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Communication For Change: Some Observations

By

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COMMUNICATION FOR CHANGE: SOME OBSERVATIONS

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In this presentation I would like to share with you some of my concerns, some of the questions that have been bothering me and some of the observations I have made in communication. Here I do not criticise, nor condemn but just observe.

Communication has become a sophisticated art in our times and perhaps there may be truth in the statement that whoever control the media control people. Therefore for success of developmental programmes, effective communication is vital. This communication is not to control people but to liberate them, not to brain-wash them but to enlighten, not only to share its knowledge, but also to motivate them to action. This does not mean the people whom we are communicating with are illiterate, naive and useless. It should be said at the outset that illiteracy of the villager should not be confused with having no education. The rural man may not be aware of the urban techniques, but the wealth of experience he has must be tapped to the full. Having said this, let me point out some of the problems that I have observed in developmental communication.

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The author points out some of the problems in developmental communication and suggests the setting up of a rural press. Also provides guidelines for developing a communication strategy in line with the overall project strategy.
For any communication, the place of man's cultural-behavioural patterns is a crucial one. Man's inborn traits and customs quite often thwart communication. Some inborn, invented or thrust cultural patterns are very difficult to break. One of the tasks of the communicator as change agent is to bring or evoke human dignity. I would like to elaborate this point by citing an example. In our seminary we run a youth centre, creche and women's programme for slum dwellers. We also run a hostel at the centre where mainly post-graduate research students, lecturers and a few government officials stay. The seminary also has a canteen. The seminary provided the building, furniture and all the necessary cooking facilities, cutlery and crockery. The idea was to encourage a youth from the slum to run the canteen. A young graduate from the nearby slum who has had some sort of experience in the business came forward to run the canteen. To our disappointment he failed miserably. The main cause for his failure was that he could not come out of his inborn cultural-behavioural pattern and in his case it was the habit of servitude. Although, educationally and physically he and the inmates of the hostel were of the same footing, for him to serve the middle class and to say 'NO' was a big problem. He wanted to please every one and he would reduce the price of the sweets indiscriminately when such suggestions were made by the customers. The problem here was that he was operating from the old idea that he belonged to the weaker
section of the society and was incapable of asserting his rights and was mentally having an inferiority complex. As change-agents how can we make a break-through, through our communication?

More often the communicators assume an ontological authority which fails to establish rapport with the people. Mere fact that I go to a village with an electronic watch and elegant suit and also with an air of academic superiority (consciously or unconsciously) puts off the people with whom you are to communicate. The fact remains that though these physical appearances are irrelevant they count a lot. These people are deprived of even the basic needs of life. Hence some look at my shining shoes and broad belt in wonder and awe but a few others look at me with resentment, and therefore, both the groups fail to listen and to understand what I communicate to them. Some of our seminary students who lived in a village found it very difficult to establish meaningful relationships with any of the villagers until they discarded their western-style trousers and went about bare-chested. This attire attracted the attention of the villagers and helped them to find 'commonness'. The importance of identification is vital for better communication.
The advertising agencies project upper middle class values through their advertising of the products. These products attach certain status and symbolise good life. Even in films, the stories always depict the values of the elite, and the rural folk who view these films try to imitate their heroes. The externals like dress, hair style, manner of speech are imitated, thereby not allowing his personality to grow in the natural habitat. For that matter, even some of us wore tight trousers when it was in vogue though we knew that it was not congenial to our climatic patterns.

There is also a problem of too many people trying to communicate too many things. Along with these, goes the question of what do we communicate and what for?

Now for example, we work in a village where we try to impress on the villages the human dignity and the idea of self-sufficiency and self reliance. This takes a period of persistent and patient teaching and learning with the villagers. What happened was while our group was involved in this kind of work, some voluntary agency came and distributed food, clothes etc., and thereby undercut all the efforts and energy spent to educate the villagers. What do we communicate here: do we communicate our concern and love through our gifts or do we communicate that they have the
potentiality to stand on their own feet and can lead a respectable life without being reduced to beggary?

Some of the volunteers of the family planning or family welfare as it is known now, question the relevance of the programmes. Here, they say, that it is not the problem of population explosion, instead it is the problem of distribution. What can you expect from the communicator who holds this view? They work as change agents but are not committed to and convinced of the policy.

The government mostly uses the agencies that belong to their political parties to promote and propagate their developmental policies and only a very insignificant number of voluntary agencies are entrusted with this sort of work. Here two things happen: One is that the communicators are eyed with suspicion because of their association with political parties and the other is that these agencies fail to do a good job. They come alive fully when they want to use these machinery for election and for party matters. Perhaps this may be inevitable but in a democratic set up, it is crucial that the party policies are pushed to the minimum to maximise the benefit of the developmental projects.

