Media Education In South Asia -
The Indian Experience

By

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MEDIA EDUCATION IN SOUTH ASIA - THE INDIAN EXPERIENCE

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In November 1989, UNESCO adopted what it called a 'new strategy in the field of communication'. The 'strategy' aimed 'to improve the organisation's effectiveness in ensuring the free flow of information on national and international levels, and its wider and better balanced dissemination, without any obstacle to the freedom of expression'. This Major Programme Area IV of UNESCO's Third Medium - Term Plan (1990-95) was termed 'Communication in the Service of Humanity'.

From the viewpoint of the non-aligned nations who were in the vanguard of the struggle for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), this 'new strategy' appeared to be directed at wooing the United States and Britain back into UNESCO's fold. Not surprisingly, the innovative strategy laid emphasis on the need for the free flow of information on a global scale even as it argued for a strengthening of the IPDC 'aimed at developing endogenous capacities in the developing countries'. Further, it argued for 'a media education that would lay emphasis on the development of critical acumen among users and the capacity of individuals and communities to react to any kind of manipulation and would, at the same time, promote a better understanding of the means available to users to defend their rights'. Such an approach to the demand for NWICO subtly deflects attention from the crucial issues involved. (See MEDIA DEVELOPMENT, 1991 ( ) for reactions worldwide).
UNESCO has been promoting media education especially in Europe since the 'sixties. But this is perhaps the first time that media education has come to be intimately linked with the 'legitimate demand' (in the words of the strategy document) for NWICO. According to this 'new' communication plan, media education will focus on 'the development of critical awareness and the capacity of individuals and communities to react to information received'.

The pioneers of media education in Europe, the United States and Australia did not see the subject in the context of, or with any direct linkage to, the new information order. Rather, they were concerned about the future of their own societies, especially about the impact of the modern mass media on the children and youth. Their concern was largely defensive (even moralistic) and they sought to develop strategies to protect the young from the power and the influence of the media. They believed this could be done by turning children and youth into 'critical' and 'discriminating' viewers/readers.

The pioneers took their case for media education to UNESCO and succeeded in formulating a definition of media education, as well as strategies, to counter the adverse effects of the modern mass media, at a meeting in Grunwald in 1982. The Grunwald Declaration on Media Education was drawn up primarily by
Western media educators soon came to take on universal applicability. UNESCO's New Communication Plan propagates a similar type of media education as a response to the demand for NWICO.

During those pioneering years of media education, the non-aligned developing countries were nowhere in the picture. Indeed, most international meetings to discuss media education have been held in Europe, with hardly any participants from the developing world. As though to make amends, UNESCO sponsored 22 participants from the developing countries at a Symposium on media education at Toulouse, France, in July 1990. Yet clearly the dominant influence at the Symposium was distinctively Western. Unabashed attempts were made to promote definitions, concepts and strategies which were not totally relevant to the media experiences and needs of developing societies. Western experiences were passed as 'international' experiences.

ALTERNATIVE DEFINITIONS AND APPROACHES

However, alternative definitions were offered by participants from Africa, Asia and South America. One of the alternative definitions reads: Media education is an educational process/practice that seeks to enable members of a community creatively and critically to participate (at levels of production, distribution and exhibition) in the use of the technological and
traditional media for the development and liberation of themselves and the community, as well as for the democratisation of communication'.

Such an approach points to a more meaningful and relevant media education - from the perspective of the developing societies. Of course, not all developing societies are alike; their information needs, media experiences and cultural experiences differ from region to region. So, adaptations have to be made in the definitions, objectives and strategies depending on local needs, the media situation and available facilities.

This approach places the community at the centre of any efforts in media education. The goals are development and liberation of the community as a whole rather than the production of critically autonomous individuals or discriminating cultures, even the protection of individuals against manipulative media. The concepts of 'development' and 'liberation' (often used interchangeably) have arisen from the need of the economically less-advanced countries.
Another goal of media education, according to the Toulouse definition, is 'the democratisation of communication'. This can be achieved by participation of all members of a community – not just at the level of reception (no matter how 'critical' or 'discriminating' that might be) but more importantly at the levels of planning, production, distribution and exhibition as well. This implies the 'right to access as well as 'the right to communicate in a critical and creative manner through both the technological and traditional media.

