

Communications Systems in a Rural Setting of Upper Assam

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The nature and elements of the communications system in a given society vary with the form and culture of that society. On this basis, we can identify different types of communication systems. There are tribal, rural, and industrial communication systems. The first two, the tribal and the rural together form the traditional communications system (Pye, 1963). However, the industrial communication system represents what Pye calls 'Modern communications systems are well integrated with modern mass media'. In most nations like India tribal and rural societies have been under the process of social transformation and therefore they have significant exposure to the outside world. The communication system even in the tribal societies in India is not a closed system' as discussed by W. Schramm (1963). Although these tribal societies retain their traditional forms of communication to a great extent they have also absorbed certain elements of modern communication systems. These societies have transitional communication systems which are open to the forces of social change and development in this sense both the tribal and rural societies in India have an 'open' communication system. In the last decade the process of rapid social change has affected all the forms of societies all over the world this process is termed as the process of Globalization. Liberalization and privatization are two important processes associated with this process. The new communication technologies have contributed significantly to speeding up the process of globalization both in developed and developing societies. The globalization of Mass Media was an important step that initiated the process of initially not only changes in the culture of the society but also creating an environment for structural changes in the societies at the global level. These issues give rise to the question that to what extent these exogenous forces of modernization and globalization affect the communication systems in the rural and tribal societies in India. As new commercial technologies are now penetrating the remote corners of the countries, it seems relevant to undertake an empirical research study on the nature and forms of communications in a rural setting. The present paper aims to understand the nature and forms of communications systems of Dopdar village in the Sivasagar district of Assam.

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It is based on an empirical study conducted in Dopdar Bhiturual Village of Sivasagar district in Assam in 2008. It is a small village located in the south part of Assam near the Nagaland border. A purposive sample of 100 respondents (male 50 and 50 female) was drawn from the study village. The data were collected through participant observation and a structured interview schedule. The mass media exposure of the respondents has been analyzed in terms of frequency of listening/ watching/ reading of different mass media which will show the impact of modern mass media and its integration with the village. Besides, the major social institutions and the impact of new communication technologies will show whether it is open or closed communication.

The Locale of the Study

Assam is situated in the centre of the North-East between the latitude, 28° 18' and 24° N, and the longitudes 89° 46' and 97° 4' E. It is surrounded by Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh states of India, and countries like Bhutan, Bangladesh, etc. Assam is divided into two geographical regions, namely. Brahmaputra Valley and Barak Valley. These big rivers Brahmaputra and Barak flow through the state. Sivasagar is one of the historical places in the present district of Assam. It is situated on the plains of Brahmaputra valley and the north of Nagaland. The ancient name of the district is Rangpur or Kalansupar. There is Dibrugarh district in the north direction, in the south the historical Janjhi River separates it from Jorhat district and there is Nagaland in the East and South direction of the district. The geographical location of the district is situated between 94.25° and 95.25° Longitude East and 21.45° and 27.15° Latitude North. It has an elevation of 86.6 meters above sea level. The universe of the present study is one of the villages namely Dopdar Bhiturual, which is situated within the present Sivasagar district of Assam. The village is surrounded by various types of plants. There is a business town towards the West of Dopdar Village at a distance of 6 kilometers away namely Amguri. In the North direction, a small river flows, namely 'Tifuk', and in the East direction a large cultivated field, including a small private tea garden. The village is located 25 km from the district headquarters. The village is divided into two parts by Mehgar Road, where the South side of the road is connected with the 'Borsilla' road and the North side is connected with the famous 'Dhodar Ali' of the Ahom Dynasty. All the village is covered by different kinds of thorny and bamboo woods. There are 132 males and 103 females distributed in 54 households. The data have been collected through a structured interview schedule and with participant observation from 100 respondents, 50 males and 50 females. All the people are Assamese and belong to the Ahom community. Vaishnavism is the dominant religion of that village. Most of the villager depends on agriculture.

