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Communications Research Priorities In Economic Development
In Asia: The Case Of Sri Lanka

By

Ralph Pieris
COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH PRIORITIES IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN ASIA: THE CASE OF SRI LANKA

By Ralph Pieris

The object of this paper is to identify priorities pertaining to communications research in respect of economic development, with special reference to Sri Lanka. The paper is confined to economic development, and not to development in general (which would have posed controversial problems of definition, particularly relating to religious and cultural development, since politicians frequently stress the importance of spiritual, as distinct from material development). Consequently, the main focus of the paper is on the positive, neutral or negative impact of communications on income-generation and increase in per capita GNP, through increasing productivity in agriculture, industry, etc., particularly in the export sector. The minimization of income disparities is considered by some to be crucial to economic development, while recently the satisfaction of "basic needs" of the poor has been advocated as an appropriate strategy.

Sri Lanka has experimented with various styles of economic development since 1970, depending on the policies of the government in power. The country is firmly committed to parliamentary democracy, and although press censorship has been enforced during periods of emergency, the national press and the radio being state controlled, there is leeway for dissent through party newspapers, demonstrations, public meetings, and the less evident informal modes of communication which have been found to be crucial, especially prior to elections. The mechanics of informal communication devices will be considered later. Suffice to say that oral communication is significant, although free education at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels has resulted in an "explosion" in literacy which has accorded to the written word a pre-eminent place in the whole system of communications in our society. Furthermore, Sri Lanka celebrated fifty years of universal adult franchise last year, although it took about 25 years for the advent of "clean" elections. In a regime of mass illiteracy, politicisation is slow, patrons and notables being elected for personal reasons and not for policies they advocated, propagated through the media and election handouts. In the elections prior to 1956 electoral abuses were rife: there was widespread impersonation, bribery, violence and intimidation. Rich candidates were at an advantage, being able to provide transport for their supporters...
to the polling stations. These abuses are now no more. Political consciousness is extremely high: in 1970, 84 per cent of eligible voters exercised their vote while the polling rose to nearly 92 per cent in 1977. To anticipate, except a hard core of party supporters, the “floating vote” based on assessment of a government’s economic performance, is significant. Hence the awareness of politicians of the importance of communications, not only at elections but in order to ensure the successful implementation of economic development policies, including population control, the use of high yielding varieties of grain by farmers, etc. The electorate is sufficiently sophisticated to discredit extravagant claims in party manifestos, public speeches, and official interviews by newspaper reporters. The shift is from individual personalities to policies, and the party system has come to stay. This is not to deny that on occasion a charismatic leader might personify a given climate of opinion, but the charisma emanates from a preferred development style, and the misdeeds of the “previous government” which are magnified.

In the period 1970—1977 the dominant “socialist” style favoured a “closed” economy, highlights of which were rigid exchange control, prevention of luxury imports, the nationalisation of many private sector enterprises including the plantation sector. The private sector was placed under severe restrictions, while an extensive programme of welfare measures were provided including free health and education, subsidised transport, price control of essential consumer items distributed through cooperatives on a rationing scheme. A ceiling on incomes (Rs. 2000/- per month) and on real property perforce dampened the propensity to consume, ostensibly precluded conspicuous consumption, and generally inhibited the propensity to consume. Officials in key positions were required to declare their assets (including moveables) and failure to make correct returns was punishable by jail sentences (the Chairman of a leading bank was jailed for failing, inter alia, to declare furniture and other consumer durables). The media were geared to propagation of a lifestyle of austerity, and the tenets of Theravada Buddhism, preached in temples, especially on full-moon days (which were holidays, the lunar calendar being adopted), reinforced the virtues of the ascetic life, epitomised in the behaviour of the celibate monk. At the official level the annual Budget Speech was the occasion to spell out the goals of economic development: in 1973 the Minister of Finance, commenting on the high appropriation bill for salaries in the state sector, admitted that nevertheless “the lower ranks were bound to be dissatisfied”. The solution was to halt the current false standards of living, and recruits to the state sector made to reconcile themselves to lower, non-pensionable, salary scales. It savoured of the “basic needs” approach. “All are entitled to reasonable comforts but we cannot promote
a false level of luxurious living”. For extremists, even the low ceiling on incomes was inadequate; their preferred style was an equality of degradation.

Religious values which deprecated lust and craving for mundane things could well have a latent and abiding influence in moulding life-styles. Exhortations by religious and political leaders on the futility of pursuing sensate pleasures, strong pressures against the consumption of alcohol, reinforced a long tradition of simple living, not merely out of necessity, but as a preferred style. A mid-century observer commented that among the Sinhalese there were few spendthrifts, nor was it considered a shame or disgrace to be niggard and sparing in diet. Women were particularly thrifty and “their pride and glory to be near the saving”. These notions tend to be petrified in the collective consciousness. Even in England, as Lord Keynes commented some fifty years ago, “our habits and institutions keep us, in spite of all claims to the contrary, a thrifty people”. The “demonstration effect” fostered by the media does not necessarily find ready acceptance in a country in which austere living is rooted in the collective consciousness. Even today, conceptions of the “happy life” in a village in the central highlands are diffuse: 22.6 per cent of respondents gave no direct answer; 20.2 per cent wanted a life without difficulties and worries; 13.7 specified that money contributed to a happy life, but only 3.2 per cent were concerned about luxuries and comforts.

Empirical evidence confirming these values concerning wealth was not that riches were scorned, but that conspicuous consumption was deprecated, and money should not be amassed at the expense of other villagers. At the macro or national level then, it may be inferred that high rates of economic growth, were not favoured per se. It is possible that advertising in the media (television was introduced only recently) has an impact on the propensity to consume of the alienated urban rich, who have no deep-rooted primordial affiliations, and have to be content with a secondary reality propagated by the media, which involves the fetishisation of commodities in dehumanised contexts.