The traditional and folk media are far more pervasive than the modern mass media in developing societies, but they do not figure in any media education programmes. Further, the modern media frequently take their themes and formats from the traditional media though they might transform them to suit the medium. The traditional media too, in their turn, are sometimes radically transformed by the cinema and television, as has happened in India, for instance.

The alternative approach to media education thus lays emphasis on the principles of social justice, pluralism in culture, language and religion, and to the fundamental right to communicate. What it opposes and rejects out of hand are globalism, transculturalism and commercialism of every sphere of life and all public spaces.
Indeed, media education is seen as a whole philosophy and culture which respects the local, the popular and the marginalised.

In his 'model for democratic communication, Reyes Matta (1981) places media education (or what he terms 'education for communication') within a framework of public and social policy, especially that related to communications. The model proposes the creation of a coordinating entity and defines the administrative structure within which the media should operate and should ensure the possibility for all sectors to communicate. It is intimately related to the issues of 'access' (the right to receive and emit messages) and active participation (the right to participate in decisions on the content and nature of messages).

Training in media education is thus part of a broader social process which involves the whole social system. If the audience, Reyes Matta (1981) argues, begins to develop an increasingly critical outlook towards the media, towards education for communication not only in the school but also in the entire social system, this type of training will become increasingly important in communication, and to democracy.

**STATUS OF MEDIA EDUCATION TODAY**

Media education has yet to make a mark as a subject of learning in the formal educational systems of either the industrialized or
the non-industrialized countries. Public and private school authorities, though worried by the growth and influence of the mass media, do not see the need for burdening students with a new subject whose content and methodology do not fit into traditional educational practices. The vigorous attempts of UNESCO, for over a decade now, to promote the subject at various levels of education have met with very little success, except in a few countries of the more affluent West (notably Australia, Great Britain and Canada), and in Latin America. In most of these countries, media education has not been promoted by educational authorities but by a group of interested teachers who have lobbied for the subject. Media education has, therefore, been largely a grassroots movement that has spread nationwide and worldwide, much like the grassroots movements in 'environment education' and 'consumer education'. The authorities were forced to sit up and take notice.

In several Latin American countries, media education programmes are organised on a regular basis at church or community levels with the specific aim of training youth, housewives, community leaders and other social groups to exercise their right to participate in media activities, and thus help 'democratize' communications. Media education in Latin American countries has thus become an instrument for the economic and political 'liberation' of the poor and the marginalized.
MEDIA EDUCATION IN INDIA

In most countries of Asia and Africa, however, media education has made little headway. Church organizations in India, the Philippines, Fiji, Mauritius and in parts of East Africa have been active in conducting courses in media education outside the formal curriculum. In India, media education is still at an experimental stage, being kept alive by a few dedicated individuals. Though at least two of the media education projects have been regular courses (outside school hours) for the last decade or so there has been no systematic attempt made to evaluate any of the courses. Where evaluations have been carried out they have been ad hoc and cursory in the form of assessments and comments offered by participants at the end of each course.

Exposure and Reach of Mass Media

Among Indian educationists, media education has aroused little interest. In the first place, the need for it is not felt to be so urgent since exposure to the mass media even in urban areas has yet to reach the saturation levels it has in the West. The mass media in India are, after all, still only a minority media as far as actual access is concerned. The reach and coverage of radio and television, for instance, is no doubt extensive (94% and 70% of the population, respectively), but barely a third of that population can afford a receiver. 'Community listening' and
viewing and fairly popular but both the central and state governments have dragged their feet in the allocation of funds for 'community sets'. The cinema continues to be the most popular mass media but here too access is limited because of the small number of exhibition theatres and mobile units (around 13,000 all told) across the country. In recent years, the phenomenal growth of video and cable across the country has provided small town and rural populations greater access to Indian films. Low literacy levels (barely 37%) and woefully inadequate purchasing power limit access to the press too.

