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Communication Theory: An Indian Perspective

By

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INDIA
COMMUNICATION THEORY: AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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At an international gathering in the United States in 1983 to discuss the modalities of a collaborative project were scholars from twenty countries. The working group of the project planned to examine the influence of the international culture industry, particularly music, on the youth in both industrial and developing nations. At one point in the conference, a Western scholar remarked that India proved to be an exception to every concept, assumption, and methodology in communication research. As the researcher from India present there, I smiled. Yes, to any Westerner, the Indian ethos is confusing, contradictory, and inexplicable. It can be explained but never understood in the way that an Indian assimilates the system into his bloodstream and operates within it effectively. The Indian system defies all norms of uniformity and one wonders how life functions here. Yet, India is the testing ground for the pioneering experiments in communication; in the use of innovative research techniques to gauge effectiveness of communication. Experiments are conducted here when nothing seems to work and where modernity exists alongside an ancient culture. There is neither contradiction nor consensus in the society to explain research findings.

Is there an Indian perspective to communication theory? Indeed. To explain this perspective is the purpose of this brief paper. To do so, three aspects will be examined here before discussing the Indian perspective:
a) the Indian culture and its roots; b) Western models and their application; and c) Western methodologies and their relevance.

The Indian Culture

In modern societies, religion has yielded place to education and mass media as the principal agents of socialisation and there is a greater emphasis on information, ideas, philosophies which mass media communicate in a wide variety of ways. However, in the traditional societies, especially those in the fourth world, other factors play a key role. The Indian society is an example of the all pervasive influence of family and culture on society.

To understand the impact of the culture on the socialisation process in the developing countries' societies, we have to accept that the concept of culture in Asian countries is very different from the Western view of culture. To the people of Asia:

"Culture is almost the totality of their way of life, an overall pattern of existence, comprehending the living traditions of the past, the meaningful life of the present, and the cherished aspirations of the future. The values of the spirit together with the means of its fulfillment or refinement, the wholeness of life instead of its compartmentalisation, the synthetic view of existence beyond the limited horizons of the analytical and rational approach mark the breadth and pervasiveness of the area of culture in the traditional societies of Asia." (Kirpal, 1976)

The culture remains for the Indian, all pervasive, a kind of ruling principle, an intangible order of values and relationships. It is a highly complex jigsaw puzzle of fourteen major languages, at least five major religions and races, different music and dance forms. As Jawaharlal Nehru once said "The Indian nation is one of manifest diversity and infinite variety with a long cultural history and a common outlook which develops a spirit. The framework is broad enough to encompass this diversity,
thus Indian character and culture is an encompassing system where logically opposites peacefully co-exist, where diverse elements are held together but not merged and where actions do not necessarily follow thoughts and emotions need they conflict" (Sihha, 1982). Thus, the culture seems irrational and inconsistent, is slow in adaptation and generally inefficient, but it is resilient; thus it has survived in spite of continuous invasions and changes in the socio-political system.

The modern day Indian culture is a mixture of three main roots. The first of these roots is in the traditional past, and the continuous history of more than three thousand years during which many living traditions evolved. The Aryans brought their culture to the Indus valley which blended with the Dravidian cultures of the South. Alexander left his mark on the culture as did the Muslim invaders and Moghul emperors. Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism were born in India as different sects and survived as part of Hinduism through the years. The adaptability and pragmatism that have ensured the continuing vigour of this unbroken tradition are derived from an all encompassing philosophical vision, so deeply embedded that it governs every aspect of Indian life; and Hindu thought sought reconcile opposing concepts by evolving a synthesis that transcends the limitation of opposing philosophies (Kapoor, 1985).

The second origin of the present day Indian culture comes from the colonial experience. The chronologically recent influence of the West, especially during the period of British rule which brought with it the educational, industrial, and political structures and institutions, created the modern elite -- the small but dominant cultural group today. The impact of the West brought profound changes in the socio-political system as the British linked the country into an infrastructural whole with transport and
communication systems, with an educational system and the liberal concepts of democracy and individual rights. More significantly, the British brought the empiricist tradition of observation and analysis common to Western thought. This suited the modern Indian admirably as it permits him to believe that he can pursue science as an observational activity, allied to the precision of mathematics, without in any way interfering with his traditional world picture (Kapoor, 1985).

The third source of the Indian culture comes from India's aspirations for the future after Independence with new vistas for the material and economic well being of the people. This materialistic thrust forward is not at odds with the Hindu view of life which delinks the temporal from the intellectual.

Nonetheless, Indian society is not as open minded as its philosophy. It is rigid in its divisions of caste and class; in its adherence to rituals and customs; in its links with tradition. Thus, it is not an unusual sight to see a "split personality" in the same individual — a modern, educated man in the office who, when he returns home in the evening, is the authoritarian head of the household, hierarchical in behaviour, traditional in outlook, and orthodox in his adherence to rituals, making him appear to have double standards.

