

Development and communication: a view from India

Any urban do-gooder going into the countryside to bring the "good news" of development to his backward countrymen may be in for a surprise. The backward rural-dwellers may be illiterate, but they receive an education from waging a daily struggle with the elements. The urban genius, on the other hand, learns at the feet of Western savants. In the meeting of town and country, it may be the urbanite who has much to learn from his "backward" cousins.

Anil Srivastava

I N India we are beginning to question the very concept of development and by questioning I don't mean "what is development" but "what for development", "who is going to benefit" and does the benefit percolate down to the people. It is a very small number of people in India who have started questioning and they are those who went from the cities to work in the villages. They had learnt in their school days that India lives in the villages and they went out "to do good" for the misreadable millions. They went with ideas like "if you have less children you will have more to eat", "with literacy you will be able to fight for your rights", and "adopting modern methods will bring prosperity". Most of us went out with pre-conceived ideas and when we started working with people we started discovering that these ordinary people were many times more educated than many of us who went out to "educate" them. These ordinary people had learnt from life and we, who were literate, borrowed our scenario for life from the West and we were trying to cast them into that mould which we called "modernization". It was a great educational experience for us — this process of what Ivan Illich calls "de-schooling". The stories of their experiences, not the stories of their successes but the stories of their failures, their encounters, the "process of endeavour", and stories of the communities with whom they were working are the new development education material. A colleague of mine was making a film on development and she decided to ask the question "what is development?" to all the

villagers she interviewed. One of her encounters was with a young man who has become literate, that he had learnt to read and write, and to wear a shirt and a trouser. He turned around and said to her: You have given me education, taught me to sit on a chair, made me learn how to wear a shirt and therefore it is your godamn job to provide me with the shirt and the chair and don't expect me to go and work the field.

In the sixties George Verghese started a forthrightly column in the Hindustan Times and it was called "Our Village Chattera". When I first read the column I felt that it was facile because it displayed a "patronising" attitude. But what Verghese managed to do was to open a window to rural India to those who plan for it, but seldom get to know it "as it is". However, George Verghese in one of his recent discussions with some participants in a communication seminar admitted that perhaps it was a mistake, perhaps Chattera suffered from over-exposure, perhaps the people there had begun to depend on the column to get things done, perhaps it focussed on the dramatic — the progress with a big P.

I remember a film by James Blue called A Few Notes on Our Food Problem. It was made in the Kennedy years for the USIS. Few notes on PL 480 which seems to have created more problems than it solved in this part of the world. There is sequence in the film about pest infected maize crop and a shot of a emaciated farmer, laughing. "The laugh is on us" said the commentary. The farmer could survive on very little, he could do with much less, it is the "haves" who eat most of what he produces.

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There is a study on "Poverty in India" by Professor Dandekar. The study shows that most of the goods and services produced in the country are consumed by less than 10 percent of the population. The rest of the population survives on the little that is left over.

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Mehmood Mamdani wrote another book — "Myth of Population Control" — about his impressions of the Khanna Study in North India or rather of his visit to the people of the area. He went to the house of the man who was supposed to be the best acceptor of the contraceptive foam tablets. At this man's house he found a Taj Mahal built with foam tablets. Mamdani asked this man as to why did he do that. This man said that he did not see any reason why he should not be nice to "good people" who came from faraway lands and as his wife had died some years back and he had no need for the tablets, he built a Taj Mahal out of them.

These are some of the things that I try to remember when I am working in communication for development. Our experience suggests that access and participation in development involves communication, communication not to the people for we do not have all the answers to their problems, we hardly know the problems. If we did we have had thirty years to implement our ideas. We have only achieved what Ivan Illich condemns, a "modernization of poverty".

Ripples

Gandhi described his ideal society as "ever widening, never ascending circles". Decentralization was the key concept. He felt that the communities will be like ripples, they will be autonomous, they will be self-sufficient in what they need for their daily life, and they will share whatever they had to share with others. There would be no "provider" and no "receiver" and if I may add, no strategies for development communication.

One of my many professions is that of a filmmaker. The cost of making a film is very high. You tend to make the film for a large audience. And when you are making a film you tend to create a mystique. You are more on show and people also tend to perform for the camera. They are not able to see what you carry away in that "black box" of yours. They do not participate. Because of this the film can only play the role of provoking people to think or instruct. It can be a good starter of discussions, if the people are sufficiently jolted they tend to open up. At the same time the film does not allow you to change it once you have completed it. You make a film and that is it. It is a part of the memory of the world that we can leave behind. You tend to invest into it all that you have got. With the emotional, intellectual and financial investments it tends to do a limited job — to "can" an idea or information

which can be repeatedly used and shown to a large number of people. Of course the information may not be relevant to all the people.