While the aspirations of a significant proportion of the population in the rural sector of Sri Lanka (the idyllic village community was idealised by politicians) were pegged down by an “image of limited good”, and were reconciled to a regime of subsistence agriculture, those of the middle class with remarkable skills (especially doctors, engineers, scientists and university professors) sought employment in affluent countries where they could pursue what was locally considered to be a “false level of luxurious living”. Policies to stem the “brain drain” proved ineffective; for instance, the compulsory remittance of 10 per cent of foreign earnings by Sri Lankan passport holders working abroad proved impracticable. With the demand for middle-level skills (carpenters, masons, tractor drivers, mechanics, etc.) by oil-rich
countries, even the “lower ranks” opted to migrate in their thousands to the Middle East, and recently a large number of women sought employment as domestic servants abroad, where they would earn over 30 times what they could procure at home.

It would appear that the tight economic controls of a centrally planned economy in the period 1970—76 proved sufficiently irksome for the majority to reject it conclusively by electing a government committed to an open, laissez faire-like economy. The disillusionment was not a result of the masses hankering after luxuries, but rather the denial of their basic needs owing to unemployment, especially of educated youth, shortage of essential food items, and mass poverty in general. Although the government in power enjoyed an advantage through control of the national press and the radio, there was opportunity for the expression of dissent and the ventilation of grievances through party newspapers, mass meetings and the informal modes of communication in a relatively unregimented society committed to parliamentary democracy. In face-to-face communication there was a new variety of what Malinowski called phatic communion, undirected gossip, which can precede discussion of substantive economic issues among a literate people, a process which can be more far-reaching in the creation of public opinion in the long run, than the evanescent reprotage of the organised media. Gossip at the village well, markets, public transport, and the workplace, can play a crucial role in crystallizing a climate of opinion in respect of economic development in a democratic regime.

In parantheses, as it were, it may be mentioned that there was one significant exception to the open discussion of national issues, namely, the conspiratorial style adopted by the insurgents constituting the revolutionary Jatika Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) in 1971. The leaders were convinced that political and economic change through the democratic process is slow and ineffective. Their organisation was through indoctrination of supporters in small clandestine groups, conducting “classes”, where in five lectures the reasons for, and strategy of, revolutionary action were communicated. The lectures repudiated the strategies of the traditional left wing parties through the electoral process and advocated violent overthrow of the government. Their fabrication of lethal weapons such as grenades and hand-bombs, need not detain us, but their ingenious modes of communication are not without interest. Meetings were communicated through fictitious obituary notices inserted in the national press. The development objectives of the ultra-left were obscure. The leaders admitted after their release in 1977 that their strategy was premature. As the 13th suspect said, “There can be no revolution without the participation and active support of the people”. The JVP was conclusively rejected at recent by-elections and are not a force to be reckoned with.
It will be noted that there are two divergent schools of thought in political confrontation on the subject of the propensity to consume. The view dominant in 1970–1976 was that a necessary stage in the path to economic development was one of thrift and austerity. The religious factor, particularly the Protestant Ethic has been identified as crucial by Max Weber and R.H. Tawney. In Japan, during the Tokugawa period, religious commentators evolved this worldly asceticism curiously reminiscent of the Protestant Ethic. In Sri Lanka, the Buddhist revival and the temperance movement, had an abiding effect on the consumer patterns of all but the elite. On the other hand, dissident writers such as Mandeville in his Fable of the Bees (convicted as a nuisance by a Grand Jury in 1723) contested the dominant philosophy. Bare virtue, he said, and over-emphasis on honesty, could not enable nations to live in splendour, that is, in modern language, promote the take-off to growth. Likewise, Werner Sombart, in his Luxury and Capitalism contended that luxury was a necessary ingredient in capitalist economic development. Although the political context is radically different and there is a risk of the masses agitating for immediate access to sensate desires in an age when the affluent society is a reality in the western world, the laissez-faire-like style of Asian countries has proved extremely attractive to elites of Asian countries.

Since the landslide electoral victory of the United National Party (UNP) at the 1977 elections, there was a complete reversal of the “closed” economic policies of the government it defeated. There was a veering from what has been described as “welfaristattism” at low levels of living, tight foreign exchange controls, ban on foreign travel and luxury imports, to a laissez faire-like style, Singapore being frequently cited as a model to be emulated. The private sector played an increasingly significant role in the “open” economy, and relaxation of import controls resulted in unprecedented imports of luxury goods. Subsidies were gradually removed, and the market allowed to determine prices. The demonstration effect was inevitable and welcome to the affluent, through the media (especially the recently introduced Television). But official statistics revealed that about half the population could not satisfy their basic needs as the inflation rate of about 33 per cent negated their enhanced salaries. In other words, half the population earned less than Rs. 300 (US$25) per month for a family unit, and were entitled to relief by way of food stamps. While an ideology of “consumerism” is communicated by the media to reach the affluent, the poor can hardly be insulated from its effects. Can a party in power counter the demonstration effect through communication of austere values and the supremacy of “spiritual values” enjoyed by the affluent classes? The outcome has yet to be seen.
The assumption that control of the formal media would enable a government in power to be re-elected as a result of the positive impact of the controlled media, which was self-fulfilling, has been found to be completely erroneous in Sri Lanka ever since 1956. An important research priority therefore is the analysis of informal modes of communication which can counteract the official media. This has been recognised, and recently an attempt has been made to enforce punitive sanctions on “rumour-mongers”, but without success. The mechanism of informal communication is so subtle in an unregimented democracy, that research is more difficult than in a society in which opinions are uncritically dictated by the mass media.

References:


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