Overloaded Syllabi
Secondly, the syllabi in schools and colleges are so overloaded that it is well-nigh impossible to introduce a new subject as part of the curriculum, or even to add a new unit to existing subjects such as English, the mother-tongue, social studies or environment studies. What is more, the teaching methods are geared to helping students pass the public examinations and then to gain admission to profession-oriented institutes, and to colleges and universities offering higher degrees in arts, commerce and the sciences. Media education just does not fit into this state-controlled and examination-oriented system.
Role of the State

The Indian State plays an important part in education at all levels. The national education policy, the curriculum to be followed, the time-table of studies, the course to be taught, the text materials and the appointments of teachers are prescribed by rules and regulations of the government. A body appointed by the Central Government, the National Council of Education and Research (NCERT) on the recommendation of the General Advisory Board of Education formulates a 'model syllabus' in various subjects for the entire country. Each state then adapts this syllabus according to the needs of each region. In each state, educationists from various districts co-ordinate to formulate the state syllabus.

As a consequence, schools have hardly any choice in decision-making. School authorities can only choose their own medium of instruction and introduce minor changes within the prescribed framework. Currently, the stress is on 'themes' rather than on 'subjects'; so Value Education, Population Education and Environment Education have increasingly assumed much importance. However, it has not been considered advisable to devise separate courses for these 'themes'. Instead, they have been integrated with the subject-matter of the existing areas of the curriculum.
Education Technology

A further reason for the slow progress of media education in India is that few schools (whether public or private) have the wherewithal to be equipped with the minimum audiovisual materials or to have their staff trained in media education. Though more than 50 university departments and private institutes offer courses in journalism and communication, the attempt by and large is to turn out professionals in the media rather than media critics or media educators. Few schools of education impart any training in media pedagogy though much is made of the importance of using audiovisual aids in the classroom. Educational Technology is taught as an optional subject in some schools of education but its relationship to media education is rarely touched on. The media as objects of study do not find any place in the Indian school curriculum. Some universities like Bombay have introduced 'mass communication' as an optional subject at undergraduate courses in arts and commerce.

Non-formal and distance learning systems have started playing an increasingly important role in promoting literacy over the last decade. It is evident that a country as large and as populous as India, with over 575,000 villages and with a student population that exceeds a hundred million, needs a multi-system and a multi-
media approach to education. Since media education is by
definition a threat and a challenge to communication structures
(of which formal education is one) it can perhaps have a greater
impact in a non-formal set-up.

INDIAN EXPERIMENTS IN MEDIA EDUCATION

Media education has been taught since the late 'seventies in High
school classes of a few schools in Bombay, Hyderabad-
Secunderabad, Calcutta and Madras, but as a subject outside the
formal school curriculum. The initiative in all these cities has
been taken mostly by enthusiastic individuals after their return
from communication studies abroad. The support of educational
authorities to this essentially private enterprise has been
rather lukewarm.

1. Media Utilisation Course

The first Indian programme in media education was launched in the
mid-'seventies by the Amruthavani Communication Centre at
Secunderabad. It was called a 'Media Utilization Course' (MUC)
and was directed at high school students of primarily 'convent'
schools in the cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad. It was (and
still continues to be after more than a decade) a voluntary fee-
paying course held once a week outside school hours at the
centre, and not in any school environment. It has published
booklets/textbooks which set out the subject-matter of the two-year course, and also the questions sought to be raised. A close examination of the syllabus and the booklets on each of the mass media (newspapers, radio and television, the cinema) suggests that the history, the language, the technical aspects of production and the types of programmes in each medium are the topics accorded priority. The social, political and economic dimensions do not find any mention. A scrutiny of the MUC's aims reveals that the Centre's approach is moralistic and protectionist.

2. The 'Mediaworld' Project

The Xavier Institute of Communications, Bombay, has since the mid-'sixties been teaching part-time evening professional courses in journalism, advertising and marketing, public relations, photography, audiovisuals and film production, and in recent years television production too. In 1979 the institute started a programme of media education for high school students of Bombay. Like the Amruthavani venture, this too is a voluntary fee-paying course, taught outside the formal school system. Known as 'Mediaworld' the course is run on school premises by a team of practising primary and secondary school teachers.

The main objective of the course is 'to develop a critical attitude towards the media, to foster the creative imagination
with regard to the media and to develop a critical attitude to its values'. The hope is that 'this course completes what the student learns in school, and widens his perception of the audiovisual culture in which we are all immersed'.

The course seeks to achieve its objectives in twelve two-hour sessions spread over two months and a half. Three of the sessions deal with advertising, the next three with newspapers and four on the cinema. The final two sessions are devoted to practical projects like putting together an advertisement, a chart, a poster, a wall newspaper or a scrapbook, and to guided visits to film and communication institutes.