Another example of a lopsided method of communication is, while the urban press prints in bold letters asking the people
to save the forest, the village cultivation officer asks the villagers to cut the trees and reclaim the land for cultivation. What we need here is a national integrated policy and unless we have a tentative national proposal on this, there will always be tension between the urban and the rural sectors.

The question of priority and of the information imbalance also poses problems. For example, the press is an urban phenomenon and it may be too much to expect the press to uphold rural interest. Most of the press in the Third World countries are controlled by industrialists and because of this they hardly criticise government policies. Moreover, even in the news item, the urban oriented news get priority whereas the rural news is not highlighted.

On the very same day when the Indian Airlines crashed, nearly hundred people died of taking illicit brew in a village. The urban press highlighted the air crash - the regional press was also a culprit here - lesser prominence was given to this rural incident. In Delhi, when Naval Officer Chopra's children Sanjay and Geeta were brutally murdered, the urban press lapped up the news and wrote editorials, lengthy articles on crime, murder etc; whereas a bus load of children who were employed in a match factory were drowned, none of the
newspapers highlighted the cruelty of child labour and how the village children were exploited by the big businessman. One more example: The labour strikes and labour demands are always underlined to paint a very dark picture about the labour sector by insinuating that they are unreasonable and irresponsible, lazy and greedy, but an amicable and peace settlement is neither projected nor written about the callousness of the management.

The content of the communication should be suitable to the local situation. What is relevant in Latin American context is sometimes imposed on to Indian context without analysing or even respecting Indian mental attitudes and cultural milieu and also the philosophical and religious heritage. In a country which takes Karma seriously and puts the blame on previous deeds and accepts the situation as unalterable since it is the punishment for previous sin, how do we communicate and what do we communicate? When people think in terms of individual self realisation, it is a hard task to impress upon them the need for societal upliftment.

Another problem is that the communicators go by fads and fancies. For example, if today, family welfare is the thing, they go at pell mell speed at family welfare but tomorrow if there is a campaign on grow more trees, family welfare
will be given up and everyone will concentrate on how to plant and preserve trees. If the day after tomorrow it is adult education, everybody gets into the wagon and does adult literacy. And thus there is no persistent planning and consistent communication.

Though we admit that advertising is a powerful, effective and creative medium, however we cannot condone its vulgarisation, exploitation and commercialism. In some of the advertisements, the villager is shown as a dumb idiot, women are exploited and none of the rural values are upheld. A simple rural environment is twisted in such a way that even a villager may not appreciate his own habitat. For example, for a fan advertisement, a fan hanging on the tree in an open ground and the implication was that the fan was better than the natural breeze. A villager who sees this week after week may even detest the natural breeze. How many of the advertisers dare to show the importance of khadi but it is always the polyester and the synthetic fabric that is exhibited.

Television in India was started as a change agent especially among the rural folk. It is ironic that first of all the poor rural folk do not have enough purchasing power to buy TV sets. Secondly the TV centres are located in the cities and the transmitters are not powerful enough to reach the
villagers. Thirdly, the programmes though rural in content are consumed and abhorred by the city folks. However, an enormous amount is wasted on a project which started with a high ideal and failed to fulfil its goal.

Based on my experiences I have the following suggestions to make.

In an adult educational programme, we use the local proverb as a starting point. For example we start with a proverb like "The Child who cries, gets the milk" and then go on raising questions such as why the children is crying? Why there is no milk? What happened to the milk the village has been producing? All these questions were asked to make them aware of the economic pattern of the society and also the power of the people. In this way they come to realise that unless they mobilise their strength and ask for their rights, they will not get anything. Not only is political awareness dealt with but also other aspects like religio-socio cultural questions. Learning the alphabet takes the secondary importance.

Probably what the state agencies can do is start a rural press which can communicate to the villagers in their own idiom. For example in Tamilnadu, we have a daily called
"Thina Thanthi" (Daily Telegraph) whose language, and style is intelligible to common folk and which appeals even to rickshaw pullers. Most of the government communication materials are being written in a very high, polished language but in an unattractive manner. The pamphlets do not have pictures or cartoons hence there is no visual relief.

For any communication to be effective, participation coupled with motivation of the people is very essential. Trichy Radio was broadcasting a particular variety of rice in its rural programme. When this was announced, it was discussed in the rural lingo rather than in a staid academic language. The rural folk listened, discussed and were motivated. They started experimenting on this variety and the result now is, it is known as 'Radio Rice'.

An explicit communication strategy must be woven into the overall project strategy. Guidelines for developing such a strategy might include the following:

1. Encourage a Communication System that is decentralised i.e. one which fosters localised content.
2. Encourage local participation in the designing, and implementing of non-formal education programmes.
3. Emphasis should be on prevention rather than on cure.
4. The stress must be in simple technology partly because of cost factors; partly also because of its operational simplicity.