This, then, is the Indian culture of today, diverse in forms; full of dichotomies and contradictions, where the individual's link is to family, caste and locality without a strong sense of an overall society. It is rigid in practice, demands loyalty and conformity, a puritanical morality, with an aversion for manual work. There is a sense of other worldliness, a belief in the world beyond the temporal, in myths, superstitions, astrology, and the occult. Alongside, there exists a general hungering for
Western materialism, where lip service is paid to the spirit and the outlook and expression of the culture is practical with little trace of the spiritual basis of the Indian philosophy. It is within this atmosphere that we have to speak of the relevance of Western communication models in India.

Western models and their application

For three decades now, scholars from the developing countries have been travelling to Western educational institutions for training in communication. To this, the Indian scholars are no exception. In the West, scholars are taught courses in communication theory and in development by Westerners. Some of these scholars have returned home to become the communication planners and teachers and they have expounded the theories of Berlo, Schramm, and Rogers, among others. In the 1960’s, these scholars followed the Western models in planning and implementing communication programmes. Then something went wrong. The populations were not behaving as they should. The results of research were not explicable in terms of the theories and models applied. Rural India behaved differently from urban India. In discussing the assumptions underlying the communication models of the West, I am concerned with their relevance to rural India, the bulk of India’s population and not with urban India of the cities.

There are several assumptions underlying Western theories. The first assumption is one of homogeneity of the social systems. In other words, while cultures may be ethnically diverse, the commonalities of the ethnic sub cultures would override their differences. A common language, a common outlook, common verbal and non-verbal would be present. The Graeco-Roman and Anglo-Western societies are essentially homogeneous in terms of their cultural and social values. What is applicable in France is, with minor modifications, also applicable in Germany or in Canada, A
common field of experience (Schramm, 1954) exists among the nations which share the Judeo-Christian religions and where religion and the way of life are separate with the latter as the superior aspect. In the Indian society, homogeneity is prominent by its absence. With its diversity, there is no identifiable common concept around which the society functions, except in as much as it is different from other systems.

A second assumption is one of a "free" communication climate where access and availability of media in a competitive atmosphere is the norm. In India, this cannot be assumed. There are pockets of media saturation in the cities which resemble Western society; there are also large areas of the country which are media barren. The issue is one of access and glaring inequalities of availability. A "free" communication climate is a distant dream. The population's daily concerns centre around the daily bread and butter, not around communication. What is more, communication media are institutions steeped in political interest. Their power as channels of communication for the establishment of political legitimacy is repeatedly emphasized when radio and television are among the first to be seized during periods of political instability or coup d'etats.

A third assumption, one never stated, but implicitly felt when reading Western theories, is that poverty and tradition are equated with primitiveness while the desire for material wealth in urban settings is seen as modernity. Such culture bound assumptions do much harm to the development process. In the Indian society, for example, there is no conflict between poverty and the desire for material well being. Further, tradition need not be surrendered upon the advent of modernity. The intellectual tolerance of the Hindus, the capacity to entertain divergent, sometimes mutually incompatible ideas derives from the rejection of dogmatism on fundamentals.
Poverty of the body does not mean poverty of the spirit or the forsaking of traditions on the altar of modernisation. Development or modernisation, as currently envisaged, refers to the improvement of the material standard of life so that the fruits of development are more equitably distributed. Lost is a concern for the spiritual well being. It is assumed that customs and traditions will be sacrificed.

A fourth assumption is that political development follows from economic and communication revolutions. In the Western countries, development took place through an evolutionary process with parallel growth in economics, communication, and political spheres (Teheranian, 1977). In the developing countries, political consciousness has preceded economic development, thus changing the fundamental nature of the development process.

Further, in its skeletal form, the model of the communication process, i.e. source, message, channel, receiver, and feedback, may be universal in its application. That is as far as it goes. The factors influencing each of these elements in the process are so different in India that one wonders if the process itself is applicable. Factors of credibility, message structure, channel of communication, effects vis a vis the receiver vary from those elsewhere.

The two major streams of American research, the effects approach and the functions orientation have been criticised for their inapplicability to third world countries (Lezare, 1983, Zires de Janka, 1973) since they do not take into account some of the socio-cultural factors operating in third world societies. The theories of attitude change, so necessary in the persuasion process, can be accused of the same weakness. The theories of consistency and congruence or Festinger's cognitive dissonance theories have little reality outside the laboratory conditions of the Western countries.
In fact, it is difficult even to think of the conditions under which these theories could be tested.

Finally, the current debates of the critical researchers of Europe (who have found belated popularity in American research) as opposed to the observational and empirical studies being conducted on the American continent and currently reported in journals, conferences, and papers have no meaning for third world conditions where communication scholars are grappling with the daily and mundane issues of development and in so doing, are finding to their discomfort that Western models have neglected the structural and sociological factors present in countries such as India. New and innovative processes of research are a must, and it is to these that Indian scholars are turning, whether in the Kheda experiment or among the tribals of Orissa.

Many of the theories are based on research and on a particular research tradition. It becomes necessary at this stage to examine the problems of research in India to understand the inadequacy of Western models.

Western methods and India

The failure of Western communication models can in part be traced to the failure of the Western research methodologies in the third world, and it was the exaggerated emphasis on the process of diffusion that highlighted the pitfalls of conducting Western style survey research in developing countries. Halloran (1983) has argued that "the research on media and development has been, and is currently being carried out in the third world where development criteria used and the overall approach are totally inappropriate." The result: inappropriate findings.

