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Communication And Development :
South Asia

by

P Murari
It was Z. Chaffee Jr who stated so succinctly in the Neiman Reports of April 1948 that freedom from something is not enough. It should also be freedom for something. Freedom is not safety but opportunity. Freedom ought to be a means to enable the press to serve the proper functions of communication in a free society. When such a function furthers the cause of national development it represents the summum bonum of human endeavour.

Though the comprehensive communication revolution in the 1990s has transformed life everywhere beyond any conceivable measure or imagination, information, education and communication as supportive inputs have not been adequately exploited for development in most parts of the third world, particularly South Asia. Mass media theorists, researchers and communication technologists have amply established that communication has huge potential for transforming societies in these countries. But in spite of this, "the interrelationship between communication and development, whether direct or indirect, in the context of new philosophy of decentralized, people-oriented, participatory and self-reliant development with accent on distributive justice, and egalitarian social order that has come to engage the attention of scholars, researchers and political leaders (in South Asia) in recent years, has yet to acquire a distinct, conceptual and paradigmatic frame that could be termed to be belonging to these countries."(1)

"Development", speaking specifically, is attained at "by transforming human beings and societies to a new material and moral social order and as a cultural process."(2) To be meaningful, the main thrust of "development" should be, according to Mehta, on: (i) the environment in which we live, (ii) social relations which human beings foster for their existence, and continuity, (iii) production and consumption of goods and services for a viable living and sustenance; (iv) on the well-being of
people so as to make happiness and progress compatible with each other.(3)

Communication has the greatest power to initiate, stimulate, provoke and promote development by providing varied perceptions, interests, motivations, beliefs, faiths and ideas. In fact, communication appropriately sets in a process of and determines the agenda for development. It is communication which "mediates in the production, consumption and accumulation of goods and services besides promoting political, social, psychological and cultural processes.... Communication is essential and primary to the decision-making process, a key factor at all levels of development planning."(4) Therefore, as Wilbur Schramm the guru of developmental communication has pointed out, an effective communication system can be used to "manipulate" people, and can also be used: "to bring the people of developing countries into the decision making process of development, to give them a basis for participating effectively, to speed up and smoothen the changes decided upon."(5)

Thus, it will be quite in the fitness of things here to say that communication and development are major domains of human pursuits which are intimately intertwined. Though it is true that a particular kind of development may call for a counter part kind of communication, planning appropriate communication strategies is, however, vital to the process. There is overwhelming evidence in this regard if we carefully study and analyse the role of communication in development in some of the South Asian countries.

However, to begin with, it will be imperative to define and delineate the dimensions of the issue in the South Asia region. Geographically speaking, the region of South Asia consists of countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka. Most of these countries have several commonalities of national traditions, culture, language, food and religions. They also have linkages through some other factors such as castes, institutions, family ties, marriage, kinship and
customs. In fact, religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Christianity deeply cast their influence in determining social organizations of South Asia. Besides, even historically, the region was under British colonial rule for several decades. In addition, there are similarities of political, economic, social, cultural, educational and communication ethos and systems with the incidental turmoils and tribulations.

Today, the region is in throes of change in all areas of human activity. According to Hari Jaisingh: "As it is, the South Asia region today is in a state of flux and passing through a critical stage in the quest for identity. But it cannot afford a never-ending confrontation within itself generated either by internal cleavages and frictions or by external influences or machinations."(6)

Here, I wish to state unequivocally that I have not conducted any empirical or analytical studies myself, but have depended mainly on the researches conducted by noted communication scholars from these countries and elsewhere.

In India, communication has been accorded an important place in all national development programmes. Realizing the importance of communication in development right from the beginning of the first five-year plan ushered in 1950, the Government had set up a department known as the Directorate of five-year plan publicity for the purpose. Besides, it is the exquisitely tuned and ingeniously developed communication policy in India which has knit the country into one unit in spite of several serious challenges posed to its existence during the last five decades.

