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The Changing Face Of Asia -
Implications For Communication Education And Training

By

C K Sardana
THE CHANGING FACE OF ASIA - IMPLICATIONS FOR
COMMUNICATION EDUCATION AND TRAINING

(Paper presented by Mr. C.K. Sardana* at Conference on "Communications in a Changing Asia" at Manila (Philippines) on July 17, 1992)

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen!

At the outset, I would like to express my gratitude to the Conference organisers for giving me this opportunity of sharing my experiences and perceptions on the important subject of "The Changing Face of Asia - Implications for Communication Education and Training".

I have always considered myself a student of communication. Please do'nt think that I have come here to give you a lecture. Instead, I have come here to learn from the experts, the specialists, the academics and the practitioners so as to enrich my own knowledge of the subject.

* Mr. Sardana is General Manager, Corporate Public Relations, Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (India) and President, Public Sector Public Relations Forum, India.
We are meeting at a time when there is turbulence throughout the globe. In the last one year, there has been a sea-change marked by political and socio-economic regrouping in the world. The world has changed so dramatically, so quickly and so fundamentally in the recent past that we are confronted with new problems and new opportunities of an unprecedented nature and magnitude. All aspects of human life - political, economic, social and environmental - have been affected so greatly that it requires a new thinking and structural adjustments as well as changes in long-held perceptions and patterns of international behaviour.

Till about a couple of years ago, could anyone imagine that a world power, like USSR, will crumble like a pack of cards. On the other hand, there is the example of the unification of West Germany and East Germany into a single united Germany. The latest in this chain of events is the break-up of Czechoslovakia into two countries after nearly 75 years of being a single country.

While this is the situation on the international level, let me come straightaway to the changing face of Asia which is the theme of this Conference.
Asia is the most diverse and also the largest of all continents. It occupies 30 per cent of the world's land area. Asia is also the most populous of the continents. Its population is more than half of human race. The continent includes the two most populous countries in the world, namely, China and India. In the 20th century, the population of Asia has been growing faster than the world average, its growth rate in the early 1970s being little more than 2 per cent a year.

Despite the general awareness in Asia, especially in the most populous countries, of the need for some regulation of this growth, it appears that barring some unexpected breakthrough in technology, the population of Asia may well reach 4000 million by the year 2000.

Asia has also been the birthplace of all the great world religions, including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism and so on.

There are many factors which join the countries of Asia together apart from geography. For the last
150 to 200 years, Asia has been dominated by certain European countries. They came here, exploited this continent, dominated it, and various consequences flowed from it.

But if we look at the stage process of history, going back more than a few hundred years, we get a true perspective, and in that perspective, of course, whether you look at Asia, or whether you look at India, the period of foreign domination of most Asian countries has almost ended, there is a certain process of finding oneself. Each one of the Asian countries is going through various stages of advance; there is this looking into oneself, finding oneself, feeling a certain assurance, self-confidence, and also, it may be, in the case of some countries, because of economic and other weaknesses, but on the whole, finding oneself. This is also a binding factor.

The problems of Asia today are essentially problems of supplying what may be called the primary human necessities. They are not problems which may be
called problems of power politics. Of course, every country, to some extent, has something to do with power politics in this world. But whichever countries we may take in Asia, one problem they always have is the problem of preserving their freedom — the fear that somebody might take away their freedom. That problem is always there, quite apart from the fundamental problem, the problem of supplying primary necessities — food, clothing, housing, health, education and the like. These are common problems all over the world undoubtedly, but a great part of the rest of the world has advanced in its standards much faster than the countries of Asia.

However, the pace of development in some countries of Asia is even more than that of developed countries in Europe. Japan, Singapore and South Korea are among the noted exceptions in Asia. The two most populous nations, China and India, remain underdeveloped though the panges of development have been recorded at a lower level in India compared to China.
Way back in 1964, Wilbur Schramm, who has been hailed as father of mass communication, in his famous book 'Mass Media and National Development' had noted “What distinguishes the underdeveloped lands from the others?

Geography?

The division is almost but not quite by continents. For example, most of Europe is well developed, but parts are not; most of Asia is underdeveloped, but Japan has proved that an Asian country can be highly productive.

Climate?

A majority of the less-development of commerce and capital, fairly high percentages of the past some of the most prosperous countries, including some like Egypt, Syria and Greece that are less prosperous today, have been in warm climates.

Resources?

