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<th>Communication research in India : an overview</th>
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Communication Research In India : An Overview

By

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by

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COMMUNICATION RESEARCH IN INDIA: AN OVERVIEW

BY: Sunil Misra

India.

Background:

India is a large country. The population is around 800 million, inhabiting 90 distinct Soil-Crop-Rainfall regions and 60 identifiable cultural zones. The people speak 15 national languages and more than 150 important dialects. Wide variety of life styles, poverty, deprivation, illiteracy, disparities in consumption patterns and strong group dominance over individuals, coupled with limited mental horizons and low level of aspirations, pose enormous barriers to effective communication. Nearly, two-fifths of India’s population lives on the fringe of poverty and requires protection and welfare measures more than the support for development. Its information needs as such are different from those of the privileged sections of society.

More than 75 per cent of India’s population lives in villages. Traditionally Indian villages have been described as 'self-contained little universe'. These are close knit social entities bound by symbiotic relations, where different groups in social hierarchy depend on each other for survival. Members belonging to different groups are obliged to perform their caste specific functions as a service to other groups and get remunerated according to fixed norms. This system promoted occupational specialisation and, to a great

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extent, eliminated the possibilities of competition, tension or conflicts between different groups. It also protected the interests of the economically backward segments of society and thus ensured their survival in a predominantly consumption-oriented subsistence economy. On the other hand, this system also inhibited social and economic mobility and resulted in resistance to change.

Development involves the two elements, growth and change. In the Indian context, this meant making an inert population conscious partners in the process of nation building as also transforming the stagnant social institutions to keep pace with fast changing technology. In the recent times, however, the social situation is changing at a much faster pace than ever before. This has mainly happened because of the introduction of new agricultural technology, increased physical mobility of people and greater exposure to mass media.

The period beginning early Fifties was significant for the fact that fundamental changes were taking place in the Indian society with profound impact on the social and cultural life of the people. *zamindari* (landlord-tenant cultivator) system was abolished in many parts of the country. *Panchayati Raj* (elected village councils for local self-governance) was introduced to replace the traditional councils of hereditary leadership. Community Development Programmes were launched and peoples' participation was sought through the extension agencies. The health services were reorganised and expanded to reach the remotest corners of the country. Introduction of new technology not only brought about transformation in the agricultural practices but also gave rise to a new group of specialists. As a cumulative effect of these measures, the basic institutional structure of the Indian society underwent considerable change.
Communication: Status and Strategy

The programmes of planned development were backed up by massive communication support which included mass media, folk media and the interactional channels such as the official extension workers and the village leaders. The preceding few decades have witnessed a tremendous expansion in the network of tele-electronic media. All India Radio which had only six stations at the time India attained independence from the colonial rule, in 1990 covers 98 per cent of India's population with its 98 main stations, 30 Vivid Bharati (light entertainment channels) stations and the recently commissioned National Channel. Indian television, during the Eighties created a sort of record by installing around 500 transmitters and thereby providing coverage to 70 per cent of population. In spite of low literacy and the increase in the prices, the print media have also registered considerable increase during the preceding decade. Technically speaking, the entire population of the country can claim access to one or the other form of mass communication.

In the overall strategy of communication for development, the role of mass media has generally been confined to creating awareness and a climate of acceptance of programmes. The interactional channels on the other hand are supposed to provide specific problem oriented information using individual and the group approaches. Thus, in the total package, specific roles have been assigned to various media and channels. The basic flaw in such an approach is that the mass media tend to become over centralised with little or no contact with the field situation. Thus, at times, the communication over mass media turned out to be irrelevant or redundant. On the other hand, the field functionaries who had to
cope up with the day-to-day operational problems, did not get much communication support from the mass media. In a way, the two functioned independent of each other whereas they should have been acting in tandem as part of overall communication strategy.

Lack of proper and regular feedback from the field level about the specific communication needs of the people was another major lacuna which adversely affected the quality of programmes. In the absence of basic data to identify the information needs of the people or to lay down sound communication policies, themetically stereotyped programming was resorted to with little impact at the communicatees level.

Every medium of communication in course of time acquires a cultural identity of its own. Away from this image, it tends to lose its effectiveness as a means of communication. However, there was no proper assessment of the role that the individual media could play in the overall communication strategy. They, more or less duplicated each other's efforts besides being too general and themetically repetitive. In the process they failed to generate people's response to the expected levels.

The effectiveness of communication for planned change depends upon the following factors:

1. Communication is relevant to the specific information needs of the people. In other words, the communication needs as visualised by the planners must synchronise with those perceived by the people.