Village Economy

The farmers of the village use both traditional and modern instruments in cultivation. They have used homemade seeds like Lahi, Hali, Joha, Basmoti, Saimari, etc. and Only two families of the village used also hybrid seeds like MTU 7029, 775 (Joha). Cow dung and other manure like Urea, Super, DAP, and Azospirillum Phosphotica PSB are used for more production. Out of a total of 619 bighas of land, 82 bighas are used for tea gardens, 13 bighas are for vegetables, approximately 477 bighas are used for agricultural activities and 47 for household land in the village. The non-farming families earned their bread as masons, driving Autoriksha, and lifting tea leaves in neighbors'

or other places. Traditional occupations like a basket, japi (a kind of big hat made from bamboo) murha (a kind of sitting tool), and jaal (instrument of fish catching) making continue to be a primary source of livelihood. Besides agriculture, they (09%) earn money through other occupations like business in grocery shops, tea leaves, selling grains, P.W.D contracts, and furniture.

Traditional Folk Media

“Traditional Folk Media” is a term used to denote “people’s performances”. It describes folk dance, rural drama, and musical variety of the village people. This term speaks of those performing arts which are cultural symbols of a people. These performing arts pulsate with life and slowly change through the flux of time.

Caste and Communication

Regarding communication through caste, it is found that all the people of the village have the same caste group, so there is no caste hierarchy within the village but they have to maintain different restrictions on contact with the outcaste people. So, any new information is disseminated not through upper caste people but through the literate people of the village. Some of the low-caste youths of Uria communities of the nearest village are employed as *halua* or annual servants. This annual servant lives, eats, and sleeps in the master’s house (who is an outcaste people). The servant is an annual contract laborer and does not take the form of slavery yet in the village.

Generally, communication with other castes lies with agriculture. It also socializes him and exposes him to various news and new ideas, techniques, and knowledge in agriculture, health, hygiene, animal husbandry, poultry, urban attitudes, new values, and things. Reciprocal cooperation also happens in the time of cultivation through the exchange of implements, seeds, fertilizer, bullocks, and human labor that take place with other caste people.

Traditional Village Headman and Communication

As far as the village Dopdar’s communication system is concerned the Medhi (traditional village headman’s) role is crucial. In every sphere of the village activities like the collection of land revenue, settled disputes, collection of religious donations, and protect their people from outside invasion are under the hands of the headman. Although the modern and secular activities of elections changed his power to VDP (village defense party) he almost enjoyed the same status with the new system and he also performed the role of village announcer.

Religious Communication

The ritual priests of the respective castes interact with certain jatis and influence their attitudes, customs, and practices and help in finding auspicious days and timings for the commencement of agriculture, occupational, domestic, and socio-religious activities like finding a bride or bride-groom, Viswakarma Puja, performing the naming ceremony of a child, death ceremony of a person, buying domestic or agricultural appliances, first day in a new house, etc. in the village. The priests and the villagers so more on the religious calendar before any decisions, actions, and socio-religious and economic activities are undertaken.

Village Deities and Religious Communication

There is no practice of village deities in Dopdar as a whole but some families individually practice it by sacrificing red cock.

Naming Pattern of Deities/ Gods/ Goddesses

The naming pattern of a child in the name of God and Goddesses does not persist anymore in the village as it was deeply rooted in the minds of the villagers a few years ago. So, most of the villagers' name ends with the words *ishwar* which is Gods for example *Padmeswar*, *Moneswar*, *Chandeswar*, etc., which denotes their belief in Gods.

Religious Oracles, Tours and Communication

The people of the Dopdar village visit the *Dhekia-khua Namghar* (Jorhat), *Bottadua* (Nagaon), and *Deopani Namghar* of Golaghat district once a year. Generally, they visit the Namghar in the month of *Bhadon* (August) because the Assamese people believe it is a sacred month. So, it symbolizes that the villagers have more interaction with outside places and peoples through which they get new information and introduce with new culture.