There is no monopoly of natural resources in developed countries. Switzerland, for example, is much poorer in natural resources than, say, Indonesia or Brazil.
The United States, the Soviet Union, Australia had it, but so do many of the countries of Africa and Latin America. And the most prosperous country of Asia is one of the most crowded countries in the world."

"Race Y

It is true that a majority of countries settled chiefly by the white race are economically well developed. But many white countries are not well developed; and people of all races and colours have now distinguished themselves in the tasks necessary for development."

Investment in mass media

Even after a lapse of 28 years, the observations remain valid. In India, which is still in the process of development, though it attained freedom from colonial rule 45 years ago, the planners perhaps missed the point that an investment in mass media is an investment in economic development. We missed what Wilbur Schramm visualised for us about two-and-half decades back. He wanted us to under-
stand communication in terms of exploring "The Indian Concept of India" and also "India's faith in future of the world".

In a study of remarkable experiment in social change in a part of a Latin American country in which communication was obviously important, Dr. Allan R. Holmberg noted "While there are many other aspects of community development that can be tackled in any programme of induced social change, giving special attention to the three key areas - economic life, leadership and communications - has the advantage of bringing about other changes......Widening the channels of communication with the outside will make the rural villagers better aware of the government services that are available to them and will encourage them to play a more active role in their dealings with local, provincial, and national governments."

According to Wilbur Schramm, communication is always at the very centre of existence, for any society, developing or not. Wherever dangers or opportunities need to be reported, decisions need
to be made, new knowledge needs to be distributed, or change is imminent, there information flows. These needs are especially urgent and widespread in developing countries, where the tasks assigned to the communication media are vastly greater than before the time of development.

Urban bias.

But the problem with communicators is that majority of them are urbanites or have urban orientations. No wonder, a village woman in the countryside of Allahabad district in India commented after viewing a TV spot on the family planning programme that the women in the TV spot did not belong to them and, therefore, she was wholly unable to see any connection between the film and her own life. Thus the vital message failed to reach that section of the audience for whom it was desired as well as designed.

In India, where literacy rate remains only 52.11 per cent in which the share of female literates is only 39.42 per cent, the role of the electronic media assumes greater significance compared to that the print media.
Describing the concentration of newspapers in India in 1985, 'Press in India', a Government publication, recorded that only about 23 per cent newspapers in all categories and all scheduled languages were published from small towns. This development of print media reveals the reach of the print media in a country which essentially is predominantly rural, one where about 70 per cent population lives away from the urban centres.

On the other hand, with more than 528 TV transmitters, a development which took place only during the last two decades, a sizeable section of the population, particularly in the countrywide has been covered.

The main challenges before my country, India, are: alarming population growth and sustained economic and industrial progress.

In meeting these challenges, mass media has a very important role to play. How best it can play its role to meet the
above challenges depends largely on availability of trained manpower in the field of mass communication. As I said earlier, in a country like India, electronic media is the most appropriate media for reaching out to the masses.

The electronic media has got to devise ways and means of reaching out to the vast masses of the country with implications of population growth and what it really means for them immediately and for the country on a long-term basis. It is common knowledge that even though production of goods, commodities and services has increased manifold, yet the benefits of industrial growth have not substantially changed the living standards of the country’s masses.

We should not be carried away by the fact that in a city like New Delhi, a large number of even white-coloured salaried people have things like scooter, refrigerator, air cooler, television etc. Our yardstick should be as to whether or not the masses in India possess the basic necessities of life like food, shelter and clothing.
The electronic media has to convey the message to the masses that increased number of children in a family is detrimental to the family itself. This message has got to be communicated in a language and in a manner which can create a dent in the people’s mind. There is no point in putting out very sophisticated, drawing-room type advertisement messages and serials which are not in conformity with the realities of life led by the country’s masses.

Motivating people

Coming to the second challenge, namely, spurt in economic and industrial growth, mass media has a very important role by way of motivating the people for increased productivity. I would like to elaborate this by way of a live example from my Company, Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited, which is India’s top engineering Company, besides being one of the top 12 such Companies in the world.

We are in the business of power, industry, transportation, non-conventional energy sources and associated equipments. We have as many as 13
manufacturing plants besides a large number of regional and service centres throughout the country. We have a 74,000 strong work-force.

The Company objectives of BHEL have a section called "People Orientation". Under this, the Company is committed "To enable each employee to achieve his potential, improve his capabilities, perceive his role and responsibilities and participate and contribute positively to the growth and success of the Company. To invest in human resources continuously and be alive to their needs."

In order to achieve the above objective, BHEL has well-formulated schemes and strategies for enhanced production and productivity without compromising quality. Through the use of mass media, the Company Management has been able to motivate the workforce to put their best foot forward.

