

Globalization and New Communication Technologies : Strategies for the Future

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I regard this as a great honour to have been invited to deliver the Keynote Address to this august gathering. I join the organizers to extend a warm welcome to those participants who have come from abroad. My greetings also to my compatriots.

For one who has transgressed disciplinary territories and preferred to be known as a social scientist, this is indeed a very special occasion. I began my career as a social anthropologist, but then moved to rural sociology, and further on to the study of political behavior. As a teacher also I made departures from being a lecturer in social anthropology to assistant professorship in sociology, and finally to teach social sciences to engineering graduates at the Indian Institute of Technology. My assignment as the first Research Director of the newly found Indian Council for Social Science Research, and then as UNESCO's Regional Adviser for Social and Human Sciences in the Asia and the Pacific region, demanded of me to be transdisciplinary in my orientation.

My sociology has developed in response to various challenges, taking me away from the limited precincts of specialization to the exploration of new territories. In this long journey, I have followed the trio of my mentors –Professors Brij Raj Chauhan, S.C. Dube, and Robert K. Merton. I take this opportunity to pay my tribute to them.

My exposure to the social science milieu in the vast Asia-Pacific Region also taught me to be transdisciplinary.

In this long journey, communication has been the prime mover. I employed the Communication framework for the analysis of social structure, following the footsteps of Levi-Strauss. For him, it is the communication of Men, Materials, and Messages that defined the social structure of a given society. Later, I tried to carry on empirical research in the broad area of communication, particularly in the terrain of political behaviour. For this venture, I derived inspiration from Harold Lasswell and Karl Deusch – both were leading political scientists and were explorer of new frontiers.

There were few of us in India who started work in the area of communication – Professor Dube did his study of directed culture change in the villages of Uttar Pradesh; I introduced the

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communication variable in my study of the electoral behavior also in Uttar Pradesh way back in 1967. I participated in the beginning of 1970s in a group convened by the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) to develop the research design for the study of impact of Satellite Television in 600 villages, spread in several states of this country. I was offered the job of directing this Team Research, but I could not join it because of another offer from UNESCO. One of my students joined the ISRO Research Team; upon completion of the Project, he was hired by the All India Radio's Evaluation Unit. Finally, he became Professor of Mass Communication in an agricultural University.

Although what I have said appears like my biodata, my journey somehow coincides with the growth of sociological research in India. With humble beginnings, the discipline has grown in India over the years. With the growing specializations, more and more secondary relationships are developing. The primary relationships that linked the teacher and the taught are gradually disappearing. I had hinted at the professionalization of sociology when I did an essay for the *Economic and Political Weekly* soon after the Hyderabad Conference of the Indian Sociological Society in 1970. Today, alongside of professionalization there is in evidence politicization of the profession. This trend is dual in character: within the profession, politics prevents people from acknowledging contribution of the peers; in the societal context, individual scholars are quite often sandwiched between objective analysis and political commitment. One clear example is evident in the gimmicks of poll predictions at the cost of objective analysis of the emerging political process.

What worries me now, when I am on the verge of retirement is the point that while social science manpower is growing, and our international connections are rising, very little of good sociology is coming out of our writings. Disciplinary politics has overwhelmed substantive work in the area of our growing specializations. I know making such attributions does not make the inaugural address a good copy, but now at age 80, I can afford to take this risk in the hope that my remarks will be understood in the spirit in which they are being made.

With these preliminaries, let us return to the theme of the conference.

Upon joining UNESCO, I discovered that while in India we were struggling to gain acceptance for Mass Communication as a social science specialty, the universities in the ASEAN region were already teaching Mass Communication as social science specialization. It was heartening to note that my book titled *Local Communities and National Politics*, that employed the Communication framework, was used as a textbook in Bangladesh and in the Philippines, although not in India. That book earned me the invitation to deliver the Prestigious Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Lecture in 1972. I used that opportunity to develop, within the Communication model, the concepts of *Insulators* and *Apertures* as part of the strategy for National Integration. These concepts also helped me evolve the theory of *Sandwich Cultures* in which Professor Robert Merton's formulation of *Insiders* and *Outsiders* provided the needed incentive. Incidentally, Professor Merton first proposed that paradigm in his Lecture in India at the Golden Jubilee celebrations of the Department of Sociology of the Bombay University.

