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Communication For Development

By

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Mass Media: Tradition and Change

COMMUNICATION FOR DEVELOPMENT

by B.G. Verghese

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Communication is the basis of society, and language as much as reason distinguishes humankind from the animal species. Those gathered here in this regional communication seminar ~~on mass media in the context of tradition and change~~ belong to what has been termed the Third World or developing societies moving from age-old tradition to modernity. Communication is not peripheral to development, but central to it. Indeed, it is an essential input in development—a fact that has possibly not been adequately realised by development planners and policy makers or even by many of its practitioners.

The developing world has only in the past few decades moved out of a long twilight of colonial or feudal domination. The process of development entails modernisation (not necessarily Westernisation) and a ~~rendering~~ rather ^{than} a transformation of social and economic structures and relationships, both internal and external. This entail among other things liberation from outworn tradition and the established status quo, and a continuous and creative transfer, absorption and adaptation of technology.

The very processes of education, extension and transfer of technology involve communication at and between many levels. At the same time, development entails change which can variously create uncertainty, alienation and group tensions as traditional relationships are modified or totally upset. Here again, communication can play an important role in mediating change.

However, one could and probably should take an earlier point of departure. The social and economic transformation that may ~~be~~ be the objective of national plans and programmes require a political underpinning in the national integration of diverse and plural societies. A sense of identity and common aspiration ~~has~~ ^{have has} to be fostered and projected by the political process, whatever form it might take, even if it is the charismatic personality of a national figure which has so often been the case. One has only to reflect on charisma to realise that all charismatic leaders have by definition been outstanding

communicators--Gandhi, Mao, or any of the others one might wish to name.

Why should this be so? Quite clearly because communication is essential to mass mobilisation. Cultural images evoke togetherness, shared experience and past glory. But it is equally necessary to fashion a common social and political will to achieve the aspirations of a society. At another level, the masses, long submerged in feudal exploitation, ignorance and squalor, have to be made aware of their human, social and economic rights, of the reasons for their condition and of the possibility of change. Call this conscientisation, awareness-building, social education, or just education; ~~but~~ it is fundamental. For, with awareness comes mobilisation followed by organisation and action. This is the pathway to the green revolution, health-for-all, family planning, or, ^{women} no less important, ensuring the status of/as equal partners in society and the development process. It would be equally true ~~of~~ ^{for} political action or for launching a struggle for equity.

dal If communication is the heart^tbeat of society, education is seminal. It took a Gunnar Myrdal to place failure to expedite the universalisation of at least primary if not middle education among the factors responsible for the poverty of Asian nations. Educational disparities within nations often reflect dramatic disparities in the ~~process~~ ^{process} of development, especially human development. Functional literacy through imaginative programmes of adult and continuing education for older illiterates or school dropouts is scarcely less important. Literate parents, especially mothers, are the best promoters of education and health and constitute the most effective delivery system for minimum needs. This is unfortunately not yet accepted wisdom everywhere.

Another strange failure among developing societies, particularly those that happen to be multi-lingual, is the absence of clear and purposeful language development policies. The importance of adequate linguistic communication horizontally, across a country, and vertically, through various strata^a of society, needs little emphasis for national cohesion, sound administration, participation and

cross-cultural exchange. Among the late ^{President} Sukarno's most notable contributions to nation-building was giving Indonesia a common language.

The printing press triggered a social and educational change that was the harbinger of the industrial revolution. It facilitated the dissemination of knowledge and ideas, especially the scientific theories and discoveries of the time. The mass media has grown enormously in capability, diversity and reach since then. The rapid growth of technology, especially in the field of electronics, has resulted in a veritable communication and information revolution. It is no exaggeration that the microchip, computer, satellite, video and electronic-switching technology have transformed the world. The advanced industrial nations are increasingly becoming information societies, with decision-making in every field tied to the ability to acquire, move, store and analyse every kind of data through information and large data systems.