Unlike the Amruthavani course, 'Mediaworld' does not have course books or texts but uses worksheets and printed handouts for discussion and analysis. Some of the questions raised during the sessions are:

- How deeply have the media affected you?
- What kind of films do you see?
- Are they all fantasies or are they based on reality?
- In whose hands is the control of the media?
- Is this control commercial, or political, or ideological?
- Why are advertisements called 'hidden persuaders'? Are all advertisements varnished lies? (Pereira, 1985).
3. 'Educommunication' Project in Tamilnadu

The Culture and communication Institute at Loyola College, Madras, has conducted a media education programme for high schools and higher secondary schools in Tamilnadu since 1983, the International Year of communication. Known as an 'educommunication' programme (after the UNDA term for 'media education'), it was started in response to the Vatican II decree, Inter Mirifica, and to the Pastoral Instruction, Communio et Progressio, of Pope Paul VI (Jayapathy, 1986).

The programme has two main objectives:

1. To impart media awareness and help students develop a critical appreciation of the media,
2. To teach students some skills in mass media and group media.

The syllabus of the course was formulated in consultation with the Xavier Institute of Communications, Bombay. The emphasis in the Tamilnadu experiment is on practical exercises.

4. The 'Chitrabani' Experiment

An equally significant albeit shortlived experiment in media education was carried out in the early 'eighties by Gaston Roberge at the Chitrabani Communication Centre, Calcutta. It was essentially an attempt to get a group of young people to explore
the popular cinema as a form of entertainment, through informal discussion and reflection. Roberge describes his method as 'the method of discovery which is determined in pace and content by the students of a particular group and by the film available at one time'. The method, he observes, is 'synthetic' (many subjects are dealt with simultaneously), 'organic' (it involved all the student's faculties), and 'cyclic' (the same subjects re-dealt with several times at various levels) (Roberge, 1985).

For Roberge it matters little whether you start with film, advertising or any media; what is required is to probe into the 'media environment'. The media, therefore, are not art first and foremost; rather, they are always commodities, experiences and environments (ibid.).

MEDIA EDUCATION TRAINING PROGRAMMES FOR TEACHERS

Media Education programmes can make very little progress without the commitment of teachers. Since 1981 when the first Teacher Training Workshop was conducted, teacher training had been a major priority at the Xavier Institute's 'Mediaworld' programme. Five such workshops were held over the years with an average of 10 to 15 teachers being trained. The workshops focused on audiovisual language and film, combining theory with the teaching of communication skills. The workshops were meant to help teachers increase their knowledge and understanding of the media.
and train them in skills required for meaningful and effective teaching (Pereira and Lobo, 1985). However, few of these teachers have managed to start courses in their own schools or joined the team of 'Mediaworld' teachers. According to the programme director, the aim has been to decentralise the teaching; so when a new unit begins, we organise the course and do the teaching the first year with the understanding that the school should undertake the organisation and teaching the following year. Hardly any school has managed to provide this follow-up, even where teachers have been given the necessary training and orientation' (ibid.).

The teachers of the 'Mediaworld' team would have liked to see media education integrated into the school curriculum, or else, it will be looked upon as a leisure activity which can be easily replaced or dispensed with (Pereira and Lobo, 1985). If media education is not accepted as a part of the curriculum, the subject will not gain entry into many schools, especially those run by the Municipal Corporation. Regular funding from the Government is essential to give permanence and continuity to teaching, to curriculum development and preparation of teaching materials, and to research in media education. (ibid.).

In 1985 and 1986, three workshops to introduce teachers in secondary schools and colleges to the concepts and practices of
media education. The workshops were held in Palayamkottai (Tamilnadu), Secunderabad (Andhra) and Poona (Maharashtra). Only a few of the teachers trained at these workshops are active in media education programmes; the majority of the participants have had no occasion to use their training, except perhaps at an individual personal level.

MEDIA EDUCATION FOR TEACHER-TRAINEES

Besides the course in media education for High School students, and the Teacher Training Workshops, the 'Mediaworld' team was also involved in introducing teacher-trainees in two schools of education to media education as part of the course in Educational Technology, a subject started in the mid-'eighties to upgrade teachers' skills in using audiovisual aids. The students are acquainted with graphics and posters; audiovisual language and film language and grammar. The media are used as a stimulus for discussions, helping the participants analyse the content and merits of the audiovisual medium ... The perspectives of the course open teachers' minds to a new kind of language (audiovisual) and a new pedagogy through communications (Pereira and Lobo, 1985).