India's mass media, both print and electronic are quite elaborate, well entrenched, comprehensive, independent and serving the masses very effectively. In India today, there are some 27,000 newspapers, magazines and journals, published in 92 languages and dialects. In addition, India's television network has perhaps the most extensive out reach in this region. There
are about 543 big and small television centres, about 200 radio stations, some 12,000 cinema houses, a large number of video parlours and several video news-magazines carrying divergent communication messages to every nook and corner of the country.

Today, in mid-1993, another type of revolution is sweeping the countryside. I refer to the cable and satellite television invasion. Some 30,000 cable operators all over India, particularly in urban areas, are beaming through the Hong Kong-based Satellite Television Asia Region (STAR), programmes from the BBC, Prime Time Sports, Star, MTV, Star-Plus, Chinese channel, and the Hindi Zee TV. But in spite of abundant media outputs, India still lags far behind in communication utilization. With low literacy levels (51 per cent according to the 1991 census), general poverty and poor purchasing power (40 per cent population being below the poverty line), bad telecommunication and transport facilities and tardy access for the common people to communication are some of the factors responsible for communication facilities not being fully yoked to the development process. However, despite these failings, India's record in communication use for development purposes is fairly satisfactory. Some of the studies quoted below support this contention.

It was S.C. Dube (1964) who established that several channels of communication in rural areas lead to development in diverse areas of human endeavour such as economic, social, religious and government's community development programmes.(7) In a recent study on the role of a television serial in entertainment-education strategy in India, Arvind Singhal and Everett M. Rogers found that "Hum Log", a Hindi television soap opera, was basically instrumental in inculcating positive attitudinal change and freedom of choice among women, to the effect that family size should be limited and cultural diversity should be respected.(8)

A study to find out the relative effectiveness of different media of communication for development in Rajasthan's two villages...
revealed that mass media was more effective in case of people belonging to the upper crust of society. However, traditional media, posters and exhibition, were more effective among people belonging to the lower strata of society (9).

As one surveys the Indian scene, one finds communication roles in India rather paradoxical and ironical. While on the one hand, there is such abundance of media output and development communication messages, on the other, it is only the people belonging to particular sections who are benefited. (10)

However, whatever may be the situation in India, media support to development in other countries of the South Asian region has not achieved the scale of that magnitude. Besides, the logistics of outreach of media in India vis-a-vis media in other South Asian nations differ substantially and are contingent on different factors. For example, daily newspapers in all languages are owned by individuals, or joint stock companies, or trust or private corporations in India. Only some journals are owned by State or Central governments. Most of the news-based and current affairs magazines are owned by private sector entrepreneurs. Besides, the two national news agencies, Press Trust of India (PTI) and United News of India (UNI), are also owned and run by newspapers themselves, government having very little say at any stage in their management and operations. It is only the electronic media, radio and television, which are under the direct control of and run by the Indian government. Even here Government initiatives are underway to provide a great measure of autonomy to the currently government controlled electronic media. The Prasar Bharati Bill is now under active consideration of the Parliament. Such media logistics are not widely prevalent in other countries of South Asia.

In Bangladesh, for example, there are around 50 daily newspapers, 180 periodicals, a Government news agency, and the government owned radio and television. According to Sadhan Mukherjee, "the government pressure, both direct and indirect,"
is quite-visible. Due to strict control, "the majority of the Bangaldeshi population have little access to media" (11). However, despite obvious limitations, for communication of national development objectives, active use has been made of radio and television programming. Print media, particularly newspapers, have also played a role albeit limited in promoting development objectives. For example, Matfuz Ullah's study found that only 5.87 per television and 0.70 per radio programmes have to do something with development programmes of the country (12). Yet one great success story of Bangladesh, worthy of emulation elsewhere relates to the efforts of Dr. Choudhary who with the help of the media took on multinationals in the pharmaceutical industry and helped the poor to secure the benefits of modern medicine at least cost.

