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The ever-increasing cross cultural expansion of the technologies and hardware of modern communication has begun to be accepted as a distinguishing trait of the times we live in. The super-efficiency of these communication techniques tends to gather vast segments of the human community into one massive global audience, sharing the identical message transmitted through advanced means of communication. "Live-Aid", the Rock Music Festival, that was staged simultaneously in the U.S. and the U.K., was seen and heard "live" by an estimated audience of 1.8 billion people all over the earth. The message leapt from country to country across oceans and continents, over a series of satellite relays unifying communities of diverse cultural backgrounds, into one tremendous communications brotherhood of shared common experience.

If cultural demarcations and man-made boundaries dissolve in the presence of such communications events, it seems legitimate to pose the question whether the cultural identity and the national make-up of a given community make an important difference to the manner in which that community reacts to a given message.

The question could be worded differently. Does the past of a traditional culture, determine the manner in which it reacts to communication today? Or else, does the universal presence of electronic and print media make people everywhere respond to communications messages in one stereotyped style, irrespective of the specific cultural background of a given receiver?

The inescapable truth in this instance is that, in spite of the shared utilization of modern tools of communication technology, societies and communities are deeply influenced by the value systems and ideals stemming from their own cultural environments.

In discussing the Buddhist viewpoint, however, I am confining my remarks to the experience of Sri Lanka. It is predominantly a Buddhist country, since the introduction of Buddhism in 221 B.C., and the majority of the people live in rural areas and are engaged in agriculture as their main occupation. Their value systems, both in spiritual and material pursuits will, I believe, invariably raise echoes in many an Asian culture.

In Sri Lanka, the dominant role assigned to religion and to the Buddhist clergy in the organizational structure of traditional communities, imposed until recently, a hierarchical pattern to the sending and receiving of messages. When a Bhikkhu (Buddhist Priest) delivers a formal sermon to a congregation, he addresses his hortatory remarks to one single individual who acts as the representative of the total audience. The formal responder limits his reaction to "Yes, Your Reverence" (Ehei Swamini). As a result of the entrenchment of this pattern of communication in rural communities, authoritative messages received at village level tended to be accepted with little or no feedback. The slow pace of progress in the spheres of social development, especially in the rural sector, until very recent times, could be traced to this communication pattern. Even a vital development message, that has to be examined and put to fit use, tended to be considered merely as something that should only be listened to.

The continued existence of the hierarchical system of communication is surprising to some extent, because it is completely contrary to the true spirit of Buddhist thought. The unique feature of the philosophy of Buddhism is its liberal attitude, advocated about 2500 years ago, long before such liberal values began to be widely upheld by Western systems of thought. In an oft quoted sermon by the Buddha, He advises the Kalamas how a message has to be accepted, "Not because it has been said so by a

3.

teacher, or because it is the tradition, but only if it is found to be correct on your own examination." With the passage of time, however, this liberality was relegated to the background, as the masses grew into the habit of unquestioning acceptance.

Nevertheless, in some instances in Sri Lanka, modern communicators have been able to exploit the religio-cultural resources of the rural sector. Some communicators have couched their development messages in functional forms, derived from Buddhist religious practices, in a significant effort to utilize the deep-seated Buddhist values in the rural culture.

Perahera (The Procession) is an ever-present form of religious function in most of the villages in Sri Lanka. Traditionally these are associated with veneration, high respect and community participation. When a development message is communicated with a procession as its vehicle, the traditional values associated with the Perahera are automatically transferred to the new message. The new message thus acquires a special social sanction bordering upon the religious.

For example, Perahera (The Procession) has been utilized with considerable effectiveness to disseminate messages of environmental protection.

The current tendency to make extensive use of Buddhist rites, rituals, occasions and sacred days, as means of communicating non-traditional messages, symbolizes a recognition, though slightly belatedly, that the Western concepts and theories of communication cannot be bodily transferred to Sri Lankan contexts.

In a State-sponsored innovative measure, associated with recent agricultural development, the age-old practice of ceremonially commencing the rice cultivation season (Wap Magul, in Sinhala) has now been revived with tremendous success. The traditional practice has been for the King and Court to go down to the rice fields, along with the generality of farmers to inaugurate the cultivation cycle with the King himself leading

the ploughing team. This royal ceremony elevated a routine agro-activity into high drama, charged with the potential, not only of effective communication, but also of fully mobilizing the communal effort endowing this seemingly humble pursuit with a sense of dignity and prestige. This modern exploitation of traditional practices for purpose of a communication effort to fulfil a contemporary need, has been possible because, even in latent form, the Buddhist cultural make-up is still present in the Sri Lankan Buddhist community. How wholesome this cultural discipline has been, is highlighted by the visitors to the 6th century rock fortress of Sigiriya, adorned with frescoes of maidens of alluring charm. The ancient painters have depicted these beautiful maidens in their bare-bosomed form. The point relevant to our context is that the graffiti etched by ancient visitors to the site (who were made up by and large of the masses of the land who lived in the seventh to tenth centuries) do not contain even a vestige of unseemly references. On the other hand, their observations are distinguished by a high and sophisticated lyrical quality of rare sensitivity and refinement. This reaction was not at all forced but voluntary and spontaneous and was the outcome of a cultural attainment, determined by the Buddhist outlook that pervaded their lives in their totality.

