# PRIORITISING *COMMUNICATION* IN DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES: THE MISSING LINK BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE IN INDIA'S DEVELOPMENT SECTOR

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## Abstract

For a long time *Communication* has been widely acknowledged as a significant component in scholarly treatment of development discourse. There however seems to be a persistent disconnect between such academic theorisations and the real field level situation as *communication* continues to remain in the periphery in programme planning and interventions of donor agencies as well as implementing NGOs in India. Drawing from the experiences in two prominent but diverse national level development organisations, this paper argues that communication in practice is still poorly understood and practiced in the sector. Rather than erroneously equating *communication* with information and apparent image building exercises of NGOs, the paper argues that it needs to be seriously seen as the key to a community's empowerment by enabling their people's participation in development initiatives that concerns them and their destiny. The paper calls for *communication* to be brought to the centre stage of institutional intervention policies and programmes and suggests possible means to do so. In particular, it argues for the need to carve out a central role of communication for development professionals in the country's third sector.

*Keywords*: Communication, Participation, Communication for Development (C4D), Non-government Organisation (NGO), Development Sector, Third Sector, Social Movement Organisation (SMO)

## Introduction

A considerable amount of academic discourse around medium-centred development initiatives – both in the domain of dominant as well as participatory paradigms – has emerged with the concomitant use of media technology in social development projects. The early scholarship around SITE and Kheda experiments in India, for example, are classic examples that testify to the case of the use of media within the dominant paradigm. In the case of the participatory paradigm, studies have examined conventional media and their role in community empowerment as in the case of films, video and television (Fountain, 2005) and in the case of community

radio projects across nations, including India (Pavrala & Malik, 2007). Scholars, in recent times, are also drawn towards the emerging forms of citizens' participation and alternative media that are based on new technology like Web 2.0 (Mudliar & Donner, 2015; Castels, 2011; Atton, 2002) and IVR (Interactive Voice Response) technology as in the case of India's CGNet Swara (Mudliar & Donner, 2015). These studies and accounts panning across both the paradigms are however essentially media-centric and even as they are highly instructive, they emulate a trend akin to what scholars argue about growth of communication discipline in India as historically rooted in a 'medium and sectoral' development (Das, 2013). Taking a different trajectory, the current study looks at communication from a *ritual* perspective (Carrey, 1989) in India's development sector, not restricted to just few communication or media projects but across initiatives in the third sector in general. The study examines how much space and priority is given to *communication* by the sector and the reasons thereof. This becomes all the more relevant given that development communication since the last six decades, and particularly Communication for Development (C4D) since the last one decade, has emerged as a rather well-developed area of scholarship globally, including India, and scholars persistently insist on the strategic use of communication in community development projects.

If communication is really so indispensable a component of development theoretically (Melkote & Steeves, 2010; Sparks, 2007), how does it play out practically in the real world? In attempting to answer this question, we briefly examine the available literature to set the theoretical framework of the paper. Later we reflect on how two leading national level rights-based NGOs in the country give (or do not give) space to *communication* in their institutional policies and programmatic interventions. Though the two NGOs considered here are far from being representative of the entire sector, their selection reflects the large-scale diversity of development organisations in the country with respect to philosophical or ideological orientation, organisational structure, funding sources, programmatic areas of intervention and intervention strategies. The reason for purposefully considering these two NGOs is to enable personal reflection on experiential learning of the author who has spent approximately a decade in the sector. Finally we draw out key discussion points, consolidate the theme of the paper and prescribe a few suggestions in order to bring *communication* to the centre stage of development programmes by the third sector in the country.

## Literature Review

The significance of communication for social change has been variously articulated by scholars. Dagron (2009), for instance, argues that it is about

> *People taking into their own hands the communication processes that will allow them to make their voices heard, to establish horizontal dialogues with planners and development specialists, to take decisions on the development*

*issues that affect their lives, to ultimately achieve social changes for the benefit of their community (p.453).*

The concept of ritual form of communication (Carey, 1987) is implicit in such a conception, and it emerges forcefully in the distinction that Melkote & Steeves (2010) make between top-down development communication and bottom-up development support communication. In his often-cited work, Paulo Freire (1968/2005) suggested that such a participatory form of communication leads to *conscientization*. Sparks (2007) argues that if this is to happen, then *communication* assumes a critical position as a catalyst in any development effort.

