

LESSONS OF PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION IN WRITINGS OF MAHATMA GANDHI

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Abstract

India in its 72nd year of independence has achieved many milestones in fields of science and technology, defence, economic progress, etc. But if there is one issue that downgrades the nation's image as a growing power, it is the sad state of human development of Indians living in villages. Clearly there have been gross inadequacies at structural and policy levels, including basic approach to handling human development challenges.

This objective of this paper is to highlight the similarities between contemporary literature on participatory communication and publications by M. K. Gandhi on Indian rural development. Qualitative research methodology comprising of content analysis and comparative analysis of both sets of literature is used. The paper also recommends a simple model of applying the concept of participatory communication in present day rural development projects in India as an extension of the 'Gram Swarajya' idea propounded by Gandhi. By involving people in their own development, the pace and efficiency of rural development can be increased significantly.

Keywords: *inclusive growth, participation in development, human development index trends, social challenges to development, village service, Gram Swaraj, communication strategies, Gandhian thoughts on development*

Introduction

India is a progressive and vibrant nation with many shades of social, cultural and economic diversity. It is difficult to explain its journey from a newly born democracy in 1947 to becoming one of the fastest growing economies in the world using conventional theories. But this journey has had its downsides in the slow and near stagnant development of its villages, especially in terms of the Human Development Index (HDI). In contemporary times, the concept of participatory development communication has emerged as a possible tool to bridge the gap between India's Millennium Development Goals (MDG) for the year 2015 and the ground realities in rural areas.

But how can we be confident that this is the right approach? An answer to the above question can be found by looking into the writings and philosophies of the great Indian freedom fight leader M. K. Gandhi. It is surprising to note that the principles propounded by him for individual and national character building are as relevant today as they were nearly a hundred years ago. A deeper analysis of his model of rural development, based on the concepts of 'self-development' and 'self-sufficiency' shows that many of the concepts of present-day participatory communication were implied in the same.

As we see many development efforts, including those with huge funding and technology failing to bring about the desired effect in rural development, maybe it is time to adapt a new perspective, that of participatory communication as upheld by the Gandhian model. The objective of this paper is

to prove the theoretical links between Gandhian philosophy and the participatory communication approach to rural development in India, and to recommend a model communication that can improve effectiveness of rural development projects. The research methodology is qualitative using content analysis as tool of examining articles and speeches by M. K. Gandhi.

Background: Indian Rural Development and Role of Communication

Development is a complicated socio-economic concept that defies any universal definition. Every time a group of thinkers presents a theory to explain development in one part of the world, it starts to acquire a new meaning in some other region. For example, in the post World War II era, theorists and writers of the western nations were convinced that development was a simple linear flow of technology, knowledge and culture from their countries to the newly built developing nations. This was the beginning of the '*dominant paradigm*' also known as '*modernisation*' or '*diffusion of innovations*' approach as propounded by E. M. Rogers (1962).

However, in the decades that followed this approach, a mere 'transmission' of development was ineffective, if not destructive to the lands and cultures of the recipients. By blindly imitating the path of science and industry without giving credence to local culture, practices and ways of communication, this approach only contributed in making the rich, richer and the poor, poorer across the world. The scenario began to change in the later decades of twentieth century with developed nations finally making efforts to understand the importance of local participation for 'sustainable' benefit from their aid and efforts.

The Indian experience of development over nearly seven decades of self-rule has followed a similar trajectory especially in case of rural development. From the very first year of independence, India decided to follow the socialist republic model of governance, where the Government at State and Central levels was entrusted with the task of human development. In the circumstances prevailing at that time, perhaps it was the best option to strengthen a newly born nation with limited resources and social infrastructure. But surprisingly even after seven decades of progress in technology, economy and political stability, the control of development resources is still bereft of any form of people's involvement in Government plans. This needs to change.

With the launch of National Five-Year Development Plans in 1951, successive governments were able to achieve significant milestones in areas of food production, infrastructure development, GDP growth and technological advancement. But in terms of Human development, India still ranks at a mediocre 131 among 187 countries with a medium Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.62, not much of an increase from HDI of 0.59 in the year 2013 (United Nations Development Program, Human Development Report, 2016). Human Development Index of a country is measured as a composite of three major factors – health, income and education of its population. While education and income trends in our country in the past decade have shown positive trends, health and nutrition trends remain our biggest development problems. As we stake claim to be one of the fastest growing economic superpowers of the South East Asian region, it is a paradox that our country is home to nearly 320 million poor people, and we have the highest number of malnourished children in the world.