In the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, media has functioned under conditions depending on the type of government extent. Be that as it may, journalists have maintained stoutly their interface with the readers. According to the 1987 official data, there were 1,826 newspapers and periodicals in Pakistan. The only national news agency, Associated Press of Pakistan, is government-owned, though Pakistan Press International (PPI), is a privately-owned concern. Radio (16 stations) and television (5 centres) are operated by public corporations, and have their own independent structures (13). Pak TV has a good record of beaming socially relevant serials and programmes, which one sees in many areas of Punjab in India, though how far these carry development messages relating to certain development initiatives such as family planning, AIDS etc. has not been fully researched by scholars.

Similarly, in Sri Lanka too communication media have also been operating on a different wave length vis-a-vis the government from time-to-time. The island nation has some 28 newspapers and periodicals. (14) But broadcasting, both radio and television, is controlled by the government. Though, according to Sinha Ranatunga, while ordinarily 27 per cent of television time is devoted to information and development programmes, concerted
programming aimed at developmental areas is not large. However, "Sri Lanka's television is very strongly influenced by government policy" (15). Radio Sri Lanka faces similar challenges (16). In the early years of its nationhood, Sri Lankan radio did a great deal of programming for overall national development. At present, radio is the main source of information for the people. Sri Lanka's national government-controlled news agency functions in collaboration with the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. The continued insurgency in the country has hampered the tempo of progress immensely: So much so that development messages on media has not been able to achieve a spread effect and act as a vehicle of mass communication to produce results. As the nation's mass media has in the past contributed to the success of several development projects, such as in family planning and in decreasing birth rates, there is no doubt that in the future too the media will meaningfully play its role in the multi-faceted progress of the country (17).

As for Nepal though communication has been greatly instrumental in bringing about awareness in the country, the nation has yet to realize the media's full potential in its development programmes. The greatest hurdles in this respect are low literacy rates, high levels of poverty and difficult and poor transport and communication facilities. The hilly terrain, mercurial weather conditions and low media access also hamper the receipt and utilization of communication messages in most parts of the country.

The reach of radio and television is practically limited to the national capital. The print media - newspapers and magazine - have low readership. However, of late, the arrival of satellite television and Indian television programming being visible in Nepal have made a lot of difference in communication habits of the people.

Nepal's journalism "is essentially a 20th century phenomenon" (18). The first newspaper, "Cotkhapatra", a government paper,
was started in 1901 as a weekly, and became a daily in 1950. It has an English sister daily, "The Rising Nepal". In 1987, there were 58 daily newspapers, "press censorship was relaxed in 1991" (19). Since the mountainous terrain prevents newspapers reaching remote areas inter-personnel communication is the order of the day. The government-owned news agency, Rashtriya Samachar Samiti, (RSS), is the only news source for newspapers and the state-own radio and television. "The newspapers tend to reflect more of the government doings and ministerial functions."

However, things drastically changed in Nepal with the restoration of democracy in 1991. Radio Nepal and Nepal Television established in 1951 and 1985, respectively, put out a few local programmes in addition to Indian and Pakistani serials. The nation's economy is generally farm-based, and provides employment to over 90 per cent labour and generates 60 per cent gross domestic product." The agriculture sector, traditional in many respects, has been undergoing, over the past 25 years, both institutional and technological changes to provide requisite incentives and modern inputs for raising productivity of land and labour" (20).

Bhutan, a landlocked country, entirely montainous, is steeped in exotic myths and ancient traditions. "Buddhism is an important factor in the deeply rooted sense of identity that the Bhutanese seem to have in the ethnics that characterise their social life and there is a degree of equality and liberalism between the sexes in the Bhutanese society" (21). Communication in the country is very difficult and tardy. The only source of information in Bhutan is a weekly newspaper brought out by the government's department of information. The weekly tabloid, "The Kuensel", is published in English, Nepali and the local language Dzongkha. Earlier, a fortnightly (now a weekly), it is computerized and published by the government. Though the paper was earlier distributed free, it is now a priced publication.
While the country has still to have a television system, or a radio service network, the Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BSS), runs a radio station in the capital, Thimpu, which broadcasts programmes in four languages - Dzongkha, Sharchop, Nepali and English. Television programmes are, however, received from India (Calcutta Doordarshan station) and Bangladesh. Also, people often listen to radio stations based in India (Calcutta), Nepal (Kathmandu) and Bangladesh (Dhaka) (22). Communication, rich and dynamic in its own unique traditional style, the Bhutanese culture has evolved as a great force and "is an important precondition for all development in the country." It is used "as an active resource in development" (23).