Sometime back we did a study of agricultural films. We selected eight of the better films. They were indeed well made. One of them was about rodent control, telling the farmers how much of the grain is eaten up by the rodents. It "motivated" them to go and collect the rat-trap from his village level worker as the government is providing free rat-traps. The catch was that the block development officer in that area had never heard of such a scheme. It was a case of a loss of credibility. As a matter of fact by the time the film was made it was decided not to provide the rat-traps but it was too late. Good money had been spent on making the film so it had to be shown.

Earlier we had done a study of family planning films. These were among the best of the films promoting family planning. We selected a batch of them which were archetypal. These films talked about people who adopted family planning who prospered and those who did not suffer. But the reality was different — poor people whether with large or small families always suffered. A child in the village often earns more than he consumes, he is not like our children who need twenty years of sheltered life to stand on their own feet. These films did not succeed in doing their job. We had been living in the community for sometime before we showed them the films. Before and after the screening of the films we talked to them. These conversations — not interviews — were recorded on a cassette recorder. Then they were transcribed by a person who was bilingual and had lived in the community together with two sociologists. We also talked to the makers of these films.

One problem is that as filmmakers we put down our argument on a piece of paper, we call this the script for the film. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The argument is very dependent on the attention of the audience in order to get across. Therefore, the filmmakers often talk about "the captive audience" — the audience in the dark. Well, we found out that the people in the village do not watch the film the same way we do. They walk in and walk out and maybe walk in again. They pick their ears to listen to something they are interested in and then their attention is shifted to something else. They often talk among themselves during the film show. The argument gets lost for want of attention. Then they make assumptions which are not valid. Everybody in the village likes to see the films and they enjoy it. This is their window to the world. They are curious about the "mythical people" but they cannot relate to them.

Video fascinates me. I know it to be an appropriate technology for communication for development. It is a more manageable and accessible technology. With little training people can learn to handle the equipment, and as they can see for themselves what they are recording on tape, they tend to learn fast from the experience. People tend to participate in making videotapes. And with every passing month the equipment and the consumable material are becoming cheaper.

In Peru, Manuel Rios has been working within the agriculture extension programme teaching the people how to improve their agricultural productivity. He has been training extension workers to use video to "make courses" and he has done a remarkable job. What he is trying to do is to "fetch" useful information at the request of the people from the "sources" where information existed. He has accepted the "operating space" available to him to work in and make the best of it. He is not out to conscientize the people as it will create a situation of confrontation which he cannot handle but to share knowledge.

Kheda experiment

The second video project I would like to mention is the Kheda Experiment near Ahmedabad. The Space Applications Centre of the Indian Space Research Organisation which was responsible for the technological aspect of the Satellite Instructional Technology Experiment (SITE) in India decided to set up a transmitter in a rural area nearby. This was a terrestrial transmitter. Since then they have been producing and broadcasting half-hour of community based programmes. In spite of the fact that they do have good local television they found that there were some issues you could not broadcast, not because the government prevented you from doing so, but because you could not take care of the consequences from an open broadcast. So what they have started doing is to make those videotapes and take them to the village for playback to small groups. They also often take recourse to extract a situation from the real life and dramatize it. It saves you from having to create a confrontation between the oppressor and the oppressed and at the same time get across the essence of the situation. They are making programmes that originate in the village. They recently had a script competition and programmes are being made on these scripts. The researchers at the Space Applications Centre are not asking the people whether they like the programmes or not but are trying to understand their reactions. I think the Kheda Experiment is important as "another television" for the people running the project are government people within the framework of the bureaucratic system who have been "sensitized" by their work environment, both in the villages and back in their organization. Something has happened to these people. There is an openness, there is a desire to look at the reality as "it is it", certain willingness to accept the reality from the other side. On the other hand the Indian television which is run by the same kind of human beings doesn't seem to be able to do anything. The people in the television organisation blame their lack of freedom to do a similar job. In the Kheda Experiment the people from the Space Applications Centre have found a way. They have found their "operating space" within the framework of the country's declared policies. They are practising a kind of brinkmanship, they keep on pushing at the limits of their space. Sometimes they overstep the limits, then they step back but never do they give up pushing. That's it. No politician can afford to tell you that it is not proper to uplift the Untouchables, to condemn the evils of the caste system, to talk about food for the hungry children, to discuss the demeaning system of dowry, and so on. These are enshrined in the Indian Constitution as the directive

principles of the state policy. SK Dey, author of India's Community Development programme, wrote a book explaining the programme objectives and it was titled "Power to the People". This was in the early fifties. There are enough of "these operating spaces" and if we keep on exploring (and not look for issues that make "news") they can like "ever widening, never ascending circles" create the ideal society.