2. The message should be in a form and an idiom that the communicatee can identify it as his own situation. Cultural compatibility of communication is an essential condition for its acceptance.
Every society has its own communication system which is essentially informal and interactional. There are specialist communicators in different fields such as agriculture, animal husbandry, health and nutrition, political affairs or even in court litigations. People consult these specialists before taking any important decisions. The structure and organisation of the communication systems differ from one field of activity to the other. Thus, the system for political communication is different from that of agriculture or family planning communication. In the close-knit societies like Indian villages, the indigenous communication system plays a very important role. Much of the information from outside sources percolates down to the communicatee through these communication leaders. Therefore, its acceptance or rejection depends upon the interpretation of the communication leaders.

The communication must be backed up by availability of services and the communicatee must have the resources to make use of these services.

Mass media communication is essentially a one-way flow of information. As such, it may be successful in initiating a process of change but does not have a regulatory mechanism at command to guide the directions of change. Fast expanding networks of mass media have exposed people to situations which are beyond their cultural comprehension or even surrealistic. Such communications have at times resulted in many unintended consequences. The communication policies, generally speaking, fell in line with the general approach to development. It was more to exhort people to accept than to educate them. It was treated as a commodity which could be handed down to the people. The overall result of such policies was that the massive communicative back up to the development programmes could not deliver the goods as expected in the initial stages.
The idea here is not to down grade the communication effort in mobilising peoples' support or in educating them but to emphasise the need for proper planning based on the potential of each medium of communication and a good research and feedback system. In a situation where resources were not unlimited, duplication of efforts by different media could be an avoidable waste. Proper planning will bring about changes in a more regulated manner commensurate with the objectives of planned development.

Broad Trends in Communications Research:

Academic and professional research in the field of communications in India is of comparatively recent origin and, generally speaking, coincides with the launching of programmes for planned development in the early Fifties. Prior to this, ad-hoc studies were carried out on radio broadcasting, print media and commercial advertising. Such efforts, however, were few and far between. Many of such studies did not even conform to the concept of communications research as it emerged later.

In the initial stages a number of studies were carried out with focus on dynamics of change as a result of programmes of planned development and changes in the village institutions. By and large, these studies were academic in nature and content. They concerned more with the processes and consequences of change, and study of communication was only incidental in such researches. The other major contribution during this period came from the extension education and training institutions whose main concern of research was the field of community mobilisation for development and acceptance of innovations. Communication had yet to emerge as a discipline in India.
Different Phases of Communication Research

Considering the wide variety and the large number of studies in the field of communications, it would be difficult to clearly demarcate them into different phases as there would be considerable overlapping. However, for the sake of analysis, some distinction is necessary. Generally speaking, three phases of communications research in India can be identified. The first phase began with the launching of programmes of planned development. In the second phase, majority of researches were carried out on family planning communication. In the third phase, the primary focus of communication researchers was on mass media communication, particularly television. In a way, the period from mid-Seventies can be called as an era of communication explosion. There had been a tremendous expansion in the networks of Indian television (Doordarshan) and radio networks (Akashvani), making use of the satellite technology. During this period, a beginning has also been made to exploit the potential of audio and video cassette technology for education and development.

First Phase - Communications Research related to Community Development

Researches during this phase were taken up primarily to assess the directions and processes of change as a result of transformation of the rural institutional structures, attitudinal and behavioural changes vis-à-vis community development, effectiveness of interactional channels of communication etc. Thematically, these researches focussed on:
1. Effects of extension methods on community mobilisation;
2. Role of village leaders as communication channels;
3. Application of different educational methods and evaluation of their impact;
4. Analysis of methods of individual, group and mass communication;
5. Processes of communication and change; and
6. Role of official functionaries as catalysts of change.

The maximum number of studies during this phase were devoted to assessment of the role of community leaders, diffusion of innovations and the adoption process. On the other hand, much attention was not paid to the role of mass media.

Second Phase - Family Planning Communication

The second phase is marked by a shift from community development to family planning. Early studies in this field were mainly ad-hoc in nature and covered a wide variety of subjects. Later, the Ministry of Health and Family Planning, Government of India, established seven Family Planning Communication Action Research projects and eleven Demographic Research Centres in addition to centres for research in methods of contraception in the country to take up longitudinal as well as short-term studies on subjects related to population control. A very large number of research studies dealing with various aspects of family planning including communication, were carried out during this period. The main focus of these researches was:

1. Knowledge, attitude and practice of family planning;
2. Role of village leaders in communicating with people on the subject of family planning;
3. application of extension methodology in promoting family planning acceptance;
4. impact studies related to various methods of communication;
5. processes of diffusion of messages;
6. patterns of interaction after acceptance of contraceptive practices;
7. mass mailing of printed material and assessment of its effectiveness; and
8. rumours related to family planning and methods to counteract them.