The Republic of the Maldives is an archipelago of 1190 small coral islands, of whom only 200 are inhabited. There are no hills, mountains or rivers in the Maldives. Though a nation of about 214,000 people with a high rate of literacy, communication utilization is rather low. There are only two daily, two weekly and two fortnightly newspapers and some 130 journals/magazines in the country. Radio is the main source of information. The Voice of the Maldives broadcasts for over 12 hours of programming daily. The television system covers only the capital, Male, and some other parts of the country. Local television programming are few and far between; canned stuff is quite popular. Well known Hindi serials and films are seen on VCR by people mostly in the capital.

The Maldives society, mostly conservative Muslim, is opening up progressively due to increased western exposure through tourism. In fact, tourism is the country's No. 1 exchange earner. Mass media indirectly plays an extensive role in providing incentives to the nation's three-year development plans. The main development objectives of the country are: to improve living standards of the people; to balance the population density and economic and social progress between the capital Male and the atolls (other districts of the country); and to attain greater self-reliance for future growth (25). Therefore, the mass media in
the country "functions to make the social and political communication more harmonious and synchronized with the panchasila democracy to promote the capacity and opportunity of the press to express their aspirations and interests. It mainly strives to reflect people's interests, aspirations, accommodate and channel these in such a manner so as to enhance a balanced political communication among the people and the government" (26).

Since the Maldives has no news agency of its own, the newspapers' local reporters concentrate on national news and also monitor international radio networks for foreign news. All mass media function directly under the control of the President's secretariat. In the Maldives, the media access is limited though individual and family incomes and literacy rates are quite high.

It will thus be noticed that communication in most of South Asia is influencing every aspect of people's life -- economic, social, political, cultural and educational -- in a number of ways. In fact, the persistent foreign media blitz has been tremendously instrumental in opening up avenues to people who were hitherto totally isolated from the international community.

So much for the background and historical perspectives. I shall now attempt to provide a few pointers as I perceive of it, to enhance inter country cooperation in the field of mass communication so as to foster developmental initiatives in this region.

The seven members of SAARC, as non-aligned countries, are committed to self reliance and mutual cooperation through their acceptance of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). (36) In pursuance of this in the Male summit, the importance of cooperation amongst SAARC member countries in the field of mass media was stressed and it was agreed that there be increased interaction action amongst journalists, new agencies and mass media. This was intended to facilitate cross border flow of information and mutual exchange of visits and ideas.
Even earlier, at the Bangalore summit, the decision to put in position the Audio-Visual Exchange programme was implemented. SAVE has been telecasting programmes every month in rotation among SAARC countries and some special TV & radio programmes have been beamed and broadcast from time to time. The Quiz programmes involving youth have also evoked special interest.

One of the encouraging factors even in the current scenario insofar as the South Asian region is concerned is that commonality of interests, including shared history and culture, besides languages, in a number of cases formed important motivating factors. Doordarshan serials "Buniyaad" and "Tamas" which dealt with the partition of the sub-continent had a wide viewership in Pakistan. Similarly, listeners and viewers in Bangladesh switch on AIR and Doordarshan, when signals are available, for Rabindra Sangeet. On the obverse side, there is very good response in India to dramas and features put out by Pakistan and Bangladesh television and national networks. (31)