You may be interested to know that BHEL is the only Company in the Public Sector in India with a track record of continuous growth in production year after year together with a record of continu-
ous profitability over the last two decades. The Company also bagged National Productivity Award for Best Performance.

The Company has also a scheme for recognising merit, motivating its employees and help develop healthy competition among the employees. For us in P&PR field, our workers are the VVIPs. Some of our workers have bagged Prime Minister’s Shram Shri Award for outstanding suggestions and performance. These awardees are VVIPs and Company gives them due recognition. As communicators, we arrange top-class publicity for these VVIPs. They have been publicised through the electronic media as well as through the print media.

Another important aspect is the interface between the industry and the academic institutions in the field of mass communication.

Before going into details of the implications for communication education and training, a peep into
the present status of Journalism training in India would be worthwhile. A majority of universities today, i.e. about 25 out of 45 universities in the country offer courses in journalism, besides the Indian Institute of Mass Communication and a number of private organisations including Bhartiya Vidya Bhawan. The courses cover a variety of subjects such as reporting, sub-editing, public relations, advertising, press laws, feature-writing, etc.

Some universities have fulltime courses while some have part-time courses leading to degrees and diplomas. These centres of journalism education send their students to newspapers and news agencies for training.

An expert group on journalism education, however, found that there was need for greater practical training and exposure for students of journalism and mass communication. It is partly true. There are, however, instances where universities and institutes have regular tie-up with electronic media, print media and large business houses for practical training.

The Indian Institute of Mass Communication, for example, regularly sends its students to Televi-
sion, Radio, Newspapers and major Public Sector Undertakings to study practical working in these organisations. The students are also sent for 6-week practical orientation in major public sector undertakings. The students have done several project studies like Internal Communication in ITDC, PR in Tourism Industry, Motivating the Employees in Hotel Industry etc.

BHEL, as a matter of policy, supports such interface between the Industry and the Academic world. This involves provision of facilities for practical training in its Public Relations Wings and induction of qualified persons in the PR discipline. We have inducted batches of Executive Trainees (PR) and Junior Executives (PR) from out of trained Graduates and Post-Graduates from IIMC, universities and other professional bodies. These PR executives have done well and have shown great potential for growth in PR discipline.

Talking about the pitfalls in journalism education in India; Prof. S. Bashiruddin, Head of the Deptt. of Journalism & Mass Communication, Osmania Univer-
sity admits: "Mass Communication education faces a dilemma. There is a bright stream on the horizon of communication. Audio-visual education and research specially has national relevance for which there is a felt need and scope for application. Will the communication departments rise to the challenge, revamp their sights and give a new direction?"

He adds: "A well thought out agenda for communication education in India relevant to the closing decade of this century should strike a balance between the developmental needs of the Indian environment and the aspirations of the audiences. Communication must not lag behind advances in theory and methods of application elsewhere especially in advanced countries such as USA, Japan, Sweden and UK etc."

"The basic problem we have to overcome or seek a reconciliation with is the need to have Indian languages for instruction and communication research. It is no use trying to explain away that English is an international language and, as higher education in India is still through the English
medium, mass communication education needs to be through an alien language. We must not rely on English language solely for communication education and research. The reality of the situation is that, however, insightful and skilled we may become in communication theory and research, we would still have to deal with the application of findings in our languages. In fact, this has been one of the dilemmas of communication education and research in India.

"Unlike the physical sciences, where techniques and concepts do not undergo major changes and modifications with change in culture or environment, a sensitive behavioural science such as communication which is highly culture and language bound becomes totally irrelevant when divorced from its ethos and socio-cultural moorings."

Therefore, Bashiruddin says, "an effort has to be made and made now to revamp higher education in communication and research within the basic framework of Indian (even regional) languages and our socio-cultural frames of references. Though this may sound insuperable, it need not be so as proved
some 20-30 years ago by communication research scholars on Korea, Japan and to an extent Indonesia and China."

Realising the turning point in the history of information, Ignacio Ramonet pointed out in a special issue of Le Monde Diplomatique "Television sets the tone, determines the importance of news and fixes its themes with such commanding authority that the print medium has little choice but to labour under its dictates."

Admitting this fact, Dileep Padgaonkar, Editor of the Times of India forewarned in a lead article 'Global Television: Towards New Forms of Dominance' saying "Television has begun to impose on newspapers and magazines what Ramonet calls its own perversions: its fascination for the image, its tendency to turn every bit of information into a spectacle, its relentless drive to play on strong emotions. The obsession with the image leads television to operate on the premise that news is what is visible. The stronger the image the more it qualifies to come up-front in the news bulletin
regardless of its real news worthiness. Even the most serious crises thus get neglected if they do not contain the promise of good 'shots'."

