

# National communication policies and frameworks affecting pluralism

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**National Communication Policies  
And Frameworks Affecting Pluralism**

**By**

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In the last decade, we have seen the communication revolution sweep mass consciousness as never before.

Media - like markets; and ecological systems, do not observe any national or geo-political boundaries. And no country can, in absolute sense, ban or stop the waves hitting radio sets or T.V antennae, in any part of the world. Personal computers and satellites have brought another dimension of plurality and multi-culturality to the state of things.

This revolution has posed a challenge not only to communicators and media practitioners like me, but to the Governments of individual countries, and policy makers at the highest level. This is perhaps because the revolution struck when mankind - divided as it is in its various nationalities, geopolitical structures and religious beliefs; - was not quite prepared for it psychologically, it was taken unawares. The task of evolving policy frameworks to bring about some order to this chaos, was the challenge of the day.

India, like other developing countries, began with every intention of using media-especially radio and that wonder-box Television, towards the uplift and betterment of its people.

The well meaning efforts over the past 40 years to use these tools especially - towards enlightenment, education and instruction, was witnessed by the launching of the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment - SITE, at Ahmedabad, Delhi. This experiment was hailed with much fanfare and expectation. It unfortunately proved to be a vivid example, of merely good intentions, achieving naught. Doordarshan itself, hitherto jealously guarding its sole control over the moral and spiritual wellbeing of the Nation, telecast dull and dry fare day in day and out. Platitudes, preaching, and pedantic programmes put out by the Indian television, were an excellent example of what mass media should not be. Counter productive. The soft-ware served for years on end on the Indian Television was dismal, uninteresting and unentertaining to put it kindly. Viewers watched programmes, albeit grudgingly, because there was no alternative. With its' holier than thou attitude; any kind of gloss, or glamour, or even slick presentation was frowned upon, lest the populace develop a wrong set of values. Entertainment for its own sake was not encouraged.



And then suddenly, policy was reversed. The doors of D/D were thrown open to the advertising merchants, and almost overnight the picture changed. Soaps, oils, refrigerators, pressure cookers, tyres, undergarments and instant noodles, vied for the pride of place on the small screen. Slicker and slicker ads were aired to fan consumerism. These ads were in direct contrast to the lack-lustre 'in-house' productions of D/D. Children and the less educated simple folk especially, liked and waited for the commercial breaks - so rich with colour, using animation and smart special effects.

There was now no escape. The writing was on the wall. Outside producers had to be called in, so that the programmes could be spruced up to keep in line with glossy ads and brisk entertainment that was now required. This led to a few years of confusion, a glut of family serials - good, bad and indifferent, and also charges of corruption at Mandi House - the bastion of the National Network. Everyone seemed to be making a television serial of some sort. The emphasis now, was on total entertainment, with the instructional and educational aspects totally toned down or shrunk to the university oriented educational telecasts in the afternoon. Priorities changed, and with consumerism given the green signal by T.V. itself, the work of years of developmental activity-however inadequate-was negated. This was the situation before the spectacular media explosion. National boundaries broke down, and national culture was threatened. This was a world-wide phenomenon.

Some panic stricken countries attempted to stop the intrusion . Saudi Arabia banned dish antennae and China is contemplating stopping the Northern beaming of Rupert Murdoch's Star T.V. with its unsympathetic BBC bulletins But countries in South Asia neither have the money-power of a Saudi Arabia, or the clout of the largest country - China, to regulate the inflow of information from outside. The best they can do is to evolve policy frameworks to bring about some order out of the chaos created by the recent media explosion. The policies presume the existence of a certain authority, which has moral, legal and popular sanctions. In democratic countries, such authorities are created by the electoral process. The in turn are influenced by the communication media. Indeed the political electoral process itself is a part of a cultural milieu, therefore culture, communication and state; form some kind of a veritable triangle. An eternal triangle. Constitutions of various countries try to define the cultural parameters which in turn determine media policies.

7 The Indian Constitution proclaims India a sovereign democratic republic and declares that the object of the constitution is to ensure that all citizens enjoy :

"Justice-social, economic and political: liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; equality of status and opportunity; and fraternity, assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity of the nation". These principles are developed in Articles 15 to 31 which define the citizens fundamental rights. Article 15, for instance, forbids discrimination on grounds of religion, caste, sex or place of origin. Article 31 defends the right of ownership, declaring that no one shall be deprived of his property, except by act of law. This means that the Indian constitution assures every citizen his cultural and media right, though it is not spelled out in so many words.

However, India is not just a Republic of a union of states. It is a unique cultural federation in which over a dozen religions, thousands of caste groups (we even have Christian Brahmins), hundreds of linguistic communities with a wide variety of dialects, multiple tribes and several geo-social organisations live together. Indeed, just as the people of India have a common history, woven and integrated into a magnificent mosaic; there is also a vast sub-altern history to each caste and tribe, to each dialect and language, to each province and to each religion.