UBI Technological choices

What implications or choices does this offer the developing world? As in many other areas, the Third World can leap-frog a number of intermediate or incremental stages through which the advanced societies have progressed. While this is a distinct gain, it is necessary to remember that technology is not culture-free and, in that sense, is not neutral. There are enough examples of hardware-led development decisions to advocate caution. Each society will naturally determine its own priorities and pace of development. But it must be clear about goals and realise that means can often subtly but surely influence ends. The very sophistication of much modern communication technology, the considerable infrastructure and loops it requires, the demands it makes on management, maintenance and personnel, and the elite culture it is sometimes prone to breed in a developing society can make it as much a "class" as a "mass" media. Dependence on external sources of supply for equipment and software systems could also become constraints. What follows therefore is not a policy of abjuring these options but the need to exercise more careful choice, ensuring too that communication

decisions mesh into the nation's larger developmental priorities and aspirational goals.

In effect this requires the conscious evolution of a national communications policy that defines directions, patterns and combinations within given developmental and political perspectives. Such a policy does not imply state intervention at all levels or total state control, as is the case in centrally planned societies. There could be sufficient room for healthy but deliberate interaction between the state, the media, industry, scientists and users, instead of leaving so much to chance which is what happens at present.

Consider some very real issues that confront most Asian nations. The very considerable potential of radio is far from exhausted in terms of spatial coverage, innovative programming and community or group listening. Yet television is assuming a higher priority, and colour television at that. Few governments have stopped to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of these almost involuntary choices in terms of national systems or a mix. Colour television has been accepted on the ^{facile} assumption that black and white TV equipment is ^{obsolete} ~~obsolescent~~ and unavailable. Hard questions have not been asked as to the purpose of television: if for education, extension and development communications, is the significant ~~incremental~~ incremental opportunity cost of colour systems worth any measurable information gain? Where these factors have not been adequately considered and matched with appropriate software, (colour) TV--with or without commercials--has been reduced to a primarily urban, middle class mode of entertainment for which cheaper and more effective alternatives are possibly available. Furthermore, lack of a programming infrastructure has sometimes compelled reliance on canned, imported programmes thus creating cultural alienation and dependence. The impact of these subliminal influences on social mores, aspirations and development priorities is probably greater than most people realise or are willing to admit.

Satellites are powerful and versatile tools for telecommunication, mapping the weather, remote sensing and other

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purposes, including broadcasting. It is best used in broadcasting for national networking whereas large, diverse countries with many socio-cultural and agro-climatic variables require location-specific extension and, sometimes, educational broadcasts. Local programming becomes necessary to enable viewers or listeners to identify with the message, environment and season. Access and participation are important; and rugged low-cost, small-format, easy-technology systems, that can be locally managed and maintained are obviously preferable.

UBI
Media mix

Multi-media combinations and systems are possible, especially through video and tape-cassettes which can be independent of broadcast networks and be circulated as a mobile facility. Super-8 film and slide projectors can also be used for education and extension as well as for entertainment. These can be combined with the traditional media which is ubiquitous and well loved and uses symbols and imagery to which modern messages can be sensitively grafted.

Broadcast-video-tape-slide film combinations can be used to develop popular systems of informal and continuing education. All India Radios, farm-schools-of-the-air hint of a vast potential in any number of adaptations of Britain's highly successful University of the Air, the United States' Sesame Street, and Italy's one-time Telescuola. Such programmes call for the development of suitable structures and interfaces. The unit cost of instruction will fall sharply with every increase in "enrolment".

The possibility of using telephones and small rural electronic exchanges for developing communication information centres needs to be explored. These could provide information about the weather, commodity prices, pest and disease outbreaks; house book, tape, slide and film libraries and operate as a clearing house of general information. The development and cultural impact of such communication resource centres could be significant, especially with the growth of literacy, the diversification of the economy and a more varied and rapid process of transfer of technology.

To be participative and creative, the media should enjoy wide autonomy even within officially sponsored systems. Propaganda and censorship do not provide a framework for lively or creative

communication . Credibility would suffer. There has in recent years been a great deal of debate about the need for a new information order that ensures a free and balanced flow of communication between North and South, East and West. There is nothing like "the" new order. There will be a constant process of change, and the objectives of a new order must be realised as much within as between nations and regions or globally. Indeed, a global order can only rest on strong national foundations. This is a measure of the task and the responsibility cast on the developing nations.

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