An important aspect of making development efforts reach the intended beneficiaries is communication. Communication is an essential input in any human development initiative. Study of this branch of Mass Communication started gaining importance in the later decades of the twentieth century, notably the 1970s and 1980s, and a new field of study called **Development Communication** was born. The epistemological origin of Development Communication is dated to the year 1971 when the phrase was coined by the renowned author Nora Quebral (1975), at a conference in the University of Philippines. Its conceptual origins can be traced to post World War II years with the emergence of many new nations with large populations and meagre resources. The Western nations then embarked upon the mission to 'develop' these nations, communication being an integral part of their approach.

Since then the journey of development communication is marked by several paradoxes and contradictions, with no single theory or model proving adequate to describe its functioning and effects. At first the 'Modernisation theory' from the work of E. Rogers (1962) was regarded as the dominant paradigm, followed by Dependency theories in mid-sixties, and then came the alternate approaches, the most important of them being **Participatory Communication** as propounded by thinkers like Paulo Friere (1972), Alfonso Dagron (2002) and Jan Servaes (1999). This movement started picking up in India in the 1970s with citizen's groups and associations getting actively involved in addressing problems of the society such as dowry deaths and deforestation (Ghosh, 2006).

Looking back upon the several development initiatives by Government and NGOs that did not quite meet their targets, a need for a fresh perspective on ground realities of development challenges is necessary. Perhaps the missing element lies in not asking the masses what kind of development they really need, given the fact that it is meant for them. Large scale development of people cannot be achieved without understanding their minds, hearts and circumstances. One of the greatest philosophers of our time, who not only understood the minds of his country's people but also succeeded, in motivating them on an unprecedented level towards a national mission was M. K. Gandhi, fondly addressed as 'Mahatma' Gandhi by his followers. Though we all know about his role in our freedom struggle, only a few know that he was also a great development visionary and a prolific writer. In his writings we find values and lessons, prescribed over a hundred years ago for a 'New India', which can be incorporated in contemporary policy making for rural development.

Let us now understand the concept and application of Participatory Communication as an effective form of mass communication for development and how this recently appreciated idea was already implied in the writings of M. K. Gandhi

Research Methodology

This paper uses qualitative approach to study the content links between existing literature on participatory development communication and the writings of M. K. Gandhi in the period between years 1920-1940. The methodology is grounded theory (Creswell, 2009) in which a general theory or model is derived using constant comparison and content analysis of both sets of literature. This approach was selected because the aim of the paper is to highlight the conceptual link between two sets of literature and develop a model that can make PDC more effective.

The first step in data collection was to read and code writings of M. K. Gandhi in terms of rural development, participation, self-development, community service and etc. Similarly, existing literature on concepts of participatory development communication were coded. The codes were developed into themes and a comparison was made between both sets. The study found that many themes in both lists matched in meaning and relevance.

Analysis and Interpretation: The Conceptual link between Participatory Development Communication (PDC) and Gandhian Model of Rural Development

The concepts most relevant today in 'development by participation of people' are localisation of media, bottom-up and horizontal flow of communication, preserving cultural identity of local communities, and democratisation of communication process. Participatory Communication is a mind-set that encourages the beneficiaries of a development effort to participate in every aspect of the project, right from the planning to implementation to evaluation of results. In this approach, the people most likely to be affected by changes brought about by a development intervention are consulted at every stage and even given the power to decide crucial elements. They are encouraged to discuss and decide on the development issue as a community, and all members are given equal opportunity in this process.

Participatory Communication was defined at a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) Seminar in 1978 as *the social process in which groups with common interests jointly construct a message oriented to the improvement of their existential situation and to the change of the unjust social structure*.

There are many socio-cultural challenges to application of Participatory Communication to Indian villages because of complex power structures and social inequalities like caste and community. For her research the author wanted to assess the level of participation by beneficiaries in a rural healthcare development project. Application of this concept to rural healthcare was a new area of research and so there was the question of its suitability to Indian context, as very few published studies were available.

Uma Narula (1999) also describes *'Learned Dependency'* to be a commonly observed dysfunctional phenomenon in the Indian civil society, more profound in rural areas. The masses are so used to accepting aid and making complaints about failures of governments/agencies that they become totally dependent on them. They are satisfied by expressing their dejection, instead of participating and improving the project outcomes. Given these observations, the idea of research on participatory communication in Indian rural context seemed to be incompatible with ground realities of rural life.