All these separate social groups have various forms of cultural expression. There are festivals with their cultural moorings in agricultural practices, and there are other lively, vibrant folk forms to express a whole gamut of emotions.

These separate groups have borrowed copiously from each other and yet curiously maintained their own cultural sovereignty and identity. As one travels across the country, one comes across the same Ramayan and Mahabharata with slightly different-sometimes major-twists and turns. In the North - Ravana is the big bad villain whose effigy is burnt come Dashera festival each year, in South India he is glorified. Surely there was some kind of communication between these social groups even in the past. Obviously the communication channels transcended barriers of language, religion and social hierarchy. Infact the Ramayana has crossed the National frontiers, as Rama, Sita, and Hanumana - the monkey God, are familiar figures in Bali, Thailand and Campuchia.

These invisible communication channels which took epics and other art forms to peoples across vast lands and oceans, did not require any policy framework. The channels operated on the volition of the people. What they liked, worshipped or was acceptable to many, survived. The other folk stories and art forms became extinct and later subjects for anthropologists.



विभक्तं अविभक्तेषु -- or perhaps more appropriately -- अविभक्तं विभक्तेषु

united in diversity, is a pat 'sookta' which can apply to India, the land of plurality of every discription. Once in a while however, an ugly incident like the Ayodhya debacle rears its head and threatens our claims about peaceful coexistence and mutual tolerance between multi-cultural ethnic groups. The policy of सर्वधर्म सनातन the same attitude towards all religions - has been adapted by our Nation and all its information channels. This means that on television, a lot of footage is given to showing Ganesha processions, Id celebrations, Christmas festivities and Jain Sadhu conglomerations at Shravanbelgola on Mahavir Jayanti day. All in a weak effort to pander to all religious groups alike. On the occasion of some national leader's demise, Sarvadharm prayers are aired endlessly. This to my mind, is a futile exercise in hypocrisy. A secular state should leave religion well enough alone. The worst kind of exploitation in recent times, of television to serve religious ends is the case of that fraudulent couple Jimmy and Tammy Becker who fleeced their gullible audiences to build a private empire of their own. The state and religion should be kept separate. It is not, or should not be the concern of the National media to cater to the religious aspirations of any one group. That would amount to malfunctioning of a state-owned information medium.

Another blatant but apparently accepted misuse of communication organs of Government is the disproportionate coverage given to the ruling party - its leaders, in fact Government itself. Viewers, listners and readers alike are subjected to endless accounts of the doings of leading lights of the ruling party. In Tamil Nadu Jaya Lalitha's larger than life posters adorn the streets of Madras and she is seldom absent from the small screen. It is unfortunate that at the hands of the wielders of the information media, it is the media that earns a bad name. Goebbels, Hitler, Lenin, Stalin all knew too well the all pervasive power of media build up. Nearer home, we too learnt our lesson during the Emergency. History has proved time and again however; that despite efforts to suppress the democratic process, truth finally does catch up. Indeed सत्यमेव जयते "truth prevails" is the National dictum prominently displayed in our House of Parliament. Speaking of parliament I am tempted to refer to a programme - 'a day in parliament' - telecast during parl. sessions every evening. Television producers are harangued by publicity crazy M.P's to give them ample coverage in the programmes, and there is much heartburning if names are left out. Can the tax payers money not be put to better use ? Silly question. Obviously a ruling power will not give up its most powerful propoganda tools, however much one may protest in seminars.

Policy makers will obviously never let go the right to develop the information processing strategy - but with an onslaught from the very



skies what can the Nation state do ? A developing country like India will have to grin and bear the free flow of information - a term made popular by UNESCO, which nearely cost it U.S support.

Pluralism is as much a diversity of market-place as it implies cultural diversity. To what extent can a developing country stand up and be heard in such a media market ? Our hitherto strict Censor Code - strict atleast concerning sex if not violence, can no longer be a serious regulatory force, considering the 'liberated' entertainment which now comes straight into our living rooms. And what about that all important factor in the dissemination of news - that is 'urgency and 'immediacy' ? BBC brings us world events now which our own news bulletin may - if at all-telecast a week hence.

The Satellite delivery system is so expensive that only a Japan or a France can think of launching its own communication satellites. How do we then deal with the situation ? To restrict receiving outside inputs would be a negative approach. Pluralism which started off as a multi cultural - ethnic - religious society, has, as I mentioned earlier, a market place which can cater to diverse interest groups. This indeed is happening in a big way in the West. Programmes for blacks, asians, up market fare, M.T.V., business news, Programmes for housewives, teenagers - there is designer software for different demographically segmented groups.