Perhaps most important of all is the need to evolve a training mechanism, and as a corollary, identify or set up training institutions to correct the current imbalance in international news flows, build up a cadre of trained news agency personnel as well as refine and develop a strong electronic media network so as to subserve the objective of linking developing and communication. In one of the earlier meetings of the non-aligned community on information technology and communication, it was envisaged that in the South Asian region a training centre would be set up in New Delhi to impart advanced skills to strengthen news agencies where these did not exist. In pursuance to this aim, the Indian Institute of Mass Communication located in New Delhi inaugurated the first course in News Agency Journalism for Non-Aligned Countries in 1978. Subsequently, there have been regularly two courses a year aimed at imparting skills to journalists from the Third World till date. A number of countries other than those from the South Asian region have also availed of this opportunity.
Still, due to various constraints, the contribution made by the IIMC in this regard is very limited. Many of the countries in the South Asian regions prefer to send their media persons for training to Europe and to the United States. This at best not only being time-consuming and costly, at the same time would not reflect the moods and aspirations of the member countries. Therefore, one of the main initiatives which SAARC could take would be to identify the IIMC in New Delhi as one of the nodal institutions for imparting training in news agency journalism, broadcast journalism as well as in developmental communication to strengthen the base for mass communication expertise so as to provide the spring-board for the countries in this region in turn to develop their own expertise to be honed in the crucible of experience. This should be one of the cardinal recommendations to be made.

Again, India can boast of an outstanding Film and Television Institute located in Pune, in the western part of India, which during the last two decades has been producing outstanding film makers, cameramen, television producers and directors who have won international acclaim at various film and television festivals. SAARC can lend support to make this one of the premier institutions where trainees in the electronic media in the various South Asian countries can attend courses and sharpen their skills and in turn help institutions, government controlled or otherwise, in their own countries to effect the crucial linkage between development and communication.

ASEAN countries have realised much earlier that cooperation amongst them cannot be sustained and strengthened without adequate support from the media. Therefore, they have already gone ahead in the field by institutionalising mechanisms to further these objectives. Unfortunately, in relation to SAARC this realisation has come a little late. In this, there is a lesson viz that the ASEAN initiative needs to be carefully examined, the experience utilised and built upon for the benefit of SAARC.
As Chowla says, the most important item on the agenda of future SAARC summits should be the aspect of regional cooperation. The SAARC secretariat should take the initiative to study the current media infrastructure problems and possibilities and prepare a blue-print for a plan of action to be presented to the governments of the respective countries. At least at the next summit, there should be included an additional agenda item - A New Regional Information and Communication Order.

The reality is that communication is a fundamental prerequisite for all living beings. As Singhi states, the development of human civilization is directly dependent on refinement and growth of forms, mechanism, and quality of the content of communication (27). Though there is an astonishing variety and enormity of communication in the world today, a society generally chooses and yokes only those forms of media which fit into the nation's general environment, traditions and culture. In some countries such as India, for example, all media, traditional and modern, are exploited to convey the message. Researches have proved that communication is also used in the "processual dimensions" of progress in a country (28). But as Singhi cautions, adequate care has to be taken so that nothing hurts the psyche, culture and institutional aspects of the society while also development is ensured. Any policy of culture and communication should be built within a paradigm which is both holistic and integrative so as to combine the local reality, people's perception and needs and desired aspects of change. Both theoretical and empirical dimensions of intellectual inquiry shall be of great significance in media, communication and development" (29).

There is no doubt that the world's future would be determined and shaped by communication. South Asia cannot be an exception.
1. Ray, S.N. Communication and Rural Development in India IIAS, 1992


3. Ibid


8. Singal, Arvind and Everett M. Rogers -- Gazette


13. Sinha Ratnatungh in "Development Communication" Ibid. (Sri Lanka)

14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.


18. Mukherjee Ibid. P.90


20. Malla, Bir Prakash, Media Presentation, Nepal, Mimeo, 1992

21. Palzang, Gedum Media Presentation 1993, Mimeo

22. Mukherjee Ibid. Pp. 27

23. Palzang, Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Rameez, Ibrahim Media Presentation The Maldives, 1992 Mimeo

26. Ibid.

27. In Sharma Ibid.

28. Ibid.

