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Tracing A Change-Agent: A Case-History And Hypothesis

By

T Ganguli
TRACING A CHANGE-AGENT
A CASE-HISTORY AND HYPOTHESIS

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(The text below was used with the aid of colour slides as illustrations)

As the title of my presentation indicates, what I am going to share with you is a hypothesis. While I am the author of the hypothesis, I owe much to a very talented team of researchers in our Company who have been working with me on testing this hypothesis. That process is not complete and I certainly look forward to your comments on it.

It is not only a hypothesis. It is a bit of a detective story as well.

Let me give you a bit of the background. As you may know, a great deal has been happening in India within the last ten years or so. And some of it seems strange to those of us who have formed our essential impressions of India 30 years ago.

Self sufficiency in food for one thing - in fact a glut and price-support. An abundance of foreign exchange and a favourable trade balance. India's emergence as the world's
10th largest industrial country. Even the atomic bomb
(not all that has been happening during the last 10 years
is necessarily good!)

In my own specialisation of Marketing and Advertising,
there was an equal sea-change. The good old comfortable
seller's market suddenly evaporated. The buyer became king
and our industry became tough.

Marketers and Advertising agencies were caught unprepared.
The hunt for marketing expertise started. Today, the marketing/
advertising industry is awash with enthusiastic MBA's and
undigested ideas. There was a wave of change in the staffing
of advertising agencies and "consumer-orientation" entered
the marketing world in India.

This trend started 10 to 15 years ago. The changes in the
market place are still going on together with consequent
changes in the industry.

Our population growth rate is 1.8% but there are product
categories which are growing at 25%. There are product
categories which were static but have suddenly taken off.
My hypothesis started from sitting back from everyday adventures and quietly asking the question, "Why have so many Indians started behaving so differently in the last 15 years or less?" The significance behind my question is my conviction that such a large population has a proportionately massive inertia. And the history of such a society as we have in India adds a multiplier to that inertia.

One would seem to have the right to think that any dramatic change within such a short span of 15 years can hardly take place.

Let us take a look at this inertial force.

If one examines the excavations and restorations of the Indus Valley civilisation dating back more than 4,000 years ago a remarkable level of human organisation is visible.

There is evidence of town planning and a fair level of zoning organisation like arrangements for drainage, sanitation and water storage among other signs of sophistication.

Formal Architecture existed - and was impressive.

Our basic bullock-cart dates back to this civilisation.
If one compares this with typical Indian villages, as I saw them 30 years ago and as my father saw them 60 years ago, those villages were considerably less sophisticated in their organisation and level of living.

The construction was basically of mud and thatch and there were no arrangements for drainage or sanitation and water storage was typically the naturally stagnant pond.

There was very little division of labour except in the largest of village clusters.

Thus, the Indus Valley remains show a much more advanced stage of human organisation and level of living than was to be seen in a typical Indian village 4,000 years later. Better building, better sanitation, better water storage, among other things.

Of course, the Indus Valley civilisation shows a so-called urban situation. But it is also a fair inference that the Indus Valley village was in any case no very different from the kind of villages we saw in 1950.

And when we think about the change that has recently taken place in India, we must remember that 80% of our population live in these villages. No real change would be discernible
in India if the people in those villages did not participate in those changes.

What about after the Indus Valley period? Well, there was first the Aryan influx into India - lost in the mist of pre-history. There was certainly a flowering of industry, science and many other aspects of culture from those times. Empires were built and fell in the aftermath. Sages gave us their wisdom. The Vedas, Upanishads, the Ramayana and Mahabharata allow us to draw inferences about the culture of those early Aryan centuries. But none of them allow us to infer that village life in India was much different from that in 1950.

Later, there was an influx of the nascent Islamic forces which first conquered and then settled down to become a part of the fabric of the country. Again empires rose and fell. Again there was a flowering of many kinds of cultural activity. Music and dance flourished. The finest cottons were woven and the Taj Mahal was built. This is all recorded history. The life of the elite was very splendid but again the records do not show village life as significantly different in character and quality from that 30 years ago.
Then came the British. First as traders and merchants. Then as insidious conquerors. They brought us Western science and education. They brought us some aspects of British law and laid the foundations of the railway and the road systems which were necessary to extract and export the resources of the country.

The British were never absorbed in the fabric of our society and perhaps had the least effect, since they were there for less than 200 years. And they left our villages alone, except to arrange for collection of taxes.

But, they did leave behind a thin crust of western educated urban elite, mentally and physically remote from the villages and those living in them.

That bring us up to 1947

The cultural sweeps that I have described in somewhat sweeping terms left what was essentially a rural civilisation. And this civilisation was emphatically not prone to change. All that history had passed by our villages and left them more or less untouched.
The Hindu socio-religious and philosophical pattern taught us that if this life was unsatisfactory, better ones would follow. It taught us that every man had his pre-ordained state in society. Vertical movement was not for him - in fact it was against the proper order of things.

ISLAM, the other major religion in India talks of a horizontal society - the equality and brotherhood of man. It taught essentially a social order like a commune and that good fortune and misfortune are not achievements of man, but the will of God, or the hand of fate.

Other socio-religious movements in India also follow the pattern of philosophising about the futility of the individual aspiring to change his personal position in the social order around him.

It is hardly my place to comment on the merits of such philosophy.

During the period immediately after 1947, the Government of India launched its Five-Year Plan. The initial accent was on industrial development as the key catalytic agent of change. Such initial efforts mainly affected the urban population. However the Government also embarked on progressively massive programmes for rural development.
While some of these rural development programmes aimed at creating infrastructures, like road-building and rural electrification, other programmes like rural education programmes, agricultural extension programmes and the Family Planning programme would directly enter the life of our villages. Predictably they ran into heavy weather.

