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Towards A Relevant Strategy Of Communication Planning In India

By

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A paper presented
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A relevant communication strategy is necessary for a country like India with high population, geopolitical and linguistic variations. The four major factors relevant to communication planning include the overall national media policy for development, regional communication policy, communication for urban audiences and communication for rural population. Amic 007459 d.

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For a country with nearly 400 districts - the district (county) serves as the unit of administration - the regional news bulletins originating from state capitals in the languages of the region or sub-region cover the entire region comprising often 10 to 20 districts. ~~As~~ These could hardly focus on the problems and needs of the target audiences in the rural and district centres[^] they are broadcast in condensed form of 10-minute duration of news events relating to 10 to 20 districts.

Cinema houses are mostly located in cities and district towns though there are touring cinemas that reach 25-30 percent of the villages. Also, some Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) continuity scheme terrestrial television transmitters cover rural regions, this would be less than 5 per cent of the rural population of the country. That being the case, of the 630 million people in India, nearly 78 per cent i.e. over 500 million people are at the mercy of the audience-interest programmes that cater mainly to the 130 million that are concentrated in the cities and towns of India.

Reverse the Process:

This inappropriate programming legacy has to be arrested and reversed. A relevant communication strategy should take into account the need for different norms with varied programming of contents; variable hours of telecasting/broadcasting and segmentation of programme and contents to suit the relevant target audiences' aspirations, convenience, culture, language and the physical reception facilities of the 500 million rural people of the country.

The Indian feature film industry in the private sector is the largest in the world, but its contents are mostly escapist and tear jerking given to cock and bull stories. The conscious use of cinema as a medium for social change or for raising the socio-cultural awareness of the people is left to the sporadic whims of a few committed producers. The Government's Films Division can profitably combine the merit of the creativity of the commercial producer and the commitment of the ideologue.

The free press in India especially its magazine journalism wing today shows signs of considerable vitality, objectivity and investigative ability but the contents have less rural relevance. Likewise, though there is still ground for growth, the regional language press has grown in size and importance, and today there are many organs which reflect popular middle class aspirations in such Indian languages as Malayalam, Bengali, Tamil, Marathi, Gujarathi, though not necessarily in Hindi - the language of nearly 40 per cent of the Indian population. But the press can serve as a vehicle of communication only for the literate urban population.

However, an urban media forced to serve a rural population will fail to meet the desired objective of national development. A standardised rural media also will not deliver the goods as the composition of the rural population itself changes from one region to the other.

As of now, the mass media - press, radio and TV excluding the film in India are limited in their reach, not very relevant to the needs of the majority of the rural population and cater to those who are already informed.

Need for Decentralization :

In any strategy of communication for a country like India with high population, geopolitical and linguistic variations, the need is for a decentralised set-up of communication structure that is relevant to the aspirations of the population. In India with media policy holdovers of a colonial past, where the media remained centralised, there is a pressing need for a variable approach to urban and rural communication dimensions.

In view of these background aspects, the following four major factors become relevant to communication planning in India:

- I) The overall national media policy for development;
- II) Regional Communication policy;
- III) Communication for urban audiences; and
- IV) Communication for rural population.

Communication implies both lateral and vertical, two-way multi-level or circular diffusion that contributes for exchange of ^{messages} at many levels. The democratization of communication with a higher degree of access to participation should characterize a society striving for development. But many developing countries including India with either a feudal or colonial centralized media policy have inherited communication systems which restrict access to the media and participation by the public. In such countries media remains merely an appendage of the government or the party in power resulting in loss of credibility, irrelevant contents and one-way flow of messages not meeting the needs of the population.

Relevant Approach to Communication Planning :

The foremost priority must be given to the need for crystallizing the objectives of communication in India: For what kind of social goals

and to which stratum of population do we use the media or address or message? How long, for what purpose and with what effect?

Evolving a development communication strategy for the Indian sub-continent would involve accommodation of multiple frames of references to respond to regional, sub-regional and local communication needs as well as reconciling federal and national objectives to suit the concrete local viewpoints. At the same time this also calls for prioritizing of grass roots rural needs without necessarily sacrificing the industrial thrust, commercial and technological considerations of the urban population.

Lessons from Gandhi :

"I do not want my house to be walled on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible, but I refuse to be blown off my feet by any of them".

- Mahatma Gandhi

Indian communication planners can profitably learn from the communication channels and processes adopted by the most effective communicator in twentieth century in India : Mahatma Gandhi. He motivated more millions than any mass medium did. He established mass contact through walking tours, and third class train journeys. He identified himself with the poor and, above all, symbolized self-reliance and unified action. He reinterpreted the ancient scriptures of India to suit the modern idiom and took to public devotional singing to rouse the motivational springs for action and discipline among the masses. His idiom was native, his language and appeal fitted into the concrete, local and tangible frames of references of the audiences. And, above all, his message was easy to understand as it had character identification and met the needs of his target audience i.e. Indians.

