are basically effects studies. In this type of research we do not treat the audience in a transactional perspective. They are looked on as passive, that audience understanding of programmes was determined in a general sense by the meaning immanent in texts' (Curran, 1990, 137, 138). Also, the focus is on the originator of the message and his objectives.

* Reception Analysis has been described by Ang as "interest in the ways in which people actively, and creatively make their own meanings and create their own culture, rather than passively absorb pre-given meanings imposed upon them. As a result, the question of media consumption as itself a locus of active cultural production has acquired a central place in cultural studies ... the emphasis has been overwhelmingly on the detailed description of how audiences negotiate with media texts and technologies. In this sense reception analysis could well be called the ethnography of media audiences (1990:243).

Effects Studies and the Audience

Since the majority of Asian research are Effects studies we may raise the question as to whether we have paid adequate attention to the complexity of audience reception. Modern communications scholars have the following questions regarding such studies.

- (a) traditional effects studies were based on 'a relatively unproblematic analysis of meaning'. Little attention

was paid to 'inconsistencies, contradictions, gaps and even internal oppositions within texts'.

- (b) The audience was not looked upon as 'an active producer of meanings'. Since the emphasis is on the producer, the complexity of the audience in a transactional situation where individuals, groups and subcultures negotiate their relationship with media messages through interpretations based on the 'social and discourse positions of audiences' is not highlighted.
- (c) the recent stress on 'audience autonomy' has led to a less extravagant assumption of media influence. If the media text is received through the prism of individual and subcultural positioning then its general manipulative capacity is less than usually assumed. The influence of interpersonal communication, which has been highlighted by ethnographic studies, is looked upon as a major factor.
- (d) The belief in the limited influence of media has led to greater stress on text and the roots of pleasure. "The political aesthetic gave way to the popular aesthetic; the focus of investigation shifted from whether media representatives advanced or retarded political and cultural struggle to the question of why the mass media were popular. This encouraged 'readings' of media content that sought to infer the nature of people's pleasure in them and ethnographic studies of the audience."

nces that sought to probe the roots of their pleasure
(Curran 1990,146).

The Marxist and Neo-Marxist perspective

Another critique of popular culture based on a 'Marxist' perspective was presented with great insistence by columnists of two local newspapers the Island and the Divayina. Since this was a time when the JVP, which claimed to be a Marxist rebel group, was able to threaten the lives of newspaper owners and journalists, so called 'Marxist analyses' of culture were the only versions which were highlighted in the Sri Lankan press. This tended to inhibit a fuller discussion of the question at that time.

The approach of the Island columnist, Ajit Samaranayake, was that Jothipala, consciously or unconsciously, served the interest of the capitalist class. This he did - (a) by helping in downgrading of the work of musicians and singers in the 'high culture' tradition who constituted the natural leaders of resistance to the open economy' policies of the government which fostered commercialisation, advertising and the interplay of market forces on the arts and culture. (b) by disorientating youth whose commitment to the class struggle was being sapped by 'diversions' such as pop music. Antonio Gramsci was invoked as the source of this line of argument.

Communication and the power dimension

This radical approach to cultural phenomena, though naive and, as we shall see, inadequate at best, remains a strong tendency in South Asian communication research. Globally, it was a reaction, in the sixties and the seventies, to the positivistic, pluralistic tradition of American communications scholars who tended to analyse media "in isolation from power relationships or situated within a model of society in which, it is assumed, power is widely diffused" (Curran: 1990:140).

If the traditionalists saw the spread of popular culture as the spur for "moral panic", the radicals saw it as a conspiracy against the people. As Samaranayake asked insistently "Who does Jothipala serve?".

We can identify several variants in this Marxist approach. The first is the orthodox Marxist approach of analysing media products as manifestations of class interests. Thus mass media being, in liberal societies, structured on a capitalist basis its products are looked upon as the fount of capitalist ideological interests. Studies of advertising, for instance, are looked upon as a way of increasing wants, legitimising the values and lifestyles of the 'upper classes' and generally promoting a consensual ideology when the true interests of the non-capitalist classes lie in the area of conscientisation and ideological confrontation.