Our villager, like poor men everywhere, was a practical man. He did not want his children to waste time in school when they could be useful in the fields. On the question of modern agriculture, he was utterly unresponsive. Hybrid seeds were eaten and fertilisers could not be given away.

The co-operative movements moved only with the files in New Delhi. Change was anathema to our villager.

Attempts at propagating family planning met with equal resistance. The death rate was falling, the birth rate remained static and the family size tended to grow. But our villager considered it bad economics as well as alien to the proper order of things that he should not have many children as came to his lot.
During the 50's and early 60's we had some experience of this kind of inertia in the advertising and marketing field also. Tempted by our rural numbers, marketers tried to propagate many kinds of low-priced consumer products in rural areas. One by one, these marketers retired hurt - in the pocket book. Our villagers rejected all these things because they simply did not belong to his life-style.

So far, I have described how, and perhaps why there was strong inertia in our villages, with a massive resistance to any change in pattern.

And then suddenly, roughly 10 years ago, THERE WAS this change. It was like an explosion. These changes showed up in villages and in cities. They showed up on sales charts and production charts. And the changes were sweeping changes which seemed to be changing astonishingly within a very short period of time.

DESCRIBE (15 SLIDES)

That a change is taking place is undeniable. But there are three things about the change which leads us to our detective story.
1. Change-agents such as education and other kinds of Government efforts, or the change in life-style wrought by the marketing efforts of private enterprise do not seem to be the casual agents of this change. All such change-agents were met with equal indifference or resistance.

2. As we have seen, for any change-agent to have fundamental effect on the country, the effect must be felt at the grass roots - the villages. And this effect must be on a massive scale, for it to have an effect on the rural population.

3. Because of the weight of the inertial factor I have described the real CAUSAL change-agent would not be one which fought head-on against the static mores of our village life. The change-agent must somehow have got around this.

What was this change-agent that could bring ferment and reactivity where there has been very little for so many centuries?

We have followed the trial and our hypothesis is that we have tracked down the elusive change-agent.
We believe that it is the Indian Cinema.

HINDI CINEMA
Let me present the evidence.

Firstly, the basic Hindi Film has been not a new phenomenon. It has been around for a long time. However, since the 40's there has been a tremendous boom in the production of the Hindi Film. In our opinion this was the prelude.

The Hindi Cinema has a peculiar and characteristic flavour. The Producer of the Hindi Film has learnt over the years a kind of formula which will create a dream aimed at the box office. The box office numbers - the poorest classes for whom this medium constitutes practically the only escape from real life.

The formula has invariably one main thread in the storyline. The poor man (with whom the box office numbers can identify) goes through a series of somewhat incredible adventures and in the process becomes rich and gets the girl. Since the target audience of the Hindi Film makers belong to the poor and under-privileged classes, the Hindi Film often shows the hero breaking cast barriers and other old cultural norms, on his way to the inevitable success and happiness.
embodied in the formula. He crosses the barriers of untouchability and communal difference in his one way road to Nirvana.

For the last 30 years this basic story line has formed the back-bone of box office success. And we have the largest film industry in the world. Let me stress that the Hindi Film producer is not a social reformer. Since he is staking the money, he has learnt to handle all these sensitive issues with an ingenious mixture of delicacy and dream.

He has created credibility for the socially incredible because he had to manufacture the art of transporting his underprivileged audience through to the top of society during the dream.

The essential impact of the medium has been to break the static mentality of a number of the poorer classes and arousing in them the sense of personal aspiration. After all, if he sees the same hero do the impossible 30 times, he is liable to believe that he might do it once.

It is our hypothesis that this is the massive force which has injected economic reactivity.

The number of these formula films is increasing and even the regional cinema has taken to using the formula.
And this force has been let loose in rural areas. The penetration of cinema was 59% in 1978 among village audience and they are now seeing a film of this kind 5.4 times a year. More cinemas are reaching villages - there are now about 3,500 cinemas touring the rural areas.

A great deal of data can be cited to show how the Indian rural population has suddenly started to do things that they were reluctant to do before, but I will confine myself to just a few facts.

Between 1960/61 and 1975/76 fertiliser consumption jumped from less than 300,000 tons to nearly 3 million tons. And the farmer found that he could thereby increase production of food grain by nearly 40 million tons.

During the same period the output of motor cycles and scooters rose from 19,000 per annum to 229,000 per annum. Electric fans increased from 1.1 million to 2.6 million. Radio receivers from 300,000 to 1.7 million. And any Indian marketing man will assure you that the main thrust for marketing all these products is to the rural consumer.

Perhaps more importantly, the Indian villager decides that education is not, after all, a waste of time for his
children. Between 1961 and 1980 nearly 26 million matriculates will form an army of changed agents in the country side. The total new educated population in the 15/35 age group today is 40 million. Of course, the new rural educated are not distributed evenly in the country, there being a range from only 700,000 in Rajasthan to 3.5 million in Uttar Pradesh.

As I mentioned, this is only a hypothesis and I greatly look forward to your comments on my contention that the prime causal change agent in rural India has been that much maligned formula of the Hindi Cinema.

However, if this hypothesis is correct, it has an important significance for communicators as change agents. That significance is:

THE MAIN CHANGE THAT THE DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATOR SHOULD AIM FOR IN THE 3RD WORLD IS TO CREDIBLY AND CONVINCINGLY CONVEY THE IDEA THAT THERE IS HOPE FOR THE INDIVIDUAL, THAT INDIVIDUAL ASPIRATION CAN LEAD TO INDIVIDUAL REWARDS FOR ANYONE.

Once this mental change is effected, the task of the communicator becomes much simpler. He then only has to function as the conduit for information which his audience not only needs for development, but will demand, because of his new aspiration..