Maze of Technology:

While in any communication approach, empathy, two-way communication, the capacity to respond to feed-back remain supreme, the goals are very often forgotten by the planners under the glamour and maze of technology. For instance, though the well planned SITE programme — covering 2400 villages spread over six states — was in itself a heavy investment for experimental rural mass communication, the point that was lost sight of was that the different regions of the country have different needs and aspirations. The Satellite though providing instant telecast was not able to telecast tailor-made programmes in view of less number of channels and prestructured ^{non-}variable programming input. As one perspective Indian communication scholar pointed out that there are not many villages in India which have similar communication problems and that the "global village is a non-villager's concept of rural communication". When planning a communication policy, to use a reversed idiom, we must be on guard against mistaking the wood for the trees or

to seek the ocean when the need is for a glassful of drinking water.

Neglect of Little Media :

Since the majority of the rural population in India is illiterate, a sound approach to communication planning is to rely more on audio-visual tools like slides, 8 mm films, cassettes, posters, flip charts and ^{channels such as the} traditional and rural folk media troupes. In another context, Gandhi prescribed basic education with emphasis on reading, writing and arithmetic combined with the capacity to use skilled hands by training in crafts and for producing cottage industry goods. Had India taken ~~the~~ Gandhian road ~~to~~ planning, we would have wiped out illiteracy by now.

Likewise, in communication planning, if only the planners could place a high premium on the use of rural and folk media, and combine it with the advantage of modern little media, there would not be need for heavy investment on sophisticated technology which in any case cannot change the ingrained attitudes of the people as it provides little scope for two-way communication, instant perception of feedback, spot guidance and improvisation. All this could be done through extension work and reliance on the effectiveness of the little media combined with human ^{interpersonal} ~~interpersonal~~ communication support.

Mix Indigenous and Modern Media :

One might tend to view the suggestions presented in this paper as bordering on traditionalism and non-applicable to societies given to modernization. To allay any such surface impressions let me clarify that what is stressed here is that India has in its native heritage insights and processes of effective two-way communication techniques which have been neglected. What is required is not to shun modern technology but to bring communication technology to ^{the} service of the basic insights that have worked well with Indian society.

To give an instance while adopting modern technology on radio and TV, we have failed to provide audience research. Hence, the programming has not been successful and makes an amateurish effort to satisfy the whims of elite programmers. In ancient India, the great diplomat-scholar, Kautilya prescribed the need for gauging public opinion. In the The Ramayana, it was based upon response to anticipated public opinion that Rama, the ideal king — upholding dharma (uprightness) ^{and} to set an example to his subjects was ready to subject his queen Sita for a test of fidelity.

Need for Audience Research :

While it is a universal phenomenon that motivation is linked with need fulfilment and self-gratification, the policy planners have put the cart before the horse i.e., presented plans and programmes for development as fait accompli without basing the plans on an assessment of prioritized needs of the population as audience research does not precede programming but is always treated as ^{an} expendable tailpiece.

Gandhi's philosophy was based upon opinion surveying through walking tours of villages, train journeys while mixing with the masses to know their feelings so that his viewpoints had the broad consensus of the Indian masses.

Now, what is required in communication planning in India is to evolve policies giving priority to meet people's viewpoints — aspirations, hopes, fears, doubts, worries, grievances — and then to utilise appropriate communication agencies, technology, and structures to fulfil these needs.

The Committee appointed in 1977 for ^{the} Study of Autonomy for Radio and TV headed by the distinguished journalist and media scholar, ~~Mr. B.G. Verghese~~ in its two-volume report gave priority to audience research and feedback units as an integral part of radio and TV network in India. The committee had also suggested the need for introducing small, independent, franchise radio and TV stations where creative programming by educational institutions can be introduced in the service of the local community. This would break the monotonous set up of radio and TV and give the audience a fresh whiff of air.

Priority for Rural Sector :

A recent healthy trend in India is the increasing realization of the need to develop the rural sector. This is a forward looking approach as ultimately it will lead to an awareness of the relevance of communication to rural change. Also, the value of communication as a necessary input in the developmental process especially in the rural sector is slowly though steadily gaining ground.