Antonio Gramsci and "Hegemony"

The classical marxist approach of giving pride of place to material conditions which 'create' consciousness appeared to be patently inadequate. As Stuart Hall describes it, "classical Marxism depended on an assumed correspondence between 'the economic' and 'the political'. One could read off our political attitudes, interests and motivations from our class interests and position. This correspondence between the 'political' and 'the economic' is exactly what has now disintegrated practically and theoretically." (1988:25).

Around the time of the first world war, Marxist thinkers grappled with the growing reformism and nationalism of the workers, the rise of right wing movements and the failure of communism beyond the Soviet Union. "The march of events apparently demonstrated that Marx's scientific hypotheses were wrong. Even Lenin, whose explicit theoretical grounding always remained impeccably orthodox, behaved as if the 'dialectical laws of history' could not be altogether trusted. Marxism, as determinist theory of social development, had greater appeal when the trend of events actually appeared to be leading towards revolution and it could be confidently asserted that 'history is on our side'. When the course of history revealed a less agreeable aspect a 'subjective' interpretation of the doctrine came to the fore" (Femia, 1987:2).

Gramsci, together with Lukacs and Korsch - founders of le Marxisme Occidental, also called 'Hegelian Marxists' or Marxist humanists', attempted to bring in elements of idealist philosophy

into Marxist thought. This was done by "placing at the centre of their theoretical discussions the relationship between mental events and reality. By accentuating the role of cultural objects and spiritual factors in social development".

In place of Marx's notion of the inflexible primacy of material conditions, Gramsci stressed cultural and intellectual factors in this theory of egemonia (hegemony). "He saw in a way that no previous Marxist had done that the rule of one class or group over the rest of society does not depend on material power alone; in modern times, at least, the dominant class must establish its own moral, political, and cultural values as conventional norms of practical behaviour" (Ibid, 1987:8).

The Gramscian view of media as a major contributor to the dominant ideology of the ruling class and a facilitator of its hegemonic control was strongly held by the radical camp of media researchers. In Sri Lanka, such studies were undertaken in mechanistic way without a proper understanding of Gramsci's concept of the subtle inter-relationship between class and ideology. In a paper in Media Asia, Neville Jayaweera contrasted the media policies of UNP and SLFP governments in terms of the 'hegemony' theory. In contradistinction to Jayaweera's hypothesis of a sharp contrast in media policies, the internal evidence of his paper, as well as other available data, shows that there was little, or no fundamental change in the policies of the two parties. Gramsci's theory is predicated on the existence of on-going traditional value systems of the ruling echelons of society which survive superficial political

alignments within the class. Newton Gunasinghe also trivialises Gramsci's methodology though his work is much more sophisticated than Jayaweera's.

Contra Gramsci

The central problem regarding Marxist and Neo Marxist theories of communication is related to the inherent value of the creative work, or to use now standard research terminology, the 'text'. The 'text' with its own creative dynamic, internal structure and symbolic manifestations needs to be, as the semiotic school insists, be the primary, though not exclusive, focus of our inquiry,. Without such a perspective, as Reggie Siriwardena has pointed out, political criticism becomes unrelated to the text, and indeed can be conducted on the basis of synopses of the creative work, or as it was done in some instances in USSR, China and in Ajit Samarnayake's criticism of Jothipala, with no reference at all to it. Some 'detective work' on the real or imagined political attitudes of the artist is deemed sufficient for an assessment of his creative contribution.

The allocation of primacy in the analysis of culture to power configurations and social effects, rather than the 'text' has led to the distortion of creativity in socialist societies. This bureaucratisation of cultural activity through writers associations and Ministries of Culture, which follow a 'party line', led to the first wave of resistance which finally culminated in the overthrow of such communist regimes. Vaclav