Let me remind this audience that the time when we entered the profession, Sociology was focusing on the developed societies of the West, and Anthropology developed as the descriptive account of societies that belonged to the non-West. The West was the supplier of theory, and the non-West provided the base for empirical research particularly to study *Other Cultures*. It is in this

process that the Western scholarship discovered in India the primitive societies, i.e. the tribes, and the societies that were part of the indigenous civilization, as rich material for empirical research. The interface between the various tribes and the villages of their neighbourhood provided a new terrain for research. Thus, India became a site for empirical research for anthropologists. Initially, they studied the tribes as primitive and preliterate societies, and later they found a good ground to study at the micro level the new processes of directed culture change. However, Indology continued to provide the basic material for understanding Indian Society. This was the reason that Indian Society became a synonym for Hindu society. That characterization still affects all our efforts at national integration, and divides our politics in communal terms. Inter-communications between the various religious communities and an evolving Indian culture through the various means of mass media have still not been able to erase old stereotypes.

This is not to deny the role that empirical research has played to change this perception. The Village became the meeting ground for anthropology and sociology, and both began to study directed culture change introduced via the strategy of Community Development Programme. The researchers then moved to study the process of urbanization and the wider processes of Westernization and Modernization which began affecting not only the urban metropolises but the entire rural hinterland, including tribal India. India became a venue for the study of the processes of cultural change and the role of communication in a multicultural milieu. Evolving technologies of mass communication are certainly erasing the evils of caste system and opening out the doors for inter-communal dialogue.

The post Second World War era is marked not only by the independence from the yoke of colonialism, but also by the eagerness to usher in modernity, treating the West as the positive reference group. The countries of the Third World showed eagerness to shed off tradition and tread on the road to modernity. Like other developing countries, India also wanted to adieu tradition and welcome modernity.

Modernization meant literacy, urbanism, empathy, improved means of transportation and communication and political participation. The Rapid changes that societies like India were undergoing, following attainment of independence, highlighted the urgency to record the already existing structures before they get vanished or drastically changed. Alongside of it, there was also a need to portray the process of directed culture change initiated by the new governments. In this regard, the communication model focused on the interface between tradition and modernity; it also helped in understanding the existing social structures. In the mid-1950s, the vocabulary of culture and communication overwhelmed the previous paradigms of the so-called 'Traditional Societies'. The societal structures adapted to the onslaughts of change and did not oblige those who began writing obituaries of Tradition. Communication channels tied tradition and modernity in a new web of the existing social structures.

In this era, the countries that were under the influence of communism treated the Second World as the model for change. These societies had a dictatorial model for governance which functioned as a strong gatekeeper to disallow outside influences, and which simultaneously attacked the contours of abiding tradition.

Both sets of societies – of the Third World, and the Communist Second World — were undergoing change and both alleged Tradition as true culprit toppling down any efforts to bring about change. In both of them, however, tradition survived alongside of modernity; and in this process, communication played a crucial role. Quite interestingly, advances towards modernity also helped revive tradition. Thanks to the modern means of communication, people got linked not only to their compatriots settled in different parts of the globe, but also to their past history and tradition. With the permeation of TV, and introduction of TV serials, Indians were exposed to the great epics of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* so much so that many picked up the Sanskrit lexicon, and began preferring dresses of the yore. The Western attire of Jeans and Jumpers made company with *Dhoti* and *Salwars*. Modernization did not mean adoption of dresses and cultural patterns of the Developed world but also revival of tradition. Adoption of foreign traits no longer remained part of the process of Westernization. Each developing country began borrowing from a variety of countries of different continents. This made the concept of Westernization redundant. All change from abroad was subsumed under Modernization. It is this process that has been engulfed by the newer process of Globalization.