Yet, another index of communication awareness is the increase in the number of universities offering training courses in mass communication. From less than 10 during 1960s today they have risen to as many as 25 though only about a dozen have courses embracing the broad range of the discipline. The University Grants Commission which until its Fourth Plan (1969-'74) did not have a subject committee - as in any other discipline - to study the problems of communication, has now set up a Panel on Modernization of Mass Communication Education and updating training facilities. Several states in India - Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra - have now more than one university offering communication courses. Five years ago, in some of these states there was not even one university offering such a course. Another pointer is the fact that many national management and administrative training institutions have started including courses or extension lectures on communication to their senior and middle level executives. Both public sector industry and private management training institutions including banks organise lectures on communication for their trainees although these are still in the infant stages and are few and far between.

National language news agencies like Samachar Bharathi with nationwide teleprinter network have started functioning from district headquarters thus catalysing the flow of rural news and views to newspapers,

radio-TV and other organs of communication.

The Indian Council of Agricultural Research has stepped up its extension role in a new move (1978) called "Lab to Land" programme where research findings and innovative techniques have to reach the field workers for application with minimum time lag.

India has completed the first year of the National Adult Education Programme (NAEP) which stresses on functional literacy, adult education and rural development. The programme covers 230 million illiterates in the 15 - 35 age group using the heaviest investment so far - Rupees 3000 million to 5000 million (\$ 625 millions) during the next 4 years.

Recognition to Indian Languages :

Many states in India have now compulsorily introduced the regional language of the state for administration including its use in the lower courts. This step is a milestone in communication planning as the dominance of the alien English Language on the elites is on the wane and, before long, it will not be possible for the business executives, the university professors or the administrators to function in the medium of English alone neglecting the frames of references and perceptions of the majority of the Indian population. While most universities today offer courses in Indian languages, English continues to dominate science, technology, medicine and engineering courses and at master's degree level in other disciplines.

Industrial Boost :

Of late, industrial production in the country has marked a steep rise. Foreign exchange earnings improved appreciably and exports outstripped imports after 1977. India has the third largest skilled manpower force in the world; it is the tenth largest exporter and has moved from exporting traditional items like tea, jute and sugar to sophisticated industrial goods like ^{electrical transformers, machine tools,} railway wagons, engineering ^{turn-key} ~~plants~~ to developed countries. In brain power and technological knowhow, India presents tremendous potentialities. But its communication policy choices and infrastructure are not relevant to the needs of a developing country.

Technology and Human Factors :

In any communication development scheme very often priority is given to the hardware aspects - transmitters, TV studios, coaxial cables, microwave dishes, computerized data-processing systems, and now the satellites. The engineers and the technologists have a field day influencing the decision makers. The bureaucrats who always view in terms of size of the investment concede the plea for the technological hardware and wherewithal. No doubt, infrastructure is a necessary input in any dimension of communication policy. But what is equally relevant and less expensive in a country like India is the need for proper training of media personnel who have the right aptitude combined with effective media skills. Building up of a large cadre of insightful communication personnel at all levels for all media - extension, radio,

TV, field work, films division, information, visual publicity, etc.-

is an imperative that demands perspective planning.

Trained Media ^{Researchers} ~~Personnel~~ :

No communication strategy will become effective unless there are trained media and audience analysts and content monitors. The approach to programming based upon audience need is yet to take deep roots in the communication policy planning in India. In fact, before a radio or TV station is started, the prerequisite is the setting up of an audience research wing to determine ^{the} audience profile. But in reality even such well established (1972) TV stations as Bombay, have added audience research units as an appendage to programming at the end of the seventh year of its functioning (1979). Not even a dozen All India Radio stations have Programme Advisory Committees which are entrusted with the responsible task of ascertaining the effectiveness of programmes.

While it is true that India should keep pace with the technological developments, including the newer technologies of communication, such as transreceivers, video technology and scores of miniaturised transistor innovations, the point not to be missed is to blend the usefulness of the newer technology with the needs of the native audience.

Communication : A People-oriented Process :

No less important is the essential need for the planners and policy-makers to realise that communication and development are co-operative, participatory and voluntary processes very often initiated by people in an environment of freedom of speech and action.

If communication is planned, designed and produced by those who belong to the community for which the programmes are meant, it would become more relevant to the needs of the population. Also associating opinion leaders — rural, youth, industrial labour, etc. — and actively seeking feedback will help improvising the programmes to meet the tastes of the audiences.

An Effective Strategy :

The approach to communication planning in India should be based on the premise that development communication does not mean telling the people what the government is doing but sharing with them what other self-motivated groups of people are doing. While governments everywhere would be interested in projecting their image, communication policies of former colonial countries including India have a central direction and the policy hang-overs of the past tend to give wrong news priorities. The planners tend to believe that the communication of government developmental activities is equivalent to development news. They forget what the people in small communities, slums, villages do.

In reality communication strategy should give :

- (a) scope for people's access to media of communication,

- (b) peoples' right to communicate which will trigger off the motivation of small groups to carry out changes within their community or immediate environment.