Maximum number of studies during this phase were carried out to assess the impact of the communication programmes on the knowledge, attitudes and practice (KAP) related to family planning. According to one estimate, around 4,000 KAP studies had been carried out by the mid-seventies. Like the first phase, the role of mass media was confined to creating only general awareness. Some researches, however, were carried out to evaluate the impact of wall paintings, exhibitions, films, pamphlets etc. Methodology wise sample surveys were used mostly during this phase. This was in stark contrast to the researches in the first phase where basic emphasis was on village studies.

Third Phase - Development Communication over Mass Media

The period beginning mid-seventies is significant for extensive attention on Government owned media like radio and television for development communication. The imposition of emergency in 1975, implicitly made radio and television as the main agencies of communicating with the people. Satellite television made its entry in 1975 in a big way. Subsequent to this, a very large number of studies were carried out on television
communication for development. For this budgetary support came from divergent sources including the international agencies. This period is also important for a basic shift in the methodology of research. Whereas during the second phase, greater emphasis was laid on sample surveys, the third phase witnessed a movement back to the village studies. The introduction of Holistic approach was a significant contribution towards the study of structural changes with communication over television as an important variable. However, this movement back to the village studies was somewhat different in approach from what had been seen during the first phase. While in the first phase, the main focus was on studying the interactional channels of communication in village societies, in the third phase it was essentially the mass media communication. A few studies during this period were also carried out to assess the comparative effectiveness of radio and television.

Recent Changes:

Initial enthusiasm with television communication is somewhat fading out and is being replaced with interest in video technology. With the result, small group communication is attracting attention. However, many studies have not been published on the subject.

Surprisingly, distance education over radio backed up by correspondence lessons (school on the air approach) has not attracted much attention of the researchers. On the other hand, the educational broadcasts over radio have been evaluated but the findings have not been very complimentary. Distance education over television supported by video cassettes has generated considerable interest, though many
Commercial advertising over Doordarshan has come in a big way. Large number of media research organisations are engaged in carrying out researches related to popularity ratings of the programmes, or generating audience indices mainly for the use of advertisers. A few studies have also been taken up to assess the impact of advertisements on consumer products, their role in demand creation and also their unintended consequences.

Researches on Print Media:

Early researches on print media were primarily carried out to evaluate the effectiveness of the publicity material on development. A number of studies on impact of the pamphlets, folders etc. were taken up by individuals, researchers and in a few cases as projects by the Departments of Journalism and mass communication. However, their efforts have been confined to the readership surveys and content analysis of news. An important development in recent years has been the launching of sponsored researches on national level to assess the readership purely from the perspective of commercial advertising. A number of private organisations are currently engaged in it.

An analysis of general trends of communications research over last three and half decades reveals that there had been a basic shift in focus between the first and third phases. During the first phase, the researchers were more concerned with the process of interactional communication. As compared to this, much greater attention was paid to the mass media communication during the third phase. Similarly, there had also been a shift in the main focus of these researches. During the first phase efforts were directe
to study the village community in totality. This approach perhaps facilitated the study of diffusion, adoption and the structural changes that were taking place in Indian rural society as a consequence of planned change and community development programmes. In the second phase, the attention shifted from community to individual. This had become necessary for two reasons. Firstly, due to the changes in the priorities of development, greater attention was paid to those areas which could make use of the inputs. In other words, it meant making investments in those sectors where quick returns were anticipated. Secondly, practice of family planning being essentially a personal matter, individual and small group communication assumed importance. Perhaps because of this reason, most of the researches during this period made use of sample surveys.

In the third phase, the emphasis changed from individual to family as a unit. The focus, nature and content of communication necessitated such a change in approach. Development communication over mass media, though meant for large population groups, basically involved family as a unit. The publicity and advertising strategies pertaining to insurance and banking, small savings, health and family welfare planning and for promotion of consumer products, were mainly directed to the family as a unit of communication.

A few points emerging out of the general analysis which merit particular mention, are given in the following paragraphs.
1. **The Bandwagon Approach**

Generally speaking, there had been a lack of balanced approach in the field of communication research. There had been a sort scramble from one field of study to the other during different phases. This movement towards the new fashions in research resulted in imbalances as also neglect of many programme areas.

2. **Greater importance to Medium than the Message**

The researches related to mass media in many cases have concentrated more on the carrier of the messages than on the messages themselves. In the process, the difference between the potential of a medium and its effectiveness in communicating with the people against the operational realities and social situation was not assigned due importance. In a way the communication technology itself assumed the role of the master.