Itinerant Mendicant (Fokir)

Itinerant mendicants are one of the common sources to disseminate messages from one place to another. During his/her visits to various families generally, women come outside and offer grains. They generally give authentic information regarding different matters. So it shows how a village's socio-cultural and religious order: customs, relationships, beliefs, norms, etc. influence the communication pattern in the village.

Symbolic Communication

Many religious symbols and signs are used on festivals, and ritual occasions throughout the year. During various festivals, and fairs they have used different branches of tree symbols in the village. The use of some of the religious symbols in rural societies is related directly to the pattern of magical beliefs. In their shops, they used some mantras in a written form in steel or a wooden frame inside their houses. Failure of crops on certain occasions, they light a Saki or Banti (a kind of lamp firing with the help of mustard oil) on cultivated ground.

Folk Media and Socio-Religious Communication

The mythological, recreational, ideological, and emotional value of the folk media has great significance in the village (Indian society).

Bhauna (Theatrical)

Bhauna is one of the major traditional media of the village. It is a kind of acting on the story of Mahabharata and Ramayana. The plays are staged throughout the night. Both male and female characters are present. The female character is also enacted by the male person. With the help of modern mass media, they disseminate traditional customs, and laws to the new generation.

Bihu Festival:

Bihu is one of the main festivals of Assamese societies. It is not only the way of communication among the people but also religious and cultural aspects which are maintained by the people generation by generation. It is the heart of Assamese societies. The Bihu are mainly

three types namely Bohag or Rongali, Magh or Bhugali, and *Kati or Kongali*. All these festivals are related to agriculture. The dress patterns and food habits remain the same although they have adopted modern ways of living and communicating with others. It indicates the integration of tradition and modernity.

Traditional Songs and Communications

The finding shows that the villagers have maintained songs like Aai nama (on the birth of a child or in a religious ceremony), Biya nama (at a marriage function), and *Harinama* (in namghar) on different occasions. By *Aai nama* they try to protect the baby from bad evils, in *Biya nama*, they show the values of fidelity to one's husband and in-laws, glorification of women's personalities. These types of folk activities help the villager to social interaction and exchange their feelings, thoughts, and religious knowledge with others.

Marriage, Kinship, and Communication

Regarding marriage they have performed "*Saklong* marriage" and the main preference will be given to the outsiders from their blood relatives. Marrying a son/girl of a father's sister is possible after seven generations of the father's death. Generally, they prefer the bride or groom should be the same *pontho* or sect (Own caste people followed the same type of rules and regulations in religious activities, etc). Besides out of one's community marriage may be possible in the village. So, patrilineal or matrilineal cross-cousin marriage is impossible. Therefore, outside contact with a family arises from their family's marriage and kinship links.

The analysis of the marriage alliances of all families shows that the average marriage distance for the whole village falls within seventy kilometers of the village. The families who live within short distances have exchanged agricultural and other requirements from their kinsmen.

More information and ideas are exchanged when the relatives visit the family. This type of visit helps the farmers to know about the government facilities, techniques of agriculture development like new seeds, pesticides manure, and their usefulness. Besides this kinship relationships also help the education of children, financial help, and finding matches for marriageable girls and boys.

Modern Mass Media Communication

The Mass media can be categorized under three sub-headings: the broadcast media, the print media, and the audio-visual media. Print media is analyzed in terms of newspaper reading, number of newspapers, the language of the newspaper, time spent on the newspaper, part of the newspaper, and types of magazine. Broadcast media is analyzed in terms of ownership of Radio, radio listing, and time spent on Radio programs. Audio-visual media is analyzed in terms of ownership of television, number of days watching television, subscription to cable/DTH connections, time spent on watching cable TV, place of watching TV, types of programs, channels watched most, cinema hall going, types of film watch and language of films. The broadcast media includes mainly Radio. Radio is an electronic audio medium for broadcasting programs to the audience. This medium is cosmopolite in approach and is suitable for communication to millions of people widely dispersed and situated in far-flung areas.