I submit that the new idiom of change has been heavily influenced by the paradigm of communication. The process of modernization that was ushered in the countries of the “Third World” precisely focused on the three movements—of Men, Messages, and Material. Communication became the window to the outside world. It helped break the insulation of societies and opened new apertures for exposure. People were encouraged not only to be physically mobile but also helped in developing skills of empathy; they got an impetus to climb the ladder of social hierarchy. Developing societies began extending their outreach to have access to materials produced abroad and parcel out local products to the world market. Mass media began crossing the physical boundaries of countries and continents to let the people of the developing world share the world culture and familiarize with the goings-on in the various corners of the globe. An era was ushered in that was rightfully designated as the era of one world with multiplicity of cultures.

The organization of this meet in India is acknowledgment of a new trend where Indian sociologists are forging links with their counterparts abroad. This exposure should help Indian sociologists to return to their own society to empirically investigate the new processes of change. I say this to express my concern over the relative neglect of empirical research in India in recent years. We are overwhelmed by the developments in sociology elsewhere and, as good copy masters, we have also set up various research committees as acknowledgment of emerging trends and as expression of our desire to explore new frontiers. This has promoted international tourism, facilitated friendships across countries, and widened our horizons.

However, a review of trends of sociological research in India is not very encouraging. Our social science manpower is rising in numbers but our contribution to empirical research is rather dwindling. It is my hope that a gathering such as this will develop a research agenda that will encourage young researchers to carry out intensive field research to improve our understanding of the manner in which India is responding to the new challenges caused by the onslaught of technology. Hopefully, the new trend will reflect a trend of comparative research with international participation.

Let me elaborate this point. After the collapse of the so-called Second World in the last decade of the last century, there emerged a new concept of “countries-in-transition” to describe the

former communist countries of Eastern Europe. These countries have acknowledged presence of certain ailments that existed but were forcefully denied the prevalence of — for example— Poverty. Incidentally, soon after the conclusion of the first World Summit for Social Development in 1995, I had directed for UNESCO a research project, seeking academic collaboration of the former countries of the so-called Second World, and came out with the publication – the very first under the UN auspices—with the title *Poverty in Transition and Transition in Poverty*. The book raised the pertinent question: Is there no need to compare the prevalent strategies for poverty removal in the developing countries in the light of new data from the collapsed Second World?

For example, one of the recipes for poverty removal that has continually been offered is removal of illiteracy. The countries of the East Europe had high literacy rate and yet poverty existed there. In fact, all countries of the world acknowledged the existence of poverty in their societies. In India, too, literacy rate has jumped from around 16 per cent in the 1950s to around 70 per cent, and yet we prescribe this remedy. Is there no need to re-examine this strategy? Are we sure that after the attainment of the goal of total literacy, poverty would disappear? Take the case of the ubiquitous mobile. Today, it is an in-thing. And literacy is not the condition for its adoption. This gadget has put question marks on the need for literacy understood as basic knowledge of letters, and a person's ability to sign his/ her name. Today one finds the mobile phone being used by those who were illiterate by previous standards. Without being literate they are able to use the credit card to withdraw money from the ATMs. In many ways, people have become *computerate* without being truly literate. *Computeracy* is the new proficiency. Strangely, a non-computerate has become a neo non-literate; and a non-literate is becoming computerate without being proficient in writing letters.

Is it not the time when we refashion our strategies relative to poverty? The need is clearly felt to distinguish between absolute poverty and relative poverty. What is desirable is abolition of absolute poverty, and there is need to think of country-specific remedies for this ailment. Poverty hurts people now, literacy prepares our young for tomorrow. How do we remove the curse of poverty that hurts the people now? Can communication strategies help in this regard?

