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Socio-Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Development and Communication

By

Anura Goonasekera
Anthropology has a long history. It has different contents and several sub-traditions. We cannot speak of a single tradition or approach. The following diagram highlights the various traditions within the field of anthropology.

In most anthropological studies one would find a mixture of these traditions. But the dominant emphasis would be on one of these.

In this presentation I will include ethnographic studies and ethnomethodology within the term socio-anthropology. Ethnography is a description about particular people. In writing about particular people the ethnographers generally spend a long time—some times many years—living among the people he/she is studying, participating in their lives, talking with them and recording observations and interpreting their communicative conduct. This method of study has been referred to as participant observation. It is a method used generally but not exclusively by anthropologist. Sociologists and social-psychologists too sometimes use this method to gain insights into the communities they are studying. On the other hand anthropologists would use methods other then participant observation. They use secondary data analysis, interviews of key informants and examine historical and archeological material. These studies are not exclusively qualitative and descriptive with no counting involved. It is certainly not unfocussed observations nor is it
atheoretical. The obvious connection between social anthropology and communication studies is that both focus on human social conduct. In this sense the two disciplines form part of the family of subjects we loosely refer to as the social sciences. The subject matter of both anthropology and communication studies is the "knowledgeable human agent". People know a great deal about their communities and of their relationships with others within and outside their communities.

Similarly they know a lot about communication in their communities. It is this practical knowledge that makes it possible for them to live together in society. It is this practical consciousness of individuals in society that is the focus of study of all social sciences. This practical consciousness is based on an awareness of what is expected behaviour in society. It is like second nature to them. This is what makes social life possible. But these individuals doing all these complex social things cannot necessarily give a discursive explanations of their actions. Take communication for instance. To speak a language a person should know correct grammar and syntactical rules. But a common man cannot give a discursive account of the rules of the language he is speaking. I am reminded of the story of the man who suddenly discovered that he has been speaking prose all his life. It is the role of the linguist to study the structure of the language and give discursive accounts of it.

It is this practical consciousness of individual agents that make the subject matter of social sciences distinct from the subject matter of natural sciences. Human agents interpret subjectively the expectations of other human beings and orient themselves accordingly. This is the basic unit of analysis in communication studies as well as anthropology. Social sciences try to gain an interpretative (hermaneutic) understanding. Unlike in natural sciences the concepts and theories in social sciences apply to a world comprising of conceptualizing and theorising agents. In this sense it is double-hermanuetic (Giddens). Concepts in social sciences are borrowed from lay concepts and social scientific concepts are absorbed into the social world they are coined to analyse. It is therefore interactive and nowhere is this interaction more clear than in social anthropology and communication studies.
How can social anthropology contribute to the study of communication and development? What can be the social anthropological approaches to communication and development studies? I will discuss this under three headings.

A) Theoretical contributions

B) Methodology of Social Anthropology

C) Uses of concepts developed in Social Anthropology

A) Theoretical contributions of social anthropology.

To the anthropologist culture is basic to the study of human societies. It is here that communication and development scholars have a lot to learn from the anthropologists. Most communication and development scholars have failed to incorporate cultural studies in their analysis of communication behaviour. Culture according to the anthropologists is a design for living and dying for people in any community. It includes mores, values, customs, laws and regulations which are passed on from generation to generation through the process of socialization. Culture is basic to any human social interaction. Communication behaviour is therefore cultural behaviour. Cultures could vary from society to society. In fact it is a defining character of a human society. Even within the same society there could exist several sub-cultures. Communication is culturally meaningful action. Communication is mediated through culture. To understand the role of communication in development one should look at communication in the context of the cultures in which it operates.

Values, norms, mores and customs

Cultural practices are based on values, norms, customs and laws which again could vary, from society to society. These values, norms etc are basic to the process of development. In fact early studies of communication and development assumed that mass media could bring about changes in values and aspirations and thereby usher in economic changes in these societies. Such, however was not the experience of many societies. As any anthropologist would point out, values and customs are linked to institutions and to the structure of society. It is therefore not easy to change without addressing a host of other institutional factors in society. An anthropological approach could therefore bring into balance the rather naive view held by certain
communication, scholars that the mass media can bring about social change by changing values and attitudes through their programme content.

Social Structure and Social Function

- social structure refer to the system of social relationships and institutional arrangements in society.

- social function refer to the role that social practices and social institutions perform for the maintenance of the social structure.

- there can also be social dysfunctions.

- concepts of social structure and function are used to analyse the impact of society on individual behaviour.

- social structures, including social institutions, mores, values and customs are considered to have a life sui generis and imposing a constraining influence on individuals. Durkheim (1938) calls these "social-facts."

What anthropological studies have demonstrated is the need to look at the whole system to understand the contribution of each part. The anthropology principles of culture, social-structure, function, values, mores etc all point out to the inter-relationship among various parts in a social system. In terms of communication studies it is important to relate the communication sector as part of this system, having exchange relationships with other parts of the system. Communication sectors in a way cuts across the other institutions in society such as the polity, the economy, kinship, religion, etc. To pluck out the communication sector, be it extension services or mass communication, form its cultural and institutional groundings will not help us to understand its role in society. An understanding of the role of communications in society will need to relate its position viz-a-viz other institutions and practices in society.

