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Change : An Indian Overview

By

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Communication shapes human environment. This concept has been well-established in recent years. Revolution in communication technologies has had some far reaching implications for all nations, communities and individuals. The spread of mass media in many of the developing countries has been greatly facilitated by the new technologies and have enormously enhanced the capabilities of mass media to reach the people in remote and distant regions and communities. The technological possibilities have created a strong desire particularly among developing nations to utilise the power of mass media for developmental purpose. There might be differences of opinion as to what constitute development or what are the various spheres it should cover. Each country has her own philosophy and priorities for development. India has her own. I would not go into these details here. Instead I would like to examine the Indian experience in the utilisation of communication resources for bringing about changes. This by itself is a vast subject. However, I will try to analyse the role of certain aspects of media in bringing about change and development in India.

Before I proceed further, I must emphasise that communication does not occur or function in a vacuum. Even before the advent of broadcasting and other new communication technologies there existed a society and civilization on the Indian subcontinent which today claims a proud history of at

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5000 years, if not more. In ancient and traditional India, which even today continues to co-exist, in more than one sense, with the modern India, a large number of cultures blossomed in different parts of the sub-continent, to an extent unique and independent of each other, deriving strength and inspiration from each other and in turn contributing towards a composite Indian culture mosaic. This was achieved primarily through long established and strong oral traditions. In modern India also these oral and folk tradition continue to be very strong. Field researches and practical experience of communicators reveal the relevance and importance of interpersonal communication both in continuity and change. It is true that traditional forms of communication often emphasise and reinforce the existing norms and practices. Well, so is true of the modern mass media. Klapper in 1960's concluded on the basis of empirical findings that media have little or no direct effect on people. Rather, they tend to reinforce attitude and behaviours that people already possess. According to this theory mass media potential for change is very little. But many communication scholars and practitioners have today challenged such formulations. Indian experience also bears testimony against such conclusions.

Communication is like a two-edged weapon which works both ways - for reinforcement as well as for change. The

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The Indian experience suggests that proper strategy for media reach and innovative use of media can bring about the change. It is not possible to discuss all the changes that have been brought about through the instrumentality of the mass media, in a short paper. However, experiments like Radio Rural Forum, community listening and Farm school on AIR, SITE and Kheda tv stand out in imparting skills, bringing about broad awareness and even altering the existing social order.

A pre-requisite for the discussion on mass media, tradition and change is, in my view, the reach of media of mass communication, particularly in rural areas where bulk of the people live. Next to the reach is the relevance of the messages. A related factor is people's participation in the media, in determining the contents of the messages and in influencing the styles of presentation. When these three factors are taken care of the mass media have acted as change agents. Let me relate these factors to the Indian experience.

In India, as in many of the developing countries, over three-fourth of the people of 683 million live in the villages. The number of villages in the country is more than half a million. There is a great diversity in languages, dialects and cultural identities. The literacy percentage is around 38, it may be considerably lower in the villages and in remote areas. In such a situation it is natural that radio broadcas-

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ting should assume a very important role. Therefore let me begin with radio broadcastin

All India Radio through 87 stations and 157 transmitters claims to reach 90 per cent of the population covering 80 per cent of the area. In other words only 10 per cent of the population is outside the range of radio reach. All India Radio broadcast programmes in all languages and dialects of the country. The total number of radio receivers in the country may be around 30 million. Since the single band and two band receivers are not required to be licensed any longer, the exact figure of total radio sets in the country is not available. The figure of 30 million radio sets works out to approximately 4.4 sets for a hundred persons. This figure is considerably below the norm of one set for each family but in our social system one radio set can be used to serve a larger number of people, beyond the household. Then there are about 1.6 lakhs community sets because the radio sets are not evenly distributed as between the urban and rural areas or even as between one region and another. The number of radio sets in the rural areas is much lower than in the urban areas. The transistor revolution in the country had created the impression that the community listening scheme was no longer necessary. But ~~the~~ recent studies including the one conducted by the Indian Institute of Mass Communication have brought into focus the need for community receivers at least in selected areas.