Delivering the Keynote Address to the International Conference on Media and Politics, in Brussels on 27 February 1997, I remarked: Standing on the threshold of the twenty-first century, we have the feeling that Marshall McLuhan's dream of a global village has been realized. We are in the midst of an all-encompassing process of globalization.

In my Brussels speech I had remarked: "There has been so much interchange of genes, and of cultural traits, that the heterogeneity of the Planet Earth has increased manifold". I had argued then, and I maintain my position, that humanity's future will that be of one world with many cultures. The winds of change will not be able to westernize the whole world and erase tradition. The new assemblage will be a unique combination of tradition and modernity.

Unlike the discoverer of the Americas – Columbus of 500 years ago—we will not be discovering the Americas by serendipity. The advances in modern technology have made us mentally mobile; we have become part of the globe without stirring out of our drawing rooms. We do not have to fly all the way to New York, or London, or to Tokyo, or to any other destination to witness the welcome offered to India's Prime Minister, or to listen to him simultaneously while addressing audiences abroad.

I feel happy that the new coinage of “Globalization” has replaced the concepts of modernization and westernization that were in vogue in the 1950s and 1960s. The new term that gained universal currency in the last decade of the last century, is used not only by the sociologists and anthropologists but also by the economists, political scientists, journalists, politicians, and social workers. What is, however, intriguing is the fact that there is no commonly agreed definition of the term *Globalization*. And the criticism of this supposedly novel phenomenon offered in various writings is virtual photocopy of the criticism of the processes of modernization of the last century.

Worried about this definitional crisis, I proposed in my extempore lecture at the Meerut University in the early years of this century the distinctive character of this new phenomenon. I had argued that societies and cultures have been characterized by the dependency syndrome. Before the period of culture contact, accelerated by the process of industrial revolution, most societies enjoyed virtual non-dependence by being self-sufficient and generally remain cut-off from other societies of the geographical terrain of their abode. Colonization, followed by industrial revolution, exposed the societies of the world to a whole host of cultures, which they regarded as “inferior” to them, and were, thus, put on a lower pedestal as if to represent the past of the Western societies. The colonization of these cultures introduced the phenomenon of dependence with a single aperture opening out to the society of the colonial masters. The end of colonial era ushered in the process of “independence” meaning the relocation of the power of decision-making with the newly independent countries. This meant the relocation of the choice making with the newly found independent state and changing the pattern of dependence to freedom to choose partners from various societies, although underdevelopment had hurdled full freedom – this was the era of modernization of past colonies with multiplicity of “givers”. The era of Globalization is an era of mutual give-and take. Developing societies are no longer only on the receiving end. There is reciprocity- - all societies are becoming givers and takers in a new milieu of interdependence. Today you find the Globe in India, and India in all parts of the Globe. This is a new pattern of relationships, and of mutual give and take. However, I find little evidence of the study of this process in India. And yet there are several who have written on the consequences of this process. If you are familiar with the criticism of modernization, you will find that the criticism offered for Globalization is virtually the same – a Xerox copy of the criticism of modernization.

Globalization is a new phenomenon; it is slowly penetrating the Indian social and economic system. Without carefully investigating the process of globalization in a particular setting, the essays written on the new process do not earn adulation from the academe. Well-written articles are like newspaper essays, but not dependable portrayals of the on-going process. There is now the trend of jumping on the bandwagon, rather than soiling hands with raw data. While it is OK to dig deeper or dig wider, digging needs a surface. It is a challenge for the young scholarship to engage in research on these new trends as these would require new tools and new research protocol to be able to contribute to the newly emerging specialties.

Editorial Note: The present paper is Key Note Address delivered by Prof. Yogesh Atal on 26th February 2017 on the occasion of ISA-RC 14 Interim Conference held at VIPS, New Delhi, February 26-28, 2017.