This question is answered by the present study that found several *conceptual similarities* between teachings of Mahatma Gandhi for an ideal Indian village life and the literature on tested theories of Participatory Communication across the world. In several articles and essays written by Gandhi in the decade 1930-1940 he urges his fellow countrymen to change self-defeating attitudes for their own betterment. The above-mentioned traits of traditional Indian society still perpetuate in large sections of our population, particularly in rural areas. Hence the messages of Gandhi's writings are just as relevant in present times as they were then.

For example, about nutrition and diet, Gandhi has exhorted people to consume minimum of processed foods, and maximum of food produced by their own hands – either in the farms or by pounding the grains themselves. The underlying idea is to motivate village people to be self-reliant and minimise the role of external agents in ensuring good health. Another significant concept in his writings is the **'Gram Swarajya'** or village republic. He was confident that if the village community is united and focussed, if it can do away with divisions of society that undermine its progress like religion and casteism, it can turn into a mini republic within the larger republic of the nation. Its people will function to satisfy their own needs of food, clothing and other essentials, and produce surplus to send out to cities.

My idea of village Swaraj is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its own vital wants and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is necessary.

(Harijan, 26-7-1942)

Participatory Communication concept is also built on the tenets of community, local participation, minimising the role of external agents and utilisation of locally available resources. Without these basic requirements, other principles like Dialogue, Horizontal Communication and shifting of ownership and control of resources to the community members cannot be achieved. Hence the ideas expressed in writings of Gandhi form the precursor to bringing in true Participatory Communication in rural development efforts.

To achieve participatory development the officials and planners must approach the community with a sense of service, not with an attitude of superiority. The concept of *'Village Service'* and how the educated youth of cities must approach the village community is explained by Gandhi. These are invaluable lessons for any effort to induce participation and trust by the local villagers.

Only those, therefore, who have faith in themselves and in their mission will serve the villagers and influence their lives. A true life lived amongst people is in itself an object-lesson that must produce its own effect upon immediate surroundings.

(Harijan, 20-2-1937)

Now that we have seen a theoretical link between Gandhi's outlook for rural development and the modern concept of participatory communication, we can now incorporate these concepts into a set of communication strategies to reach out to beneficiaries of development. The following section provides a few recommendations based on the author's research experience in assessing participatory development communication in rural Gujarat.

Recommendations for Participative and People Centric Human Development

Based on the conceptual link between teachings of M. K. Gandhi and the various theories of Participatory Communication, the author conducted a qualitative research in rural Gujarat to assess the application of Participatory Development Communication (PDC) in a health care project run by the State Government to promote institutional deliveries. A total of 52 participants, mostly expectant mothers from BPL (Below Poverty Line) families and healthcare workers had participated in the study. The following model is prepared based on the findings of that study showing how PDC approach can be used in any development project.

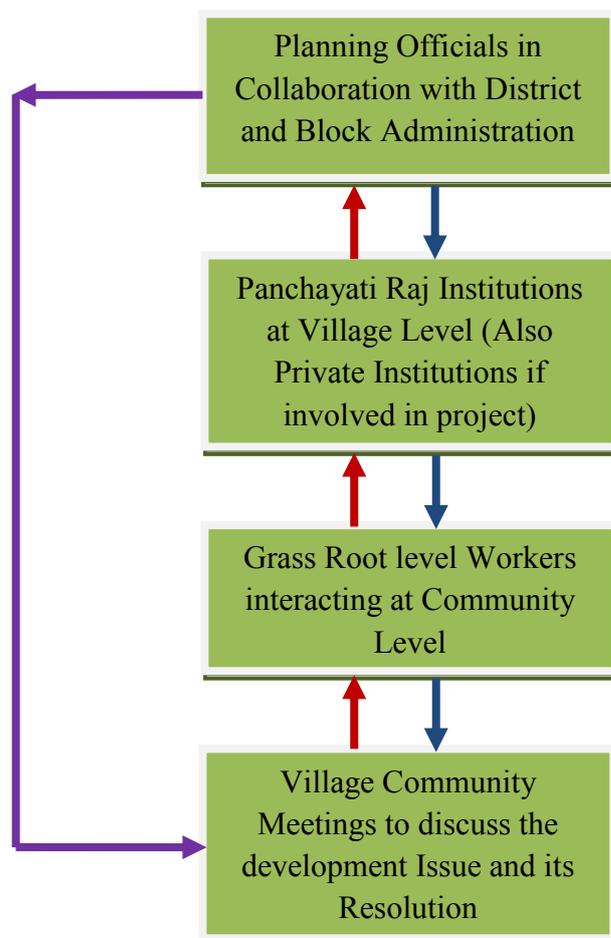


Figure 1: Model of Flow of Communication in Development Project Following the Participatory Approach
Source: Author's depiction

In this flowchart, the blue arrows represent top to bottom down flow of information. These comprise of details of proposal and plan that are sent from District authorities to Panchayat and grass

root workers. After discussions and dialogue, feed backs and suggestions are sent back through a separate channel of communication.