Communication research findings indicate that development takes place in a local context with a decentralised set up giving scope for meaningful people's participation for controlling their lives and the environment.

Access to Media Encourages Initiative :

Furthermore, development and communication are local and concrete in their manifestation with interaction between the medium and the environment. This presupposes that media should be accessible when people can show initiative, motivated through effective channels and networks of interpersonal ^{and mass} communication.

Democratic Two-way Channels :

The concept that communication is a democratic two-way process of receiving and giving with multi-level interactions has yet to escalate to the highest echelons of powers in India. Governments have changed — even parties in power have changed at the federal and state levels — but strangely, the concept of media as an appendage to government publicity persists. However, there have been some positive forces: especially the need for media autonomy voiced by the Southern State of Tamil Nadu — (Madras) based party, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and its sub-variations which have even challenged the Central government's monopoly over radio and TV. But these are stray sparks in an otherwise staid atmosphere in the sub-continent whose British colonial legacy of centralized media control and mental kowtowing to the BBC radio network and holding The Times as the exemplar of the press have yet to be fully outgrown.

Appropriate Policy Choices :

The relevant communication approach to India with appropriate structures and functional agencies will focus on the primacy of the regional language, give priority to the sub-regional needs and wishes of the population, concede the decentralisation of media with access to the public, cognize the importance of feed-back collection and base policy formulation as a response to need assessment and continuous evaluation of feedback. Also, there has to be a distinct awareness that urban programmers cannot meet the aspirations or understand the idiom of the rural population and that the priority must be for rural communication policy without necessarily sacrificing urban industrialisation and aesthetic development. A scientific policy of communication demands as a pre-requisite the thorough understanding of particular details and blending them with the overall general objectives. Now Through these approaches one can more effectively use the appropriate technology for meeting felt needs of the population.

Cross-roads of Direction :

India is at the cross-roads of a major national election slated in the first week of 1980 while a caretaker government is in power today. ~~Under~~ such circumstances, it is difficult to discern a clear-cut and long-term policy.

A report of major import submitted by the Committee for Autonomy for Radio and TV which was a breakthrough in the conservative and centralised media atmosphere has been placed in the cold storage for the time being. The Second Press Commission whose objectives include focus on the needs of small and language papers is today immobilized though given an extension of tenure. The once dismissed (during the Emergency, 1975-'77) Press Council has been revived though its impact has yet to be felt. But the press seems to be asserting its right to communicate.

In such an atmosphere marked with partial doubt and uncertain hope, one could still see ~~the~~ the glimmer of hope. The real need in the country is for evolving an appropriate policy structure with functions that foster communication for development and thus accelerate the process of change and modernization suiting the heritage and resilience of India's genius.

A country that gave birth to the humanistic philosophy of Lord Buddha and the ethical socio-political conviction of a Mahatma Gandhi can meet the challenge of change and the promise offered through appropriate communication planning for national development.

India : Relevant Communication Media Statistics

(Projections for 1978-'79 based on 1971 census)

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Population and Literacy Rate

Population	:	630 millions
Growth of population	:	2.8% per annum
Urban population	:	23% (Located in 400 districts, towns, state capitals and metropolitan cities)
Villages	:	0.58 million (cover 77% of population)
Literacy	:	32%
Men	:	43%
Women	:	21%

Newspapers

Total dailies	:	875
Total daily circulation of papers	:	10 million copies
Projected Ratio of circulation	:	18 copies per 1000 persons

All India Radio (Akashvani)

Total Radio Stations	:	85
Radio Receivers	:	30 million sets (All India Radio has a geographical reach of 95 per cent of India in the home services)
	:	50 sets per 1000 persons

Television (Doordarshan)

	:	17
Urban TV Stations	:	9 - Delhi - Mussoree-Simla (Relay) Bombay- Poona(Relay), Calcutta, Madras, Amritsar-Jullunder, Lucknow, Srinagar.
SITE Continuity TV Stations : (Focus on Rural Programming)	:	7 Ahmedabad (Pij), Jaipur, Raipur, Sambalpur, Hyderabad, Gulbarga, Muzafarpur.
TV Receivers	:	0.90 million Approximately 0.85 sets per 1000 persons.

Cinema Houses

Permanent Movie Houses	:	6450)
Touring Cinemas	:	3100)-- 9550
Cinemas seats	:	5.2 million
	:	10 seats per 1000 persons
Annual Feature film production (Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and main film production centres).	:	400 - 425

Extension Setup

Number of villages	:	575,936
Number of Village Level Workers	:	67,014
Community Development Blocks:	:	5,040
Block Development Officers :	:	4,900
Extension Officers	:	24,500

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