"These perversions have gained in intensity ever since television began to report on news events even as they unfolded. By telecasting events in 'real time', television has added hugely to its influence and impact. As it is, its ability to transmit images at great speed gave it a distinct advantage over the print medium. Now by reaching out to the audience from the spot - interviewing, for example, actors and witnesses in the news story as it develops or talking about a scene of violence taking place there and then - television has given an altogether dramatic meaning to the word communication."

"Now you do not have an 'off' voice commenting on images as the newsreels, screened in cinema houses, once did. Even the function of the anchor person who would present the news with his observations - the Walter Cronkites and the Dan Rathers - has been reduced. He is merely switching the attention of the spectator from one point of the globe to another, to witness history in the making often without
the historical background, context or significance."

"That, however, is not the only reason why this new form of communication has begun to provoke widespread scepticism. The manner in which very many recent military operations - Grenada, Panama, Falklands and, of course, the Gulf war - have been covered by television has taken its toll in terms of the medium's credibility. In the Gulf war, the Pentagon exercised complete control over who should cover what and in what way".

The interesting interpretation of four Ws and Single H which are universally considered as the backbones of any news item attains significance in the wake of this development. The interpretation is

Who

Says What

In Which channel

To Whom

With What effect
Moreover, whenever the term 'information' is used as a factor of national importance, all thoughts rightly turn to the needs of mass communication - radio, television, films, books, newspapers, magazines, periodicals etc. The question usually is: How far are these media performing this role of informing the public sufficiently and efficiently and, of course, correctly? When this question is asked then information assumes a wider dimension. It does not merely mean straightforward reporting of WHAT has happened. Rather, it includes giving facts to show WHY and WHAT has happened, how it happened the way it did and also HOW the people should react to it under the prevailing circumstances.

Therefore, the role of communication is to be viewed in the light of what an ABC executive said that the 'Pentagon has transformed the media into a supplementary arm of the armed forces'.

Forewarning the cultural imperialism, Dr. J.S. Yadava, Director, Indian Institute of Mass Communication, stated, "The last decade has seen an enormous change in the television broadcasting scene..."
across the world. Cable system and satellite broadcasting, and particularly the marriage of these two technologies, have brought about a phenomenal increase in the availability of TV channels for information, education and entertainment.

"Broadcasting by satellite has enabled the subscriber to a cable system whether in the USA, Sweden or India to gain access to wide range of programmes previously undreamt of. But these two technologies have other implications too which are usually less visible both from the cultural as well as social point of view. Access to foreign programmes through satellite and cable systems increases fears about the so-called cultural imperialism, especially in the developing world.

"In India, the Gulf war in the early 1991 brought in the era of receiving foreign broadcasts with the help of dish antenna. After the war, a Hong Kong based company started four channels of Star TV and added the BBC World Service Television Channel a little later.

"Cable TV operators mushroomed, beginning with four metros of Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras and have now started percolating down to medium and
small towns. Access to foreign programmes on four or five international channels along with a VCR channel providing pure entertainment is something which never happened in the communication field earlier."

Though the apprehensions regarding the cultural colonisation seem to be unwarranted as the economic unviability for the cable operators restrains their activities to urban and semi-urban centres only, the enlargement of the communication cavass poses new questions before the communicators. It also requires more and more training supplemented by refresher courses for those who are engaged in the field of communication or intend to enter into it.

Though the manpower needs of the emerging communication infrastructure in India have expanded enormously, there is no corresponding expansion of the training facilities and of the trainers competent for the task nor is there yet an acceptance of communication as an academic discipline having both theoretical and applied aspects by the University system. Such gaps and lags can have and actually are having serious consequence.
In fact, software planning has lagged greatly behind hardware planning. It is proving to be harder than hardware planning. Experience shows that relevant and good software cannot be generated by professionals alone with the involvement of the people themselves; if the communicator has to become the voice of the people, he must be continually interacting with them. It is also important to note that if not utilised for the common good, the vast potential of communication is tapped by interest groups in a manner which is not conducive to the common good.

The communicators will also have to take cognizance of the new opportunities which are now emerging through the expansion of radio and television which can make communication truly development-oriented and responsive to the needs of various sections of the community and which can also evolve participatory and local community based communication at the grass root level.