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**Communication Ethics From A South Asian Perspective :
WACC / AMIC**

COMMUNICATION ETHICS FROM A SOUTH ASIAN PERSPECTIVE

WACC / AMIC

WACC's involvement in the area of communication ethics stems from the realisation that (a) the lack of a normative framework has had a profoundly detrimental impact on the global praxis of communications, a legitimate concern particularly in the aftermath of the Gulf debacle; (b) for such a framework to evolve, there needs to be a multi-cultural approach to truth-building, towards the engendering of universal proto-norms of communications; (c) such an exploration is crucial if understanding and agreement are to prevail on the matter of universals, i.e., truth, freedom, responsibility, in an era characterised by the shifting codes of 'situational ethics' (provisional ethics).

Since August 1990, a series of meetings held in the West and East, most recently in Sao Paulo (August 1992) and Seoul (September 1992), explored the canvas of communication ethics from both local-specific and universal perspectives, towards the elaboration of universal proto-norms.

The teaching of communication ethics was, until very recently, a matter of introducing prospective journalists to some of the central axioms of Western journalistic practice, i.e., objectivity, responsibility, freedom of expression, etc. Thankfully, over the last decade the syllabi for communication ethics has also begun to accommodate a concern for the larger dimensions of communication ethics as a necessary corollary to the discourse on 'professional' communication ethics. The new dimensions are situated within a philosophy of language (Habermas's notion of Universal Pragmatics) and 'inter-subjectivity' as the basis for a new moral order (see Pasquali, August 1990). These explorations are contained within an approach that privileges multi-cultural explorations of communication ethics as necessary to the framing of universal proto-norms. In an increasingly 'fragmentary' world, this open, multiple, multi-cultural approach has, in a sense, salvaged the ideal of communication as the realisation of human solidarity.

While in principle the objective of coming to a common understanding of universals is absolutely essential, the task is not easy because of the fact that in terms of both epistemologies and ontological orientations there are, between Western and Eastern notions of ethics, divergences, not only in

terms of the 'understandings' of universals but also in terms of the larger objectives of proto-norms. If, for example, we take seriously Cushman and Kincaid's (1987, p.7) interpretation of the objective of Eastern forms of communication, "Communication becomes (is) the reflective transformation of individual subjective interpretations into sacred institutional interpretations of experience. Such a reflective process is internal to the individual, although it may be assisted by external messages", then the terrain moves beyond the objective of 'morality' to a consideration of humanity's entire life cycle in its pursuit of the 'transcendent'. When 'Dhukka' (Sorrow) is the crux of life, when 'Anicca' (impermanence) is the basis for all life, when 'anatta' (the absence of true self) is the only non-illusion, and when the 'Dhamma' (the Way) consisting of morality, meditation and wisdom is the means to the larger end of Enlightenment, we are presented with a discourse that is inclusive of Western pre-occupations with the self, with inter-subjectivity, but which is, at another level, linked to a purposive, transcendent objective. One could belabour the differences, but the point that needs to be raised is that there are genuine differences in terms of philosophical principles, processual principles and practical objectives between Western and Eastern approaches to the question of communication ethics.

It is precisely in the light of this problematic that we need to consider seriously Cooper's (1989, p.22) injunction that "... the discussion of 'universal principles' and practices must include an analysis of levels. What is united at one level of reality may appear divided at another level. What sounds or looks identical out of context, may be part of a specific, unique phenomenon at another level. As such distinctions, subtleties and levels become apparent, the challenge of identifying both the illusion of universals and universals themselves become far larger and more revealing." There are points of convergence as well. Bhartrhari's 'Vakijapadiya' is a 5th century treatise on Indian philosophical and linguistic thought. It deals with the relationship between 'word and meaning', 'language and human cognition' and the contextualisation of both 'utterance' and 'experience' - matters that are close to the approach taken by Western communication ethicists who have based their work on a consideration of the philosophy of language. That Bhartrhari has privileged the receiver and not the speaker is perhaps a strand that fits in well with our concern for emancipatory,

participatory communication models. But there are hidden levels as well, divergences such as his belief in the intuitive, spontaneous processes associated with decoding, the concepts of 'sphota' (the process of disclosure) and 'pratibha' (an intuitive grasp of meaning) (Dissanayake, 1989). Likewise, 'inter-subjectivity' is the basis for the Buddhist 'Sangha' and its manifestation in the 'Sarvodaya' movement. And this is as well central to Gandhi's approach to communication ethics. In both cases, however, there are imperatives that situate the discourse within a 'hierarchy/authority-harmony' whole.

Apart from the major religions of South Asia that could provide us with understandings of universal proto-norms, there are the smaller religions as well, including Jainism and Sikhism that may provide substantial 'leads' to the formation of universals. As importantly, the indigenous cultures of South Asia, like for instance the Santals of Chhotenagpur, may provide us with a wealth of insights towards our understanding of both 'particulars' and 'universals'.

The major objectives of this workshop will be as follows:

1. To explore communication ethics from a South Asian perspective;
2. To link this with 'lived' reality, and issues of peace, justice and the democratisation of communication in South Asia.
3. To situate it within a larger commitment to evolving universal proto-norms of communications.

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