The study of two villages called Wangla and Dalena in South India by Scarlett Epstein (1962) is a good example of the use of socio-anthropology for the study of development. What the anthropologist looked at was the impact of the introduction of new technology on the lives of two villages. The new technology was the use of irrigation for agriculture. One village, Wangla, benefited from irrigation. Their productivity went up, land values went up and there was overall prosperity in the village. But this prosperity did not bring about any changes in the system of social, occupational, and caste roles and relationships in the village. The existing social and
occupational roles and relationships were able to absorb and cater to the new demands created by irrigation technology and the attendant prosperity. The other village, Dalena, did not receive irrigated water and therefore was not a direct beneficiary of the new technology. But the people in this village made use of the affluence and the emerging market for specialized services in Wangla by becoming transport-contractors and cattle merchants in addition to wage labourers for the affluent people in Wangla. There were changes in the social and cultural life of the villagers in Dalena. From paddy and subsistence farmers they became minor traders and entrepreneurs using the newly opened opportunities in Wangla. There was indeed a change in occupational structure and these inturn influenced the existing social institutions and values in Dalena.

B) Ethnography as a method

The study of development and communication can benefit by the use of the methodology of the anthropologists. At one level it is direct observations of the activities of a community by living in that community for a long period. The observations are focussed and is on the basis of theory and hypothesis based on theories. It looks at a particular people, their customs, kinship, rituals, religion, symbols and other meanings and values. What makes such people culturally distinctive and what do they share culturally with other people. Communication will be studied as a cultural phenomena. It will be placed within the social organization and the system of social relationships. Inevitably such an approach will lead to the study of both inter-personal and mass communication and the interaction between these two systems. It will look at the various social screens through which information flows within a community. Such an approach, I believe, is essential in the study of village based communication in Asia. Communication does not have a life sui-generis. In such communities, it is part of kinship, caste, ritual and ceremony. Information does not free float. They are mediated through tradition and culture. The social anthropologists who has studied village and tribal societies intensively have developed conceptual tools which are indispensable for an understanding of the flow of communication in the village communities of Asia.

C) Use of conceptual tools developed in socio-anthropology

How can development communication use the conceptual tools of social anthropologists. I have already touched on this subject in the discussion of culture, social institution, social structure etc. Here I will attempt to focus on a few of the specific tools.
1. Social Institution

The concept of institutions is used in the analysis of mass media to denote bureaucracies or formal organizations that control and manage media. But this is not the way anthropologists use the term institution. Institutions arose in society through habituated social practice with its values, obligations and rights and take a change-resistant form extraneous to the individuals who are subjected to its constraining force. If we are to study mass communication as an institution in the anthropological sense then we cannot confine it to the industry, policies, laws and regulations alone. It should go beyond these to the whole complex of activities in the production, distribution and consumption of mass media material and look at the various historical and cultural roots of its present form. As an anthropologist view the institution of mass communication, its form and content may differ from the legal and the formal, institutional blue print that it is made out to be. The contribution of other social institutions such as the polity, bureaucracies, religion, kinship, the market on the institutions of mass media to shape its present form will become much clearer. The social-anthrological institution of mass media will be embedded in the sinews of the entire social organism.

2. Socialization

Anthropologists have studied the process of socialization and its role in the maintenance of cultural tradition in communities. Perhaps the role of mass communication institutions in the process of socialization is a fruitful area of enquiry. The early studies of communication for development introduced such concepts as empathy, participant personality, need for achievement etc. as important variables, introduced by mass media, which impinge on the process of socio-economic development. From an ethnographic point of view these hypothesised intervention of mass media would be subsumed under the process of socialization. In otherwords, the mass media educate the members of a society as to the socially desirable ways of conduct. In this respect it shares this role of socialization with the family, kin-groups, schools, peer groups etc. Its socializing and also its developmental role will therefore have to be understood in the social context in which it operates and the influences and reinforcements it receives in its role as a developmental agency. For instance anthropologist such as Manning Nash (1974) and Scarlett Epstein (1962) have observed that education of village youth, far from
bringing development and new life to villages, deprive such villages of promising persons who once educated leave the village in search of better prospects. Even those who return to the village, marry into the entrenched families and thereby strengthen the status-quo rather than bring about socio-economic change in the village. It is the aspirations of many villagers to enter the salaried classes in society or the salariat. They do so through formal education and exams. Once a village youth enter the salariat he maintains the symbols and vestiges of that the group. He/She is unlikely to be a vehicle of any change in that set-up. In fact he/she would be a new convert for the establishment and like most new converts would defend the privileges and practices with an increased zeal and vigour.