Dagron's distinction between information and communication is instructive here: the former is a top-down one-way process while the latter involves multiple dialogic processes. However, he laments that even specialists and people in communication in the sector generally fail to distinguish between the two terms. Communication in this sense helps the local people discover and articulate their genuine problems and the root causes, their needs and desire rather than these being identified by external elite experts who often come with a mandate. Sparks (2007) has argued how grassroots perspective towards social problem is often different from scientific perspective of the outside experts, and Melkote, Krishnatray & Krishnatray (2008) demonstrated its veracity even in case of health issues like tuberculosis and its stigmatization in India. In such a scheme of things, the lost indigenous knowledge system is resurrected, and scholars argue that such a dialectic process that subscribes to non-universality and multidimensionality of development model is, as some scholars rightly claim, undoubtedly more democratic and so more ethical. Tachi, Watkins & Keerthirathne (2009) demonstrate the connection between such a participatory democracy and empowerment in the context of a community's engagement with ICT. In this sense, as Dowmunt & Cover (2007) argue, the means or process assumes more importance than the end. It is not difficult to understand why only development initiatives that emanate from a community's lived experiences in an enabling communication environment sustain in the long run.

The relationship between participatory development and communication is so close that Dagron (2009) argues that the former cannot be thought of and accomplished without the latter; In fact, they are equated as one and the same. However, despite the centrality of the concept of participation in the participatory paradigm, ironically, very few scholars have analysed it (Spark, 2007). Peruzzo's (1996) analysis in this context is illuminating and instructive. She categorises participation into three typologies: *non-participation*, *controlled participation* and *power participation*. The first category is a characteristic of authoritarian structured organisations and in reality is not participation as decisions are taken by the power centre and are imposed upon others. Peruzzo's second category can be split in two sub-types: *limited* and *manipulated*. In either case, while some discussion of the community is permitted, the controls over the means of opinion formation, and decision making are retained by the elites. In the third category, power is shared between funders, organisations,

beneficiaries and other stake holders, and consequently decisions about the shape of a project are mutually arrived at. Extreme forms of such organisations are rare and unstable due to imminent power struggle. Examining why ideal participation is so less to be seen in reality, Melkote and Steeves (2010) argue that in this type of participation, organisations tend to lose their control and dominance over the change process as empowered community takes over and this often is perceived as threatening for the survivability of the organisation. International aid has contributed to this by remaining oblivious to and sceptic of the merits of participatory communication on the ground that people are ignorant and incapable and there is no strong evidence to prove otherwise (Dagron, 2009).

## Field View from India

In the light of the above theoretical context, it becomes appropriate to examine how *communication* is prioritised in the development sector in India. To highlight the issue, two NGOs by the pseudo name of *Adhikar* and *Swasthya* are taken for examination[1]. The intent behind using the pseudo name here is to baulk revealing the true identity of the organisations in question. Their selection also profits the present discussion as they reflect two major and diverse strands within rights-based approaches in India's contemporary third sector. The first organisation is inclined towards leftist ideology or oppositional politics of bringing structural changes through mass movements, and the second is inclined towards specific sectoral rights and market-friendly systemic changes[2]. An appreciation of various organisational aspects is critical to uncover the significance attached to communication by the respective institutions.

Adhikar is a leading child-rights organisation in India with operations across a large number of states. A highly organised and structured organisation, it is known for its professional management system and best practices in the sector in India. Though it is essentially a grant-making agency and financially supports grassroots organisations working on a variety of livelihood and entitlement issues centred on holistic child rights, it will not be wrong to say that it is an extension of the latter in that it gets intensively engaged in the former's programmatic and organisational activities. Significantly, unlike most other players in the country, it does not mobilise, accept or take any financial aid from the state, lest it cannot be critical of the government. Resources are garnered largely from individual donations in the country.

Swasthya, on the other hand, is a leading health rights organisation in the country and partners with other grassroots NGOs in implementing the projects for which funds are received from various international and national funding agencies,

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[1] The term *Adhikar* (meaning *rights* in Hindi), and *Swasthya* (meaning *health*) reflect the key focus of the two organisations respectively.

[2] The data specific to the two organisations used in this paper relate to the period till 2008. While there may have been certain shifts in approaches and widening of thematic scope of intervention areas in these organizations since then, the core arguments and facts provided here still holds good.

including the government. In a few cases, it runs some intervention programmes itself. A key programmatic thrust of the organisation is on sexual and reproductive health and rights of the young people, an area few organisations in the country have hitherto engaged in. Other thematic areas include: maternal and child health and capacity building, research, and policy advocacy. Though it is not a typical funding agency, it is a nodal agency for a few international and national donors operating in the country.