Some parent and teachers bodies (such as PTAs) of Greater Bombay have evidenced interest in media education. Members of the 'Mediaworld' team have been occasionally asked to address
parents, teachers or youth groups on the mass media. These occasions have been exploited to introduce the groups to the need for media education in the family and in schools.

In 1990 the University of Poona introduced a short course in media education as part of the Master's programme in Communication Studies. The course focuses on four main areas of media education: Definitions of Media Education; Approaches to Media Education; The Indian Experience of Teaching Media Education; Strategies in Teaching Media Education; and Research and Evaluation in Media Education.

CONCLUSIONS

Some broad principles and concepts can be garnered from the four experimental ventures in media education in different parts of the country. The common approach is underscored by a definite 'pro-values' rather than a 'value-neutral' orientation. The
values sought to be promoted are Christian or at least broadly humanistic. Further, the approach to the technological media, such as the cinema or the press is critical but not entirely negative. The tendency though is to look at media products as art forms rather than as popular cultural forms with an aesthetic very different from that of traditional art or literature. Further, the media are for the most part considered in isolation, rarely in relation to each other and hardly ever in a sociocultural or socioeconomic context. This is characteristic in particular of the Amruthavani approach. Where the analysis of the media is concerned there are few principles that are enunciated to guide students and teachers. Most analyses stop at the content, instead of moving on to probe questions such as those related to authorship and production, or to the media as institutions and industries. In sum, the media-centred approach of the Indian projects (like many of the projects worldwide) leaves little time for the larger social context in which students and teachers experience the media. The media focussed on in most of the programmes are the cinema, television, and the press. Radio - the mass medium with the widest reach in India, the music industry, the folk media or people’s media do not figure in any of the programmes. Nor do computers, telecommunications and the ‘new’ technologies. Computer education / literacy is becoming a widespread urban phenomenon because of the employment potential (so the claim goes).
However, computer education as an attempt to understand the implications on introducing computers in the workplace, in school and at home, is not discussed. This is where media education comes in and looks at computer technology as a subject for study, just as much as media are subjects for study rather than as technological tools.

Pedagogy for Media Education

The pedagogy adopted in the media education projects is fairly open and loosely structured because of their non-formal setting. No course admits more than 30 students, thus making it possible to have group discussions and practical work in small teams. In the formal school setting, classes often have up to 60 students in small classrooms where the talk-and-chalk or lecture system alone makes sense. This is the greatest advantage of teaching the media away from the formal school environment; it allows for an openness and a flexibility in curriculum and pedagogy. At the same time, without the support of the school system, media education projects tend to be ad hoc, taking place occasionally, without any systematic organized study over time. In fact, they tend frequently to be one-shot affairs with little or no follow-up. In the Indian context, media education can become a serious subject of study only as part of formal education; else, it will remain at the project or experimental level, and of little significance.
Piecemeal approaches to media education, as is very common among some church and social action groups in India, will have little impact. Media education will need to be integrated into public policy on communications technology, education and development. Except at higher levels of education (say in schools of education and schools/departments of communication) it need not be taught as a separate or discrete discipline. The media education—as-discipline approach takes the media (traditional and technological, old and new technologies, etc.) out of their social context, and gives them an unwarranted status.

Excessively zealous proponents of media education have exaggerated the manipulative power of the media, and the susceptibility of audiences, precisely because they have placed the so-called media at the centre of social, cultural and political life. This is a clear distortion of the actual role of the media in developing societies. Moreover, the modern media do not necessarily have credibility or the persuasive power they would love to have. It is presumptuous to believe that only those who are educated and the literate are questioning in their attitude to the media. However, if the state (which controls the media) desires the state (which controls the media) and the media accept this role, then the state will succeed in the control that it desires.
clout with the powers that be than academics. Further, integrating the media into the curriculum would give them a certain academic status. Also, criticism of the government-owned or business-owned media would not be taken in the democratic spirit needed. Power elites, in any case, would not like to disturb the status quo. Finally, the mass media do, after all, serve the interests of the ruling party. Since media education is a direct threat to such interests there is little likelihood of any encouragement from such a source.
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