They may include reports of qualitative studies, transcripts of community meetings, individual opinions, etc. depicted by the red arrows. The messages are analysed, and relevant feedbacks are incorporated in the original plan. The modified plan is communicated back to the villagers, which is depicted by the purple arrow for further discussions, until a consensus is reached. The process may seem lengthy and tedious but resolving important issues with the community before starting an intervention prevents problems and delays in the later stages.

In development interventions, there were two entities – the *developers*, i.e. officers and volunteers who will implement the programme, and the *beneficiaries*, i.e. the people in a given areas intended to be benefited by them. It is recommended that both these groups be trained and oriented before the launch of any major projects as described below.

(a) Participatory orientation for beneficiaries:

In his award-winning book ‘Everyone Loves a Good Drought’, P. Sainath (1996) describes the total lack of understanding and involvement of people in ongoing development projects in most of the villages he studied. They are lured in by offers of money or employment, and accepting these short-term rewards, they simply obey the development officers on vital issues like what to grow on their lands or how to treat their cattle. They are not taught to question or seek information or give feedbacks. Such attitudes need course correction in the very first steps of planning a project. The planners of the project must have a series of orientation sessions with the local community explaining them the need and benefits of the effort. These meetings must be an interactive session where all members are free to question, support or oppose a viewpoint, which may then be resolved in subsequent sessions.

(b) Thorough research into the development issue in the context of given community:

The Planners must undertake extensive research using both qualitative and quantitative approaches to understand the development issue and all factors associated, including social, cultural and gender sensitive aspects. The best alternative may then be proposed to the community members, giving full explanation why it was selected. This will help build confidence in the purpose and methods of the proposed project.

(c) Involvement of local people at every stage of the project:

Sometimes a project begins with good participatory effort in the initial stages. But as soon as technicalities and external experts get involved in the later stages, the community participants are pushed aside. This form of pseudo participation or ‘Tokensim’ (Arnstein, 1969) alters the meaning and purpose of participatory communication, leading to almost the same results as in the case of purely ‘diffusion’ approach. Hence the planners must make sure that participation from beneficiaries is sought at every stage, right from planning to implementation to evaluation.

It is possible that the local community does not have the technical expertise or skills to provide new inputs to the project. In such cases they may have to be trained or educated so as to keep the communication momentum going.

(d) Orientation for development officers and volunteers:

The quality of inclusiveness and participation in a development project depends a lot on attitudes and behaviour of the developers, especially the grass root workers. The officers and

personnel being more educated and having more resources at their disposal must take initiative in approaching the community members. The onus of 'bringing on board' the beneficiaries is on them. Hence, they must compulsorily be oriented in the following concepts:

- Village Service and the Village Worker (Gram Sevak) – 'Only those who have faith in themselves and in their mission will serve the villagers and influence their lives' (Harijan, 20-2-1937)
- Participatory Communication – setting up channels for dissemination of information to the beneficiaries and for receiving feed backs.

Conclusion

Looking back on our freedom struggle, if we were to point out the one crucial factor that made Mahatma Gandhi a force to reckon with even for the mighty British Empire, it was his uncanny ability to motivate, mobilise and discipline thousands of ordinary Indians for achieving a national goal. If his words and thoughts had such an impact as to help win a country its freedom, certainly we can find its usefulness in motivating our citizens today to participate in the national development. A strong impetus is needed to make his simple messages reach the poorest sections of the society using communication strategies and different forms of media. This task can be performed efficiently by the numerous State and Central Universities that specialise in study of Gandhian ideology.

India has scripted a great success story in rising up to be one of the fastest growing economies in the world. It has achieved incredible milestones in fields of science and technology, telecommunications and Manufacturing capabilities. Developing our Human Resources, enabling them to contribute to national growth with their full potential may unlock the final door towards become a world superpower in the next five decades. This is possible only if India's growth story is inclusive and devoid of inequalities. The idea is expressed in a comprehensive quote from Mahatma Gandhi:

'The remedy is to identify ourselves with the poor villager and to help him make the land its plenty, help him produce what we need, and confine ourselves to use what he produces, live as he lives, and persuade him to take to more rational ways of diet and living.'

(From a summary of Gandhi's address at a public gathering at Indore, Published in Harijan, 11-5-1935)

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