Table 1 below succinctly lists the key characterising aspects of both the organisations that singularly and collectively have an implication on how much and what type of community participation and *communication* are institutionally approved by the respective development support agencies.

As reported in Table 1, the two organisations vary widely from each other. The variables have strong implication on *communication* and *participation* associated with the intervention programmes. In Swasthya, for example, programmes are hardly developed in joint consultation with the community. Project proposals are primarily developed generally by one or two mid or senior level managers in the organisation who are assigned the task by or at the behest of the Chief Executive who in turn liaise with the top management of different funding agencies. In fact, the project proposals are to be drafted to fit into the requirement and priorities of the donor agencies that also broadly match with the organisation's priority areas. A substantial part of the project, once granted by the donors, is then outsourced to identify grassroots organisation who participate in the form of implementing the project as per the design set by Swasthya. There is no consultation, admission of feedback or resistance from most of these grassroots organisations for many of whom funding is critical, and in this sense, it follows Peruzzo's model of non-participation referred earlier in this section.

Thus, in one of Swasthya's state level projects in Rajasthan[3] on *reduction of early marriage* and *pregnancy* funded by a large American agency initiated in 2002, two-pronged strategies were conceived: (i) policy advocacy with key stake holders, principally the state, and (ii) community sensitisation to desist from marrying off their young children. On many occasions, the author, who was coordinating the project, in the middle of such discussions with groups of Gujjar community in remote villages in Sawai Madhopur district (a project area with high incidence of child marriages) became speechless as community members shared as to why child marriages are a compulsion and not matter of choice in the region. In one instance, a man left in the middle of a sensitising meeting with village elders, and came back after some time with his 20-plus unmarried son. Holding his hand he said, "I wish I had married him young; but I did not, and this boy will remain unmarried throughout his life as no matching bride of his age is there…" (personal diary/translated by the author) – implying thereby that all the girls in the area are married off young. Such

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[3] Rajasthan was the leading state in child marriages in India during the time and continues to retain the infamous status till date. Please refer National Commission of Protection of Child Rights' report (2017).

**Table 1: Showing Key Differences between the Two NGOs**

| Parameters | Adhikar | Swasthya |
|---|---|---|
| Decision makers | Programme staff at all level, Board of Trustees. | Chief functionary |
| Organisational structure | Largely democratic and not-so-hierarchical. Well-structured based on functions. | Authoritative, hierarchical, project based structure. |
| Ideological orientation | Oppositional left ideology; committed to structural change. | State and market supportive; committed to systemic change. |
| Programme planning | Bottom-up. Done by intervening NGO and by community; Adhikar plays a facilitating role. | Top-down. Done by key programme staff in Swasthya. No consultation with community. |
| Relationship with fund receiving NGOs (partners) | As an equal partner. Intensive involvement in their organisational, programmatic and financial planning, monitoring and evaluation. | Funds partners to implement the project. Keeps away from functional matters of partners. Limited monitoring/evaluation. |
| Intervention period | Programme mode (not time bound). | Project mode (time bound). |
| Funding source | Individual donations, corporate houses, charity events. Never from the state. | Government, International funding agencies. |
| Donor relationship | Non-interference | Influenced by donor agenda. |
| Movement type (Shah, 1977)[4] | Revolt/Revolution | Reform |
| Social movement organisation | Yes | No |
| Advocacy type (Samuel)[5] | People centred | State centred |
| Communication flow | Largely horizontal – both internally, as well as with partner NGOs. | Largely vertical – both internally, as well as with partner NGOs. |
| Communication department | Yes | No |
| Preferred employee attributes | Professional qualification and/or prior professional experience in relevant function. | Multi-tasking skills (programme management, implementation, training, research, and advocacy). Research orientation/ higher academic qualification valued. |
| International linkage/ collaboration | No | Yes |

[4] In his book, Shah (1977) discusses the four typologies of movement: reform, rebellion, revolt and revolution. The terms used here is strictly in accordance to this classification.