The problem is compounded, as Halloran further argues, because Western agencies demand that research in developing countries must be carried out by researchers from their countries. These researchers, being products
of a different socio cultural tradition, are prone to using value laden assumptions of the donor agencies.

Even the communication researchers of the developing countries have been trained in the educational institutions of the Western countries and carry imbibed within them the research traditions of their teachers. They are out of touch with the realities of the social systems of the third world. To conduct research, these scholars must forget what they have learned and start afresh.

Looking at the conditions of research in India over the past three decades, we find that much of the research carried out here has been by Western trained scholars, accustomed to operating within clear and well defined parameters. But conditions in India demand that both the processes and methods of research be designed be altered as a result of a variety of problems.

The first condition of research that one comes across in India is a situation where the lack or inaccuracy of baseline information is the order of the day. We can no more depend on the accuracy of the electoral rolls than we can on the information provided by Doordarshan. For example, if we use information from Doordarshan as to the number of community tv sets in operation in the villages before proceeding to the villages themselves, we will find that sets reported to be "working" have been out of order for several months. Information available at the district level cannot be relied upon. Census data provide a description, but remove the individuals from their socio cultural contexts, as we cannot obtain important information relating to kinship patterns, information flow, or attitude change. Thus, prior to any research being carried out, baseline data have to be obtained afresh, costing valuable time, energy and resources.
The emphasis upon the individual as the unit of response and analysis in Western style survey research is a second condition of research not applicable under Indian conditions. Rajagopal (1982) has pointed out that much of early diffusion research concentrated on the individual as the locus of change, ignoring the group as also the relations between the sources and receivers. Heads of households are usually chosen as the units of response, regardless of ongoing interaction between members of the same household. Data are collected using the individual as the unit of response when it is the family or group that jointly responds to an interview. It is also difficult to obtain information on socio-economic status variables because of the reluctance, suspicion, and the subsequent untruths that are told to the researcher because it is "what he probably wants to hear." When the data are wrong, the results of the research show the failure of the development programme, it is not treated as a weakness of the method but it is the individual to blame. Beltran (1976) has succinctly summed up this thinking "If peasants do not adopt the technology of modernisation, it is their fault, not that of those communicating the modern technology to them. It is the peasantry itself which is to be blamed for its ill fate, not the society which enslaves and exploits it".

A third problem with researchers in India is the problem of trained manpower. There is a serious shortage of trained communicators and researchers in India. The few available are overburdened with research or production of programmes. Most of the scholars engaged in the research related to SITE social impact came from the fields of sociology, anthropology, education, psychology, marketing, and political science and carry with them the frameworks of their own disciplines. Communication is but a small part of their individual subjects, and their knowledge of communication is perfunctory.
On the other hand, communication scholars in India, barring a few, do not have a strong understanding of methodology or of the other social sciences which have contributed so much to the multidisciplinary nature of the subject. Their knowledge of social psychology, political science, and other disciplines is shallow. Under these circumstances, it is very difficult to conduct research as the designs are themselves faulty.

Finally, if blame is to be placed anywhere in India, it is on the shoulders of the researchers who are guilty of ignoring the social system and the way of life. This has led to a situation where current research is 'inappropriate' but no effort has been made by scholars to discern existing communication patterns. Instances of this abound. India has a vibrant oral communication tradition which has been the mainstay of cultural cohesion for centuries. Music, dance, drama, mythology, and the tenets of culture and religion have been carried forward through this oral tradition. Little or no effort has been made by today's scholars to explore this communication process.

The 'gurukul' tradition of education, existent for centuries and the traditional and folk media of communication have also been equally ignored in the scramble to exploit sophisticated communication hardware such as satellite-based television. The widening communication gap between the information rich and the information poor has not been studied at all, except by Shingi and Mody (1976). Communication scholars who should be exploring and searching for innovative research techniques have bound themselves mentally and physically within the confines of their limited capacities.

The Indian Perspective

Is there, then, an Indian perspective to Western communication
models? Yes, in spite of the limitations of scholars and researchers. It is there is the realisation that Western models, so long applied, are irrelevant to Indian conditions, and that in their attempted application, these models require major modifications.

The perspective is also evident in the recognition that it is necessary to study social structures and cultural contexts prior to proceeding with research. It is necessary that scholars are not prepared to accept without question the different methods of research as developed in the Western countries. Indian researchers are also beginning to examine the Latin American experiences and experiments in search of answers to vital questions.

Most important, the Indian perspective is clearly evident in the manner in which major experiments are being examined by teams of social scientists, each bringing with him an understanding of the field. Large field based sample surveys and experiments are being supplemented with micro level depth evaluations to provide a total picture of the problem, at formative, processual, and summative stages of development schemes. The diversities of the Indian ethos are being identified and examined from every possible angle.

A recognition of the problem is the first step toward its solution. In that sense, a beginning has been made and from this small start, we can develop models suitable to our own needs and conditions.
References


