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Communication for Social Development -
Indian Experience

By

J S Yadava
The contribution of communication to development is well recognised though its precise nature, extent and mechanism still largely elude proper understanding. Any agreement on concept and strategy for development is not easy. The catch phrases like minimum or basic needs, participation, democratisation, decentralisation and quality of life etc. have been used to highlight varying emphasis in policy and planning debates on communication and development. However, any view of development in the ultimate analysis must see development as development of human beings.

Rostow in economic theories and laissez-faire concept of market economy influenced development and communication thinking in most developing countries including India. "Trickle down effect" was central to this model of development. Daniel Lerner (1958) emphasized the relationship between communication, urbanization and modernization which led to the thinking that the greater are the communication facilities the greater or even faster is modernization. Perhaps getting inspiration from such thoughts, the UNESCO in sixties laid down certain minimum norms for media structures and the countries not fulfilling the norms were considered as underdeveloped and deficient in communications, thereby emphasizing the need for expansion of media facilities.

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Communication Scene

In India the significance of communication in equipping people with new information and skills and mobilizing them for their willing participation in various development programmes and activities has been well recognized and emphasized in Five Year Plans, the blueprint of country's development strategies. In the first Five Year Plan itself, the need for understanding and appreciation of the various development programmes and schemes by the people was clearly underlined. In the subsequent plans this concern about communicating with the people even in remote villages has been voiced with increasingly greater emphasis and force. Consequently, all available methods of communication have been developed and strengthened manyfold over the years.

In recent years there is a definite policy shifts in favour of adopting more of new communication technologies to accelerate the pace of development and change. The country is on the threshold of a new communication revolution of which satellite, computer, television and video are major manifestations. The whole country communication wise is technically knit together and the people can have common experience of joy, grief, information and aspirations through the mediation of various means of communication. The communication scene in India is transforming in such fundamental ways that many social scientists speak of the dawn of the "information age".
The number of journals and newspapers at the end of 1986 was 23,616. Of these 1978 were dailies. Newspapers are brought out in 92 languages. The combined circulation of press is about 64 million copies. But nearly 93 per cent of the total sale of daily newspapers is in large towns with a population of over one lakh which account for only 10 per cent of country's population.

The radio is by far the most extensive network. Technically the radio signals cover almost the whole country. However, on an average there are only 4.4 radio/transistor sets per 100 persons. Not only this, of nearly 30 million radio sets in the country, 80 per cent are in the urban homes leaving only about 6 million sets with 525 million rural population.

Television expansion in recent years has been phenomenal. Today TV covers over 70 per cent of the country's population. However, only eighteen centres have television programme production facilities. Further, still only 16 million television sets are estimated in the country. But the growth rate for TV sets is expected to be three million annually in the next three years promising rapid expansion of television in India. Most of the present 10 million TV sets are in metropolitan cities and towns. However, to facilitate viewing in villages and urban slums community sets have been provided in villages and tribal areas. In 1987 the number of community TV sets was estimated to be about 22,250. Still the viewing in rural areas continues to be very limited.
There are about a million videos in the country. The video has reached many small town restaurants, long route buses and even remote villages in some areas serving as a new status symbol and ready entertainment, largely films, for a very large number of people in the country. Though till now video is largely used for entertainment but it has the great potential of being used for education as well.

However, the access to television and video in rural people is still very limited. Same is true of film. Although India is the largest producer of feature films, about 912 annually, the cinema houses in the country are limited, about 11,200 with approximately 11.5 lakh cinema seats, i.e. 7.4 seats for one thousand population. Not only that, most of cinema houses are in metropolitan cities and large towns.

On the whole the reach of mass media in India is rather limited especially in rural areas, among women and slum dwellers. This is mainly due to four mutually reinforcing factors. These are: (1) low literacy, about 36 per cent; (b) low purchasing power, about 40 per cent of the population living below poverty line (c) poor means of transportation for timely delivery of newspapers, or maintenance of radio/tv sets; and (d) lack of relevant information if purposive communication is the aim of mass media.

There is a noticeable association between backwardness or underprivileged condition and deprivation of communication resources.
A study of the "rural poor" who are the target beneficiaries of the integrated rural development programme revealed that the overwhelming majority was not exposed to any of the mass media. Only five per cent of the underprivileged regularly listened to radio.

In the circumstances the mass media are of limited relevance to the masses especially those who are living below the poverty line. They live on just Rs.2 per person per day to meet all their need of food and clothings etc. Buying a cheap transistor set is a luxury they can not afford. Newspapers and periodicals are out of question. Thus the access to media and hence exposure can hardly be expected among the rural people, urban poor and other deprived sections of the society. In the circumstances the mass media in India are essentially the class media.