All this is not as simple as perhaps it sounds, for we are in the midst of paradoxical developments. With all this talk of multi-culturism and pluralism, two bewilderingly opposite forces seem to be at work at the same time. On the one hand, there is talk of globalisation, common currencies, integration of markets, and conversion of the world into a media based global village. On the other, one is witnessing an explosion of religious, ethnic, linguistic, castist and even racial upsurges as never before. Fundamentalism is making its presence felt in a menacing manner.

Till only five years ago, it appeared as if the world was moving towards peace, sanity and progress. In 1988-89 when Mikhail Gorbachev as the President of the Soviet Union, appeared to reflect the sentiments of the whole of mankind he was discarding dogmas, was ready to confront his own system, and was regarded by the West as a Mesiah of the post - Second World War half century. He had taken his country from active agnosticism to respect for all religions, convening a world conference on religion that underlined that religion can be a unifying force rather than a divisive one, irrespective of the troubled history religions had forced on mankind. He also convened a world conference to discuss ideas that could shape the next century.



He was moving away from the Communist Faith and was seeking new solutions to new problems. Gorbachev clearly had fingers on the pulse of history. Ironically, today Gorbachev himself is history.

The ideas that were discussed in those conferences were not new nor revolutionary. But they were being discussed at a time when the world was looking for fresh approaches. It was in those conferences the concepts of multi-culturalism and pluralism acquired major significance.

Though many historians had argued that the history of the Americas was essentially a history of multi-cultural people and the evolution of democratic America was essentially a growth of pluralism. The so called "melting pot" itself is melting now under the pressure. Similarly, even after the Russian revolution, Lenin as well as other revolutionary thinkers had said that the new Russia will be a vibrant, plural, multi-cultural society which will allow various arts, literature and languages to grow and enrich each other. But it just so happened that the otherwise plural revolution took an ugly turn and in the process instead of enriching various cultures it tended to suppress the creativity itself.

The result was philosophical and cultural, as well as economic and political stagnation. Gorbachev's effort was to restructure the social and economic system (perestroika) based on pluralism and democracy (Glasnost). But the forces that intervened actually caused disintegration of the country, showing how transient and brittle Geo-political boundaries. Even in America, instead of multi-culturalism there actually grew a tendency of social and racial discrimination. According to several surveys, particularly one elaborately published in the Esquire magazine in the USA, there has been a rise in racial crime, in crime against women, and in crime against non-Americans.

The European integration in the form of the European Community was also not supposed to be merely a trade and currency agreement. It was expected to be integration of various European cultural streams. But we are witnessing a rise of Neo-nazis in Germany; the rise of the racist, British National Party in England; the growth of the racial Right wing party in France, and generally there appears to be tension and turmoil in other European countries.

In the Central European countries, after the collapse of the stagnant socialist system, one had hoped for a forward looking social order. But what we have seen in four years after the fall of the Berlin wall (November 9, 1989) is a multi-dimensional civil war in Yugoslavia, break-up of Czechoslovakia into two republics, and increasing conflicts among Romanians, Hungarians, Moldavians, and so on. The Indian sub-continent in the same period too, witnessed earth-shattering events. The Mandalisation opened up old caste wounds and the Ayodhya agitation



sharpened the Hindu-Muslim divide. The media played its part, in further dividing the people, instead of uniting them. This is the backdrop of policy evolution. While evolving policy for pluralism in a country like India, the State, the media organs, and the intellectuals will have to accept a kind of cultural democracy. No culture is superior - none inferior.

Media tends to simplify, the State to suppress, and political ideologies try to discipline. The straight-jacketing will not help promote the wellbeing of multi culturalism and pluralism. One way to ensure this, may be to empower the people. In a country as many-splendoured as India; the answer may be to develop a competent regional or local media-base with a strong local thrust and immediacy. This may prove more effective than a National hookup. Local bodies, social and voluntary organisations, NGO's, home talent and theatre groups, could be put to excellent use and support the experiment. Once the idea catches on, and is set in motion, it may not be difficult to find local funding. The entire economics of these indigenous channels would be relatively modest and therefore the answer to the global media blitz. To develop local radio stations would certainly be even more feasible. The expense being relatively much less. These small scale experiments would fire the imagination of the local people, and give them a sense of belonging and participants. Planners of their own future. The fringe people at last would have a platform all their own. Undoubtedly, a realistic approach, to keep the media compatible and in tune with their various cultural groups. A Pandurang Mohite - say a farm-hand living in - a far-flung village - Aine Dabhon in interior Maharashtra; would much rather know which bull won the annual bullock-cart race in the village fare, rather than which film won the coveted Academy award.

I have shared with you a few ideas and observation regarding the taming of the Tempest which seems to be sweeping us off our feet. In an effort to use its power for construction, not the other way around.