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Television in India had a late start. Even though introduced in September 1959,, a regular daily tv transmission started only on our Independence Day i.e. August 15, in 1965. For another 7 years there was only one TV centre i.e. in Delhi. The second centre in Bombay was commissioned in October 1972. Srinagar came on the tv map in 1973 followed by a tv transmitter at Amritsar which was also commissioned in the same year. The expansion has been rapid in late 70s and more so in the last couple of years. Today there are 41 tv transmitters including 20 low power transmitters which have been recently installed. The number of studio centres with production and relay facilities remain 11. The number of tv receivers at the end of 1981 was 16.71 lakhs. Including the colour tv receivers imported recently under the gift scheme and the black and white tv sets sold in 1982 the number may now be about 25 lakhs. A point worth mentioning is that the installation of low power transmitters has extended the reach of television to several parts of the country and in towns as well as surrounding areas far beyond the metropolitan urban centres. So far there are only 7250 community receivers mostly in the rural areas. Today the tv signal covers around one-fifth of the total population. There are two inadequacies to be mentioned with regard to the reach and impact of television programmes. First, the number of tv sets in the rural areas would still be very small and secondly the programmes specifically tailored to the needs of rural population are inadequate. But in this regard the situation in India is not much different from the one

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prevalent in other countries. Even in developed countries the television programmes have by and large served the interest of the urban population. However, some interesting experiments conducted in India to relate the tv programmes to the rural people, which I shall presently discuss, have successfully explored the relevance of television for change among the rural people.

A mention may also be made to the press and cinema in India. Some 18,000 newspapers and periodicals in 75 different languages with a circulation of 46 million copies are published in the country. Of these publications there are about a thousand daily newspapers with approximately 13 million daily circulation. But the circulation of newspapers and periodicals is largely confined to the urban areas. The second Press Commission which completed its report only last year has referred to a paradox in the circulation of newspapers in the urban-rural areas. The report says: "the number of households in the country is approximately 12.5 crores and the circulation of daily newspapers in 1979 was 1.32 crores. Considering that several households secure more than one daily newspaper it will be seen that there is only one copy of a daily newspaper for 10 households. The distribution of newspaper receiving household is not uniform, the great majority of such households being concentrated in cities and in towns." According to one estimate nearly 40 per cent of the circulation of daily newspapers is confined to four metropolitan towns, Delhi,

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Calcutta, Bombay & Madras.

There is a similar observation to be made regarding exhibition of cinema films and documentaries. India is the largest producer of cinema films. Last year the number of cinema films produced was 864 and of documentaries 123 along with 52 national news reels and 52 regional news reels. But the number of regular cinema houses in the entire country is still around 10,000. There are some touring talkies but their number would be small and capacity to take cinema to the people in rural and remote areas very limited. However, the Field Publicity units of the Central and State governments try to fill the gaps. There are 229 Field Publicity units of the Government of India and almost every district in the country has a mobile van with projectors to tour around the country side.

Inevitably, any discussion on mass media tradition and change should, for a developing country, review the position of mass media reach in the rural population. The figures in relation to the spread of mass media in India given above indicate the gaps in this respect. But since independence the government and the media planners have been concerned with the communication gaps. The parliamentary political system that we have adopted under which every adult has the right to vote for the parliament and state assemblies as well as the planned system of economy which we have accepted as the basis for our

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Five Year Plans make it obligatory for us to involve the rural population in the media system.

I would like to refer to a few experiments made in this regard. The first experiment of Radio Rural Forum with which I was personally associated as head of the Pune Station of All India Radio in 1956 was sponsored by UNESCO. Nearly 150 forums were organised in as many villages in the five districts of Maharashtra and the Pune station of AIR broadcast specially designed programmes for these forums, twice a week. The forum members after listening to the programmes discussed the contents in relation to their own experiences. There was a continuous feed-back from the forums to the radio station and an inter-action between the broadcasters and the recipients of the messages. A scientific study was conducted by an independent agency covering the period prior to the broadcasts, the activities during the broadcasts and the ones generated after the broadcasts. A comparative assessment of impact on the non-forum villages was also undertaken as a part of the study. The study revealed that the increase in the knowledge of forum villages between pre and post broadcast periods was spectacular, whereas in the non-forum villages any such change was negligible. This increase in knowledge and adoption of new ideas were impressive for many of the groups such as: leaders and other villagers, agriculturists and non-agriculturists, literates and illiterates. Group discussions after the broadcasts as a means of