3. Artefacts

Media studies look at the output of media as contents. This is in keeping with the sender-message-medium-receiver model that is used with various modification in media studies. So in development communication we look at developmental messages, whether such messages are homophylous whether there is dissonance creation or consonance creation etc. Anthropologists perhaps would look at the medium and its output as artefacts. These artefacts would give unique insights to the myths and meanings in society that underlay the continued production of these artifacts. Embedded in these artefacts are morale, worldviews, values and myths that help to explain the seemingly contradictory findings/happenings in the real world. Mass media as artefacts is a reflection of the socialization process, the values and norms inculcated through that process, among elite and professional groups in society.

4. Functional analysis

Functional analysis refers to the ways in which anthropologists look at the communities they study as a functioning whole and how the inter-relationships between social roles, institutions, artefacts and practices serve in maintaining or changing the social order. The "uses and gratification" theory and research in communication also refer to functions of media but these pertain to personal, psychological needs as identified by individual respondents. It is not in this sense that functional analysis is used in anthropology. As a noted anthropologists Radcliffe-Brown comments "the function of any recurrent activity, such as punishment of a crime or a funeral ceremony is the part it plays in the social life as a whole and therefore the contribution it make to the
An anthropological approach would therefore look at the media in terms of its manifest and latent contribution to the reproduction of social systems. It will examine it as a socio-cultural phenomena. The important point is that within the functionalist paradigm media and communication will be placed within the entire social system. Functionalist paradigm will not only look at its impact on individual behaviour such as is common on studies of T.V. and violence but it will also look at the medias' contribution to maintenance and change of the social organization as a whole.

5. The Village

Studies of development and communication in Asia begin by recognising the importance of the village where over 80% of the people live. But most communication studies ignore or are unaware of the conceptual categories necessary to understand village life. In any village, communication cannot be plucked out of the social context, for purposes of study. Communication takes place within the family, the kin group, the caste group, the salariat, the religious groups, etc. Anthropologists who have studied these villages intensively are aware of the complexities. Anthropological studies of the village can provide useful insights to the study of development and communication in rural Asia.

Let me look at two of such insights, Malinowski (1972) refers to phatic communion in Communication in face-to-face interaction. This refers to undirected gossip. But in contemporary villages such gossip can precede discussions of important social and political issues among literate villagers. Such gossip can be very effective in creating public opinion and plays a crucial role in creating a climate of opinion in respect of economic development. These modes of communication though dismissed as rumour are the dominant channels of communication in the villages. Its efficiency is recognised by the political bosses who try to legislate against what they see as rumour mongers - the carriers of gossip. Sometimes the fear of rumour spreading, force official mass media to be objective and accurate in their reports of events such as disasters, even though such reports may not show the powers that-be in a favourable light.

The next is the relationship between external sources of information such as newspapers, radio and television on internal village life. Such media generally carry a different world-view from that found in tradition based villages. Their impact therefore will depend on the
felicity with which they are absorbed into the villagers' ways of thinking and aspirations. The relationship between the external cultural influences from the metropolis on small communities in rural areas in India have posed conceptual problems for anthropologists. Some have looked at it as a co-mingling of a great sanskritic tradition and a "Little tradition" of the village. It is a unique cultural phenomena whereby the charisma of the central value system of society is communicated and absorbed by the myriad of little communicaties in India, thereby becoming closer to the central sanskritic traditions. An analysis of communication process as sender-medium message - receiver is too narrow in scope to understand such relationships between external sources of communication and the internal social process in the Indian villages or in peasant societies in any part of the world.

Finally, I would like to mention briefly some of the problems faced by anthropologists on the uses and application of their concepts and methodologies. First is the generalizability in a few villages say in India to the whole country. Is the village a microcosm of India or is India a village-writ-large? Second are the practical problems of conducting research using anthropological concepts, for instance what is a village? Is it the revenue-village identified by the administrators or is it a Jati village or a Caste village? What are the natural boundaries? Will the villagers perception of the anthropologists influence their behaviour and responses to him? Generally the villagers look upon the anthropologist as an 'outsider' - an official or a government informant, - and their behaviour would be orientated on such an understanding. Then comes the problem of language. Should the anthropologist speak the language of the community under study? Ideally this should be so particularly if one was to investigate communication behaviour. Even if this was possible how could one compose the findings in different language areas and arrive at generalizations?

In what situations can an anthropologist be a neutral participant observer. In villages divided on caste, religion, Jatis, etc will the anthropologist get identified with any such groups in the village that he/she is studying even though the anthropologist himself is absolutely neutral in his conduct. Can he/she avoid getting involved in village feuds, particularly when he has to live a long time in the village? What if the informants in the village decide to play tricks upon the anthropologist by deliberately lying. Margaret Mead found this to be the case forty years after her study of adolescent behaviour in Western Samoa. Anthropological theory or methodology did not help her in her case.

All these are genuine problems for any person who wishes to use anthropological approaches to the study of communication. They are not insurmountable problems. But they do point out to the need to be critical and selective in the use of anthropological concepts and methods for the study of development communication.
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