I would also like to mention our Saharanpur Community Video Experiment. We did not think that we had the answers and we did not have an ideology which seems to fit the situation. We felt that perhaps video was a channel, a platform for a dialogue with the community or within the community. They will have to decide what to do, we are just going to be the extension of the hardware. The problem is that this kind of work takes a long time to yield any results. A person involved in the problems of his community can

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instinctly present it much better. He gets to the heart of the matter while the "outsiders" fumble around. This was apparent to us the very first day we brought the portapak to the village we were working in. After recording the pretty images of rural countryside and poverty we ran out of ideas. There came an old man, a Muslim and a grandfather with his granddaughter in his arms. He was a landless labourer in his fifties. He peered into the viewfinder, pointed the camera at the tree and the children and then when we played back what he had just recorded he was amused. He was a little more daring. He asked us whether he could take it and use it. I do not know what got into us but one of the group said "go ahead". He had vanished for more than an hour and we thought that was the last we saw of the portapak that we had borrowed in the first place. But he came back as he had run out of the tape and wanted it played back. What this landless labourer had done was that he went around accosting better off farmers and asked them what they thought of the problems of poor landless labourers like him, what they are doing about it, and so on. It was a revelation for as if peeling an onion, layer by layer, he brought out the core of hypocrisy. They all wanted to help their brothers but what can they do, there is not enough kerosene and the diesel and fertiliser and so it was obvious from the "interviews" that no one is going to do anything for the poor, it is they who must help themselves. I could not have made that programme and nor my colleagues because we would have been too impatient. We would have superimposed our views.

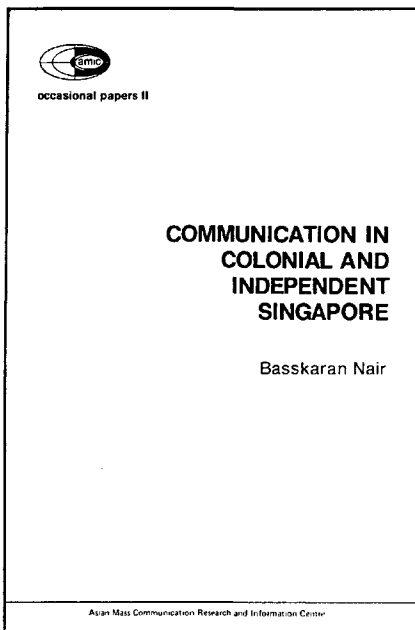
George Verghese said that one of the problems of working in India is that we are dealing with situations that belong to different centuries — the cliched phrase can be used "the Boeing and the Bullock Cart". Time is of the essence and what we need is "technocracy". It is a

term coined by Dr MS Swaminathan, presently Deputy Chairman of India's Planning Commission, to emphasise the need for education preceding alphabetization. He said one can teach the rural people to read and write but he needs information which cannot be communicated within the words he learns. He suggested that perhaps literacy could come after education and not before education. Once you are educated literacy can be a means to take hold of the opportunity.

It is difficult to provide for access and participation in broadcast television because of the technology employed. I think like film, television could provide a window to the world to the rural people. It could do this if it could get hold of people who are first and foremost their communities, people who are concerned with the issues at hand, people who are working with communities and therefore have a built-in feedback system, and who want to use television to provide relevant information and present it in the language of the people. First, it should be the information that is needed. Second, it should be useful. Development cannot be sold like Dalda. We should not try to manipulate the minds of the

people. Very seldom the copywriter consumes the product he extols others to buy through his advertisement. He knows that he is creating the "unique selling proposition" where there is seldom any. In development most of the time we are putting across ideas and methods that may work and again they may not work. There can be no certainty and therefore there has to be an openness and an ability to respond to the situation. We must reject the manipulative techniques of advertising. Let us not try and sell something that we do not believe in for we are playing with the lives of human beings, for a moment forget the talk of "target groups", "better packaging", "sugar coating", "strategies for development", and even the birth rates and zero population growth.

The new information order can only be based on a respect for people and a genuine desire to share information. There are no certain solutions to the problems of our planet but the people need information to work out their own solutions. We shall overcome our problems, each in his own way, provided there is a sharing of experiences. And to us that is what the new information order is all about.



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