Havel, a dissenter and play wright who is now the President of Czechoslovakia, describes the irony of official 'socialist' criticism, "I have an extraordinary love of harmony, comfort, agreement and friendly mutual understanding; uncertainty and confusion upset me. Yet my position in the world always has been and continues to be deeply controversial. I've been in conflict with the state and with various institutions and organisations all my life, my reputation is that of an eternal rebel and protestor, to whom nothing is sacred; and my plays are anything but a picture of peace and harmony" (The New York Review of Books, June 14, 1990). An even more grotesque approach to intellectual life, as now fully documented by the present regime, was seen in Maoist China. Mao TseTung was probably the most determined exponent of the "whom does a work of art serve?" school (eg. his lectures to the Yen'an Forum). The havoc created by Maoist during the cultural revolution, including the Anti-Confucius campaign, have on the admission of present Chinese leaders themselves, set the countries economic growth back by decades and caused untold injustices and misery. Amartya Sen writes: "The Chinese famine of 1958 - 1961, in which between twenty three to thirty million people died, was partly caused by the continuation of disastrous government policies, and that in turn was possible because of the non-democratic nature of the Chinese polity. For three years, notwithstanding intense famine conditions, official policies were not essentially reversed. The Government did not feel threatened; there were no opposition parties; no newspapers criticised the public policies. In fact, for the most part, the famine was not even mentioned at all in

the controlled press, despite the carnage that was taking place across the country. Indeed in the terrible history of famines in the world, it is hard to find a case in which a famine has occurred in a country with a free press and an active opposition within a democratic system" (NYR, June 1990).

Another criticism of Gramsci has been levelled by radical scholars themselves. They reject the theory of a monolithic, hegemonic, "dominant ideology" of the ruling class as demonstrably false since "on close inspection, it crumbles in almost every epoch into a miscellany of inconsistent and even contradictory ideas. Second, this miscellany of themes and ideas was not even 'dominant', since it was not widely accepted by the subordinate classes. Social cohesion they argued, was to be explained in terms of resignation and routine rather than ideological incorporation" (Curran, 1990,141).

Using the concept of the "autonomy of social practice" advanced by Louis Althusser researchers have looked upon the field of ideology as an arena for competing social groups rather than a 'top-down' flow as envisaged in the Gramsci paradigm. "The ruling class was reconceptualised as a shifting and often precarious alliance of different social strata. The dominant ideology was redefined as a 'field' of dominant discourses, an unstable constellation of ideas and themes which was liable to disaggregate at any point into its constituent elements. The media were portrayed as a site of contest between competing social forces rather than a conduit for ruling class ideas."

From politics to "Deep Structures"

Another criticism of Gramsci could be advanced from a 'structuralist' perspective. Structuralists, particularly Claude Levi-Strauss, have attempted to create an 'an ethnography of the mind'. Behind the discrete social and cultural phenomena that the ethnographer sees in society lies 'a thought structure encompassing a small number of simple principles'. The supposedly spontaneous flow of inspiration and its seemingly uncontrolled inventiveness imply the existence of laws operation at a deeper level when the mind is left to commune with itself and no longer has to come to terms with objects, it is in a sense reduced to imitating itself as object; and that since the laws governing its operations are not fundamentally different from those it exhibits in its other functions, it shows itself to be of the nature of a thing among things" (Levi Strauss, 1986, 10). These structuralist principles are derived from an analysis of facets of culture - language, myth, ritual, etc. Thus to Levi-Strauss the symbolic world of the primitive is as complex as that of more advanced man, and is not necessarily related to a class dimension.

Finally, post modernists like Michel Foucault, while denying that they are structuralists, have also attacked the simplistic Marxist view of causality "It is not always easy to determine what has caused a specific change in a science. What made such a discovery possible? Why did this new concept appear? Where did this or that theory come from? Questions like this are highly embarrassing because there are no definite methodological

principles on which to base such analysis for the role of instruments, techniques, institutions, events, ideologies and interests is very much in evidence; but one does not know how an articulation so complex and so diverse in composition actually operates" (Foucault, 1973).

Conclusion

The case of Jothipala has led us to a key contemporary research area in the field of communication. The analysis of culture, increasingly related to the role of mass media, demands a much more complex approach than the positivistic, functional approach which marks much of Asian research and the naive Marxist approach. Communication research demands a high degree of intuition and creativity - markedly absent amongst our researchers. In the words of Bernard Berelson, who thirty years ago saw disturbing trends in the field of media research, 'the innovators have left or are leaving the field, and no ideas of comparable scope and generating power are emerging. The expansion of the field to new centres has certainly slowed down and perhaps even stopped. Some of the new places are currently repeating what the pioneering places did years ago and are now disappointed with' (Ferment in the Field, J of Communication, Summer 1983:18).