3. **Inadequate assessment of Models and Theories**

Most of the models and theories pertaining to communication and motivation, extension education, communication and change, attitudes and behaviour, mass media communication etc., were evolved in the countries where a socio-cultural and economic determinants of behavioural changes were basically different from the Indian situation. The demand creation models which were mostly result of commercial advertising, appeared to be more applicable to the situations where the communicatee had direct access to media, where he had the capacity to take decisions independently, and where he had the necessary resources to back up his decisions. As compared to this, the Indian situation is characterised by group's influence over the individual's decision and lack of direct access to mass media. For most of the information needs, people
depend on their own channels of communication. Poverty and lack of resources, mostly prevented people from making use of the benefits provided under various development programmes or experimenting with a new practice. As such, many of these theories could not be applied in Indian situation. However, the communication researchers did not make much effort to assess the applicability of these models in Indian situation. Instead a large number of studies were carried out to collect information to fit into the available models but to rarely test them in field situations. The KAP studies in family planning are an example of this approach. The model, generally speaking, presumes a unidirectional behaviour change as a result of communication inputs. In the Indian situation on the other hand, behavioural changes are outcome of a series of interactions between the individual and his group members as also a number of other divergent factors.

4. Lack of Methodological Innovations:

Interlinked with the general diffidence in testing the utility of the available models and theories of communication was the lack of initiative towards methodological innovations in communications research. With the result, majority of researches conformed to a set pattern. One major contribution, however, was made by the SAC/ISRO group of social scientists in the form of Holistic studies during SITE.

5. Lack of Understanding of Community’s Communication System:

In spite of the involvement of social scientists in communications research, many notable efforts were not made to understand the structure and organisation of the indigenous communication system. The strong
social ties lead to dominance of group over the individuals. The effectiveness of directed or superimposed communication thus depended upon the favourable participation of the indigenous communication system. This was generally a neglected area of research.

As a cumulative effect of the factors enunciated above, communications research studies have tended to be repetitive resulting in redundancy of information on the one hand and gaps in knowledge on the other. Such researches have not helped to develop indigenous models in the field of communication either.

Basic Issues:

1. Utilisation of Research:

Considerable amount of money, time and energy has gone into communication research over the years. However, not much attention has been paid to their utilisation. A lot of information generated through such researches could have been used in programme planning and development. However, it remains confined to the shelves in the libraries. Even the institutions, engaged in communication teaching and research, have not paid adequate attention to this.

2. Research Reviews:

A number of scholars have carried out reviews of the researches in the field of communications. They have generally focussed on the methodologies of such researches. Many significant efforts have not been made towards utilising the data emerging out of such research. The fact which merits attention is that many such studies, methodological laurnae notwithstanding, contain useful information which could
help in initiating further research on scientific lines. Interestingly, a number of researches which were criticized for methodological deficiencies, came out with more or less similar results as the researches using sophisticated research methods. This raises an important issue on the question of the extent of methodological sophistication in social researches. In a situation where resources are not unlimited, methodological refinement beyond a certain point could be an avoidable waste particularly when there is not much of difference between the results obtained by using the two approaches. The idea is not to promote methodologically weak researches but to take a realistic view. If appropriate results can be obtained using simpler methods of research, over emphasis on methodology may not be necessary.

3. Interlinkage of Theory and Research

Generally speaking, most of the researches in the field of communication in India have not helped in development of theories. As a corollary, research studies have not been attempted for evolving theories but to lend support to what was already available or to prove what was known. The need is to initiate researches on the fundamental issues which could lead to communicative theories more appropriate to the Indian situation.

4. Communication Teaching

There does not seem to be an effective link between communication research and communication teaching. Efforts have not been made to correlate the research findings with the theories being thought. It may also be mentioned in this connection that enough attention has not been paid to the training in research methodology. It has to be realised that theories and models in the field of communications cannot be developed without intensive researches at the field level.
5. Interchange of Experiences:

Presently, the researchers working in the field of communications do not get many opportunities to share their problems and experiences with others. There is a need to have a system by which these could be discussed to solve methodological issues. At present, there is a lack of communication between the communication researchers themselves.

Research Perspectives:

The Asian countries will have to evolve their own models and theories based on the cultural and social situation as also the administrative ethos and the operational realities in their regions. The past experience has shown that many of the models and theories, developed in highly individualistic affluent societies, do not apply to the situations in the developing countries, especially in the field of developmental communication.

The following areas related to communication and motivation merit priority attention of the researchers in the Asian countries:

1. The structure and organisation of the indigenous communication systems, their basic role in promoting or resisting changes and the methods of mobilising their support.

2. The process of decision making starting from the source of first information to the last adviser before accepting a new practice.

3. The role of tele-electronic media in bringing about attitudinal and normative changes; an analysis of their perceived potential and effectiveness in different administrative and social situations.

4. Documentation and data retrieval systems in programme management, counteracting rumours and resistances and collection of qualitative information for bringing about improvements in the programmes.