[5] John Samuel, then of the Centre for Advocacy Studies, had articulated the concept of 'people centred advocacy'. According to him, such advocacy results from collective mobilization/mass movement. The use of the term is in accordance to this. State-centred advocacy is used here to mean one that is restricted to advocacy directed towards state and carried out by organisation, rather than by people at large.

grassroots experiences are convincing enough to argue that priorities are wrongly off young. Such set in intervention programmes. Rather than addressing the core issues of the area that foments child marriages such as the heavily skewed child sex ratio - a typical characteristic in a patriarchal society as in Rajasthan (where feticide and infanticide of girl child is rampant), poor agriculture due to lack of irrigation facilities accentuated by cyclical droughts, and poverty that has been largely affected due to drying up of the Banas river as a result of construction of a dam to provide water to Jaipur city, among others, the project focused on hollow symptoms. Communication, if any, in this case was essentially one-way and top down, and the indigenous knowledge and belief system of the people were ignored. Lack of people's participation was, unfortunately, more by design. Even as people could be gathered to share their perspectives and solutions on the issue of child marriages, their versions were not to be taken into account by elite experts as these were beyond the scope of the given intervention strategy. Consequently, even as some child marriages were claimed to have been prevented during the project period in the area due to intensive campaigning by the local partner organisations, such weddings continue to happen till this time, and at a massive level, particularly during *akha teez*, an annual occasion considered auspicious for child marriages across the state. The reason behind such a sorry situation is that funding and support agencies fail to identify and address the root causes of the problems, which often demand structural changes, and implementing agencies fail to negotiate effectively with the funding agencies. Participatory planning would be a self-defeating exercise as donor agencies feel safe and risk-free to carry out projects without affecting the structural issues in the society and questioning the status quo.

The scheme in Adhikar is different. Based on what is called the organisation's annual Key Focal Areas (KFA), each division (or department) within each region charts out every year its own matching KFA that is factored into individual KFAs set by each individual employee after due negotiations. This acts as their set targets during periodic self-appraisal and assessment of the same by reporting authorities. Thus, each employee participates in limited planning for themselves. Such organisational level participatory planning transcends at the level of NGO partners as they and their communities participate annually in their programmatic and budget planning and also in the periodic evaluation of programme's activities. The *outside expert* from Adhikar plays a political role in ensuring full community participation in this crucial planning activity. Practically, however, many times, the say of the former is final as also often local NGOs are sadly surprised to discover that the approved budget handed down to them is drastically cut and the final action plan received is extensively modified.

The ostensible democratic spirit of Adhikar takes an authoritarian turn as local NGOs contest their policies, challenge their decisions or resist unacceptable terms and conditions. Disagreements and noncompliance by the partners are often not to be tolerated and funding is withdrawn in such cases on one pretext or the other, though in some instances, strong partners successfully negotiate with the donor agency or

delay the withdrawal process by using their rapport with senior functionaries in Adhikar. As regards community participation, it is questionable as participation is effectively of the local NGOs and its worker-activists (rather than community at large) who learn and know well what the funder wants and accordingly suggest an acceptable action plan. This is also obvious from the fact that these NGOs often succeed in getting funding from competing donors with contrast and even conflicting ideologies and agenda.

Interestingly, Adhikar, like many large scale corporatised NGOs, has a separate Communication Division, though relatively much smaller than its other divisions. The personnel are generally recruited from the corporate world of advertising or journalism and their work is largely restricted to the image-building exercises of the organisation and resource mobilisation campaigns. In Dagron's sense, these are information and not communication activities. Given the background, orientation and experience of the personnel in the communication team, it is understandable that *communication* is not their forte. As for its mass media relations – a key aspect for social movement organisations (Andrews & Caren, 2010) – again Adhikar is not very successful in terms of ensuring visibility of its core issues on the media. Reasons are primarily two-fold:  one, the disconnect between Communication Division and the community's issues and struggle at the grassroots, and two, the disconnect between the intervention programme team of the organisation and the media.