Further, even at the risk of over simplication, it may be noted that in contents the urban stemp on mass media is obvious to merit further dialation. Consumerism and escapism are the dominant value thrusts in our mass media fare. And entertainment is the major gratification the people seek from the radio, TV and film media. Even newspapers beside giving hard news generally serve entertainment functions as would be obvious from the popularity of glossy film and gossip magazines over the serious information and views oriented newspapers and magazines.
However, despite the limited access and the urban bias the mass media have been effective in communicating hard news, significant political issues, and relevant developmental information. News about major political developments preceding the election get disseminated far and wide and influence the voters choice. Farm broadcasts in certain regions are popular and help farmers about new farm methods. Indepth analysis of media effects show that the mass media are effective whenever the contents are relevant and or of political significance and sources are considered as credible. The interpersonal channels and folk forms of communication are fairly active and make up for the limited reach of mass media in our society. More importantly the interface and interaction between mass media and other modes of communication influence significantly the reach and effect processes.

Be that as it may, the mass media, despite the above listed limitations of access and urban character have far reaching consequences in our society and are effective vehicles of public opinion and even in socialisation process. But more importantly media ascribe prestige and status to new values, norms and practices as these are portrayed in media programmes and presentation.

Development Paradoxes

Any agreement on the concept or model of development is not easy but it would be worth-while to view it as a process which facilitates and results in participation and advancement, both material and social, of the widest possible number in a given society. Viewed from this perspective it will be useful to dwell briefly on as to
what has been the Indian experience. It is now nearly 42 years since India became free and more than 39 years since planned development was initiated. To begin with the achievements, our national income is now three and a half times higher at constant prices, production of food-grains is three times higher, industrial production is five times higher, and electricity generation ten times higher as compared to what these were at the time of independence. There are five times more school students and four times more hospital beds. One third of the scientific and technical personnel in the world are from India.

Then there is other side of the picture as well. Despite increase in food production, the per capita food-grain availability at 460 grams per day is not only low but it is lower than what it was in the early sixties. Half of the world's behind population is in India, nearly 40 thousand children go blind every year due to poor diet and vitamin A deficiency. Nearly 40 per cent of the country's populations live below the poverty line. Nearly 60 per cent are illiterate and so on.

The country's large population (about 685 million in 1981) which has almost doubled since independence, partly explain the disquieting picture of development. However, population increase is not only the cause but is also the consequence of under-development. Enormous efforts and sources have been mobilized over the years to stimulate development and growth in the country.
However, in the absence of structural changes in terms of access and ownership of means of production the benefits of development and growth have largely flowed along the existing grooves. The more resourceful ones have benefited more while the resourceless poor have reaped little benefits from planned development of over four decades.

As a consequence, India may miss the opportunity of using the communication media for widening the base of informed and skilled people for participatory and balanced development. The vision of 21st century may remain empty and the progress towards that goal tardy. While the rich may have a comfortable flight into the 21st century, millions of the poor may still remain stranded into the 19th or even 18th century. The processes of crystalization of two nation's in the country, the nation of affluent and educated and the nation of the uneducated and the under-privileged are being strengthened. As a result tensions will mount as already evident from frequent violence and turmoils in public life in India.

Social Development

Viewed as a means to break out of the poverty-ignorance trap, the relevance of communication to the process of education and human development becomes obvious. Thus, extending communication in all its varied trends from a minority to all of the population is a priority in any scheme of social development. However, the content and mutuality of communication determine its usefulness, apart from the question of access to it.
The right to expression as well as to information is a basic need of children as well as of adults. This need is all the more urgent when a change in the way of life and living is the aim involving breaking away from old systems of tradition and belief even on simple daily concerns like eating habits, hygienic practices, farming methods and the equation with the natural environment.

The communication system in India has steadily expanded during the past four decades to become one of the largest in the world. At the same time, there has been a decline in the 'old information order', based on a rich and ancient heritage including song, drama and dance which still lingers in the village in its ministreals, balladeers, story-tellers, puppeteers and theatre groups.

Communication flows correspond to community structures. To the extent the latter are strengthened, communication becomes more democratic. This precisely represents the present challenge in the face of a fairly rapid, but still inadequate expansion of the modern media. Given the prevailing high rate of illiteracy and the poor means of transportation in much of the countryside where most people live, it was perhaps to be expected that the electronic as well as the print media would cater mainly to the not-so-poor among the urban people. The media themes and ethos are that of urban middle classes. Their 'popularity' with the rural audiences may be the result of band-wagon effect. The urban brethren serve as reference models for the rural cousins.
On the one hand the mass media provide glib entertainment, pander to consumer gulligibility and are becoming an addiction with audiences. On the other, they offer unprecedented scope for communication support for education and social development of masses who are in greatest need of information relevant to knowledge, skills, and their well-being.

Advertising an important form of communication not only affects consumer preferences but also tend to have repercussion on the whole spectrum of human attitudes. The main function of advertising whether made explicit or kept implicit is to stimulate the psychological needs and desires of audiences. Stimulation of desires per se may not be that undesirable. But given the context of Indian economy the question needs careful examination.