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assimilating knowledge was found to be a great success. About 20 per cent of the members participated actively, 50 per cent participated variously, only 30 per cent were rather inactive. In the discussions held on the following day, large majorities of the members expressed the view that the discussions were "excellent" or "good", that they had learnt "a great deal" or "quite a lot". Knowledge that existed in the latent form in the villages was brought out in the open and shared by the whole village. Forums developed rapidly into decision-making bodies capable of speeding up common pursuits of the village faster than the elected Panchayat. The forums thus became an important instrument in village democracy, and enabled many people to participate in the decision making process in the village. This was in 1956-57.

Then there is the recent experience of taking television to the rural areas under the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) from 1st August 1975 to July, 31 1976. This experiment attracted attention of communicators - all over the world. I would like to refer to a few of the findings common to several studies conducted on this experiment.

Many of the viewers of SITE programmes were first generation mass media participants, in the sense that they had never been exposed to radio, newspapers or cinema. Most of these participants were illiterate and came from the poorer

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sections of rural society. SITE was more effective than all other media in attracting the audience including the female audience. On the basis of continuous feedback from 22 villages, where 210 interviews were conducted every day, it was established that the audience favoured instructional programmes as compared to socio-cultural programmes. A large-scale survey has shown evidence of statistically significant and unexpectedly large gains in information, awareness and knowledge in areas such as health and hygiene, political consciousness, overall modernity and family planning. It was found that the gains were greater for underprivileged sections of the rural society such as females and illiterates. It was also seen that the gains increased with the degree of television viewing. In the area of agriculture there is definite evidence, in the holistic studies, of a large number of innovations triggered by the tv programmes. Some case studies of these innovations indicate that farmers adopted only those new practices which did not demand additional expense or infrastructure. They were also secretive about their intentions till the time they achieved success. A survey of children exposed to the morning programmes showed very positive gains in the area of language development and in the attitude to seeking knowledge and information from sources other than conventional classroom teaching. Since the television programmes for children were not syllabus oriented, it is not surprising that there was no significant change in

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traditional scholastic achievement.

Despite the pressures from the urban viewers we in India have accepted that when our own communication satellite INSAT-1B is launched later in the year, the gains of SITE should be very much a part of the television programme planning. It has been proposed to set-up another programme production centre at Ranchi in Bihar and to augment the existing studio centres at Hyderabad and Cuttack providing suitable up-link facilities to the satellite and installing 1200 direct reception sets in the rural areas of the three states of Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Bihar. In addition, the north-eastern region is also being considered for satellite coverage in view of its remoteness and nature of terrain.

Both these experiments, one on the radio and the other on television, have generated some new thinking in the planning of radio and television programmes for the rural people. As a result of the Radio Rural Forum experiment some 61 stations of AIR have Farman and Home units which provide educational and informational support to the intensive agricultural and rural development programmes. They are also responsible for disseminating new agricultural technology to the farmers in the local language or dialects besides covering other subjects like rural cooperation, animal husbandry, poultry, fisheries and cottage industries.

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A special programme called Farm School on the AIR was introduced in 1973 at two stations in South India, Trichur and Vijayavada. At present some 30 stations broadcast the special programme on Farm School on the AIR. In this programme lessons on subjects like rice and wheat cultivation, use of fertilizers, dairy, poultry, fisheries and nutrition are given. The evaluation of the programmes indicate that the audience find them extremely useful. The first Farm School on the Air indicated that 474 out of 476 registered listeners considered the programme to be "extremely useful". To a specific query as to how the lessons helped in paddy cultivation, the listeners gave a number of practical examples.