What is essential to be asked here is whether the modern theories of communication apply effectively in a social context that has been moulded by such religio-cultural concepts. We have to respond unhesitatingly that modern theories of communication are vehemently valid, even in such a culture, as that of predominantly Buddhist Sri Lanka of today.

Here, what I have in mind is the theory of communication which stipulates that the reception of a message is always determined by the background of reference of the receiver or the receiving group. Given this situation, the effectiveness with which a message can be communicated to a Sri Lankan receiver will depend on the extent to which the sender of the message understands and imbibes the unique properties of Sri Lankan Buddhist culture. Therefore, what has to be appreciated is the fact that, while adhering firmly to the theory of communication evolved in the West, we have to probe deeply into the attitude to communication of the Sri Lankan

masses. For that purpose, it is not only desirable but also essential to fathom the cultural depths of the Sri Lankan community, in terms of communication, which, in turn, makes it obligatory to examine how they have attuned themselves over generations to the process of exchanging messages.

The 17th Century British Sailor, Robert Knox, who had lived among Sri Lankan peasants and farmers for 18 years, has set down revealing observations in his memoirs entitled "An Historical Relation of Ceylon," regarding the communications behaviour of the Sri Lanka villager, who is a product, essentially of a Buddhist culture. Knox has recorded that, when a villager visits a neighbour with a receptacle in hand to borrow some curd, the host will enquire why he came. According to Knox, the visitor will invariably reply: "I came just for a visit" ("nikan awa").

In this communication pattern, what is evident is the care with which a harsh directness was avoided with admirable grace. In modern communication parlance, theorists talk about the "wow" and "flutter" which are indirect messages that, to a great extent, modify the harsh impact of a directly communicated message. In the West today, communicators may introduce "wow" and "flutter" described by some also as "noise" as a deliberate technique to cushion the impact of a "core" message.

But the Sri Lankan villager (whose communication style had been so keenly observed by Knox), has resorted to the indirect method to leaven his message as a spontaneous outcome of his inherited traits. Extending this finding to modern communication situations, the communicator, planning to reach the rural community with a modern message, could very well utilize the villagers' built-in proclivity to indirectness as exemplified by Knox's peasant. These communication graces inculcated primarily by the religious-social inheritance, has also made the generality of the people in the country better listeners, more tolerant and sympathetic responders to communicated messages.

Here, I like to recall my earlier remarks regarding the sermons delivered by the Bhikkhus and the acceptance of them unquestioningly. I pointed out that this determined a form of communication behaviour in which

6.

"feedback" was largely lacking. However, the habit of careful listening probably demonstrated that this practice is not bereft of some compensatory virtue in its own way.

When we require, for purposes of modern developmental tasks, a feedback - intensive communication process the prerequisite for it - namely, careful listening - was already embedded in the Buddhist communication mode. Whatever may be the seeming newness and the alienness of a modern message, the communicator of today, if he is sympathetic to his audience, and is adept in the make-up of the cultural life of the receiver, must acquire an idiom of communication with which he could readily reach his target audience.

Buddhist culture has conferred upon the communicator and the communicatee, a massive lode of concepts that could be shared for complete mutual rapport. For instance, Buddhism has endowed the Sri Lankan culture with a whole host of stories, fables, anecdotes and sermons which an innovative communicator can adopt to fit into a new communication context.

Therefore, in Sri Lanka, we have, as a consequence of the evolution of Buddhist culture, a society replete with communication co-ordinates which will yield their communications effectiveness to those communicators who are ready to adopt modern theories in a manner that will not go counter to inherited cultural legacies.

The advanced technologies of communication begin to affect the message itself. A Communication System is a process that evolves perpetually. In that situation, the cultural patterns themselves start adapting to new demands of communication. To quote an instance, we can observe the changing attitudes towards a sermon. Today, Buddhists can sit comfortably in their chairs, listening or viewing a formal sermon, which is broadcast or telecast. This would have been unthinkable a generation ago. Therefore, even communication environment itself (once more to use the Buddhistic term) must necessarily be in a perpetual state of flux.