How far the life style and consumption pattern shown in many a consumer advertisements are relevant to majority of Indian population? What are their social and psychological consequences for those who can hardly afford these. These questions acquire special significance in context of children whose feelings are intensified and who have yet to accept delays in fulfilment of their needs and desires. What goes into the minds of deprived children in rural areas and urban slums when they watch on television screen children gleefully eating chocolates, noodles or sipping soft drinks when they do not have access to even clean drinking water? One thing is certain, more often than not their so stimulated desires are not likely to be satisfied. In the circumstances, they may grow up with lots of resentments against their parents and the existing social set up. As such, along with the rise
of consumerism and expansion of middle-class values, there is a possibility of the deprived children growing into the adulthood with resentment against the existing order.

Besides facilitating development processes increased communication is making socio-economic disparities, existing or resultant from development, more visible and perceptible to us. The neglect of basic welfare and material well-being of the common man and uneven progress of different communities and regions are contributing to sectarian forces leading to many a conflict and turbulences that are surfacing today. Further, in multi-lingual and multi-cultural society like India, spread of media industry and communication is also at times viewed as a threat to the language and cultural identities.

With the skewed disparities in economic well-being, education and communication resources the present system acts as a fine sieve which filters off nearly 70 per cent of the country's population, preventing it from acquiring any education and skills worth the name. Since talent by all accounts is uniformly distributed in any population, this 'selectivity' implies that a large proportion of our 'gifted' people have no or inadequate opportunities of participating in the challenging tasks of nation building. In the circumstances, there should be no surprise
at poor or midicore performance whether it is research, technology or sports. All talks of 21st century and building of a great nation will remain empty rhetoric unless the base of informed educated and skilled people is not widened sufficiently and rapidly enough.

Indian society remains a pyramid with a very small minority of elites enjoying the benefits of development and a very large majority of poor masses deprived of most of the opportunities of modern life including access to media and education. Whatever benefits are percolating at the lower rungs of the society those are also being resisted and resented. The result is increased conflicts and tensions between various sections which may take communal, regional, ethnic or caste colours.

Of the many choices that are to be made at the general and or more specific levels to evolve a more meaningful approach to communication and social development the fundamental choices would concern about the questions of communication and development for whom and for what?

In India with categorical constitutional commitment for a socialistic, secular and democratic society the media should be for the masses and be geared to bring about improvement in living standards of the commonmen.
But the public pronouncements notwithstanding the media expansion largely has helped consolidation and maintenance of status-quo. The benefits of our planned development over the years have gone to those who are better off. Even the specific plans and projects meant to benefit the deprived sections of our society have been largely cornered by others.

The revolution in new communication technologies may further facilitate the processes of consolidation and maintenance of status-quo amongst myriad changes in the society unless there are structural changes in other spheres as well. There exists strong coherence and close relationship between social structure, communication and the development processes. If the communication technologies are to bring about participatory development then all communications should aim at widening the base of the people, especially from the weaker sections of the society, who are informed and skilled enough to meaningfully participate in and benefit from national development.

The questions of communication facilities and the processes of transferring information, ideas and/or innovations engaged the attention of many scholars concerned with development of traditional societies and the question of social change (Pye, 1963, Schram, 1964; Rao, 1966). However, in late sixties and seventies 'holes' become visible in the prevalent dominant approach to development and communication (Rogers, 1976; Soedjatmoko, 1980). Development on the ground was not fast enough and certainly not with social justice. In India despite spectacular
achievements the development strategies resulted in increasing disparities making even green revolution look red for those who could not take advantage due to lack of adequate resources of land, money, and irrigation facilities etc.

Many scholars and policy planners started questioning and looking for alternatives or improvements in strategies for social development. Integrated Rural Development and other poverty alleviation programmes are the result of this rethinking in India about development concepts and models. As opposed to "trickle down" of benefits through usual development processes the new poverty alleviation programmes are in a way 'bottom up' approach to development.

Social development in traditional societies is not easy because of close inter-relationship which exists between technical, economic, cultural, religious and other social aspects. Even so, social changes take place, which can be viewed as the aggregate effect of individual adaptations to some 'new environment'. Communication plays significant role both in individual adaptation, their aggregation as well as the creation of new environment itself. Increased communication facilities are necessary but not sufficient condition for bringing about development and social change. Individual is important but social system of which he is a part is equally important for his innovative behaviour and participation in development processes and social change.
Access to mass media and other modes of communication is primordial. For this in a developing country like India facilities for community listening, viewing and reading as well should be provided in all villages and weaker sections on priority basis. Alongwith this a movement for district language newspapers with relevant contents need to be launched. Together with structural changes in other spheres if electronic media, district newspapers, adult literacy and civic education programmes, and other development efforts are planned, synchronised and harmonized well then these can be complementary and together can serve the larger national objectives of promoting universal education and participatory development with social justice. This will ensure active involvement of the 'silent majority' which has been largely left out of the development and progress achieved so far, in challenging tasks of nation building.
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