Further, given the fact that the potential use of alternative and new media technology is increasingly being realised in the global development sector today, particularly with the prodigious proliferation of smart phones in rural India, special skills and understanding of how to use technology in social development and community empowerment have become imperative. This becomes particularly significant in the light of literature that suggests that privileging participation over media content itself empowers the community; the skill to facilitate such a process on the part of the support agencies therefore becomes critical. However, social movement organisation as Adhikar still keeps itself away from this.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The paper, while emphasising the distinction between information and communication, brings to the fore the wide variations in terms of how participatory communication manifests in two distinct categories of rights based organisations in India. Fitting the two diverse organisations into Peruzzo's framework, one may reasonably argue that Swasthya's model falls into *non-participation* type while Adhikar positions itself somewhere between *controlled* and *power participation*. Such a variation, as has been seen, is in sync with the interplay between their respective ideological orientation and belief system, key organisational aspects and funding source and relationship with it. Thus, a market-state friendly organisation is severely restricted in terms of factoring communication and community participation in identifying issues and planning intervention programmes. Swasthya's case

exemplifies this. At the other extreme, for social movement organisations like Adhikar that are committed to the power of collective voice and oppositional politics to ensure human rights and entitlements, participatory communication is assumed to come naturally by default. As has been explicated, this is not necessarily so. Cutting across typologies of organisations, communication is generally perceived in a very narrow sense, even in those organisations which have resources and can afford to have a distinct communication department. This is despite the fact that there is so much celebration over participatory approaches in development discourses. This paper has highlighted that the level and nature of participatory communication as a matter of work practice and ethics within grant making organisations transcends strongly into their intervention programmes and in that of their dependent partners.

Analysis of the two NGOs has brought to light that while a larger degree of *participation* is possible for organisations that depend on self-mobilised resources, it is difficult for those relying on external funding – state, corporate or international grants. However, a considerable level of participation can be carefully carved out in the scheme of things even by the latter. Grant receiving and grassroots organisations can and should negotiate effectively with their grant makers in this respect. Enabling institutional structure and internal democracy and participation within organisations is a crucial step towards this. A dedicated Communication wing that can provide extensive inputs to all the programmes of the Development Departments need to be set up either as its part or established as a separate unit in the organisations, particularly in the support agencies.

If real community participation is to be understood as central to any programme that seeks to empower the underprivileged, as this paper argues, and if it is to be understood as a key to communication, then the development sector needs to give far more priority to communication. A communication professional's role in the sector is to strategically facilitate multiple dialogic processes in the community in the context of the power dynamics inherent in any society. This means working with difficult processes rather than just messages that a journalist is supposed to work with. Ironically our 'media centric-communication departments' in the universities (Das, 2013) are busy producing journalists and media professionals for the media industries and not communication professionals for development sector. The university programmes need to address this.

Professionals in the field of communication for development have to be well-grounded not only in development theories, discourses and practices and they should be skillful in high-end strategic communication planning and advocacy. They should also have skills in communication research. They have to be well versed in social marketing, behaviour change communication, in the use of media technology for empowering the community, and they should have the ability to use 'communication action' (Melkote, Krishnatray & Krishnatray, 2008). These tasks are too serious to be outsourced to professionals from other academic disciplines and have to be serviced by those properly trained in communication. As individuals in their personal capacities can hardly bring in any change in approach, such a scheme of things needs

to have institutional support. Dagron (2009), in this regard, rightly suggests that every development organisation should therefore have its communication policy in place that clearly states its long-term position and strategies on participatory development and the place of communication in its programmes and projects. This is different from institutional visibility policies. Such a policy need to be translated into strategies for C4D. Organisations should demonstrate their earnestness in this regard by allocating a separate budget to enable the implementation of communication policies and strategies. In fact, since most intervention programmes in the sector deal with perception and behaviour change, these can be categorised as communication programmes/projects. This will give a complete shift in terms of approach, focus, strategies, and personnel requirement. Thus, for example, clearly classifying Swasthya's project on reduction of early marriage and pregnancy as a *communication project* would have set different priorities and approach towards the issue.

What emerges from the discussion in this paper is that despite *participation* being touted as a buzzword in development sector and despite communication for development increasingly finding space in theoretical discourses, the ground reality in the field in India is one where what is otherwise preached so many remains to be practiced. The development sector needs to awake to the need of the hour and *communication* needs to be brought to the centre stage from the periphery. Communication professionals on their part have to fully gear up to the situation and skill themselves adequately for the task. There is also a serious need to rethink on the part of Indian university system to give adequate weight to field-based course content and training in the otherwise overwhelmingly theoretical Development Communication course as it is today. This can, in a considerable way, correct the 'missing link' between the academia and the third sector as prospective communication professionals for the third sector will not only be exposed to the challenges in the field, but the development sector will also learn of the vast scopes and utility of communication in their initiatives that goes much beyond the use of information, media and visibility exercises of the sector. This will also pave way for communication students and professionals to seriously consider the development sector as a meaningful career option in India, as also the sector will willfully open itself up for such professionals.

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