There is yet another experiment to which I would like to draw your attention. This experiment is being conducted through a television service in the Kheda district of Gujarat. This television station does not carry the normal programmes of any one of the other television centres. It serves 350 villages in the district through community tv receivers with specially designed programmes. The programmes have social as well as economic relevance to the people of this area. Besides imparting knowledge and information about farming practices the programmes cover the entire field of social and economic activities in the area. The programmes are field-based ensuring maximum participation of the people themselves. They are written and produced by the tv men who have had a specific orientation in the problems of the

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people. Often the programmes are provocative enough to generate minor tensions among those who hold on to the old values of norms and behaviour and others who would like to adopt new practices and are willing to challenge old beliefs. Among the themes covered are untouchability, prohibition, superstition, minimum wages, exploitation, cooperation, among the oppressed, status of women etc. besides the hardcore pertaining to agriculture, animal husbandry, health and hygiene. Thus, the Radio and Television in specific and mass media in general with their extended reach have awakened the people in countryside to assert their claims participation in nation-building activities. This has, in turn, led to a change in the contents of mass media. The focus has shifted on human beings and it has been realised that any programme of development can be carried out only if people themselves become participants in it. The most disfavoured groups in society are no longer willing to be left out of developmental process. I wish to suggest that the media of mass communication have made a substantial contribution in creating this awakening.

Alongside the expansion in the reach of mass media there has been decentralisation in media output and media management. Broadcasting, for example, no longer functions as one central organisation. A number of radio and tv centres have come up in different parts of ^{the} country and whatever their management or

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control they plan and produce programmes to meet the needs of people in their respective regions. There has been a spurt in the publication of newspapers and journals both as a cause and as an effect of expansion of literacy. What is called the rural press has made an impressive beginning in some of the countries. Similarly many more people outside the metropolitan towns are exposed to the film medium than ever before.

Of course, there are imbalances and disparities in the expansion and the reach of mass media as between the few developed countries and the many developing countries. The MacBride Commission Report has rightly focussed on these imbalances. However, the expansion of mass media within the developing countries and in traditional societies in recent years cannot be ignored in any assessment of the change that is taking place. Also, ⁱⁿ the developing countries there have been some interesting experiments in the use of mass media to bring about change in social system. There have been innovations in the contents and presentations of mass media messages. People's participation in designing the messages has been given specific importance. As a result, the communication process has become more endogeneous, self-reliant, and responsive to the people's needs.

I am not suggesting that the attitudinal change has been entirely due to media projections but what I am suggesting is that as media in developing countries become more responsive to

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the people as a whole they directly influence people's attitudes and aspirations.

The theory of two step-flow of information can also be challenged in the same context. There was time when media messages reached only a small section of people who in turn acted as transmission agents or as gate-keepers, as the case may be, for the rest of the community. With the expansion of mass media, be that through satellite transmission or availability of transistorised radio receivers or through penetration of printed word in rural areas a much larger number of people have direct access to the messages. The inter-personal communication which is an important factor in the spread of messages in our social system is of course relevant. In a homogeneous social group interpersonal communication is an effective instrument in spreading the message in favour of a change. This system meets with resistance in a society which is divided into economic or social groups but the spread of mass media has been helpful in breaking some of these barriers. Resistance from individuals or groups which have hitherto held economic power and social influence has also been challenged to an extent.

Another important development that has taken place in the communication system in developing societies is the use of traditional forms by media of mass communication. Radio and television have utilised the traditional media forms not only for entertainment but also for carrying messages to the people.

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Some times there have been distortions of the forms in this process but on the whole there have also been worthwhile experiments. The effectiveness of mass media has therefore considerably increased.

This brief survey of the Indian media scene and reference to some experiments in the broadcast media may lead to the following conclusions:

1) Developing countries with vast rural populations, low literacy percentages and low per capita incomes can be sensitised through mass media projections in attitudinal change as well as to bring about a change in the practices affecting the entire social and economic life provided the people have access to mass media and the messages are relevant.

2) The reach of mass media to the rural communities is inadequate and the media systems need to be strengthened for development at a national scale and in specific areas.

3) People's involvement in media planning is a prerequisite to achieve their awakening on all relevant issues. For this purpose the media planning has to be decentralised so that the contents become relevant to smaller communities.

4) The media planning should also take into account the social and economic infrastructure in the target community and make use of the traditional forms of communication.

5) The inter-personal communication channels are

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important extensions of the mass media but they should not be allowed to further the interest of a group based on economic or social exclusiveness.

6) There is a close-correlation between the development of mass media and indices of economic development. Expansion of mass media with focus on relevance of messages to the community accelerates attitudinal change in favour of social and economic development.