The availability of low-cost receiving sets operated with electricity or battery helped radio to penetrate deep into rural life. The programs may be listened to while one is engaged in farming or

household work. The exposure of the subjects to radio will analyzed in terms of their habit of radio listening.

Most of the respondents have owned a radio. The majority (74%) of the respondents who owned a radio were regular listeners and 42% of the respondents listened to the radio for 1-2 hours. Most (43%) of the respondents listened to filmy songs on the radio and 68% of the respondents preferred news of their religion or locality only. Although most of the respondents read newspapers they do not subscribe to them, 34% of the respondents read Dainik Agradoot newspaper and spend less than one hour reading the newspaper. Most (43%) of the respondents are interested in the political parts of the newspaper. 53% of the respondents read Magazines among most (25%) of the respondents read Bismoi Magazine. The majority (60%) of the respondents have owned Television and 65% of the respondents watch television daily for 1-2 hours. The majority (60%) of the respondents watch the News on television and watch it in their own home. Most (22%) of the respondents have no DTH connection at their home. All the respondents watch the *News Lives* (24x7) channel. Most of the respondents do not go cinema hall. Most of the respondents prefer to watch movies on DTH or Doordarshan. Most (38%) of the respondents prefer romantic and comedy movies. Most (50%) of the respondents prefer Hindi and Assamese as a medium for watching movies. Most of the respondents have owned a VCD player. The majority (83%) of the respondents watch movies on VCD. 60% of the respondents watch it at home and 39% of them bring VCD from a local shop. 38% of the respondents watch movies more than thrice a week. The majority of the respondents have a medium degree of sending letters. Most (83%) of the respondents don't receive letters in a month. The majority (14%) of the respondents have sent letters for official purposes. Most (15%) of the respondents prefer registered posts. Most (91%) of the respondents do not use fax for sending messages. Most of the respondents have mobile connections. Most (86%) of the respondents do not have access to a computer. Most (07%) of them use it at their home and for educational purposes. Most (99%) of them have no internet facilities and use it in cybercafes. Most (90%) of them use it rarely and for one hour. The majority (10%) of them use it for downloading materials. Maximum respondent's family members have no internet facilities. Maximum (44%) of the respondents have mobile phones and they (44%) using them for more than three years. Most of them use it to communicate with relatives. All the respondents received calls and sms between 1-10 per day.

After a description and discussion of the traditional and modern channels of communication, we will now especially dwell upon those aspects of communication that speak or help us understand the nature of the communication system of the village. The nature of a village would be known through people's living style, the social structure of the society, the use of different channels, and their adaptation of new technologies in their daily activities.

Interpersonal Communication

The word 'interpersonal communication' automatically indicates its meanings i.e. face to face communication with others which is also an important means of communication. Generally, there is more communication among the villagers in their meetings in grocery shops, Namghar (temple), meetings in rice mills, etc. These are the important channels of communication that disseminate very essential information to the villagers. They get all new kinds of agricultural information like new

pests and pesticides, use of fertilizers, markets, availability of labor, seeds, schemes, programs of the government, politics, and such other things are discussed. Day-to-day problems in agriculture are discussed and the more knowledgeable farmers suggest remedies or solutions. In their discussion tea garden has always taken place an important role because it is one of the important sources of the economy of the villagers.

As we know the whole Assam is dominated by Assamese language. So communication also goes with this language when they interact with one another on different occasions. The Assamese word sentence like- "*Tumi ki kori assa?*", means "What are you doing now?" Tumi (you) ki (what) kori assa (doing now). This type of communication often happens in the village with one another.

Posters, Pamphlets and Loudspeakers

The walls of grocery shops, tea shops, and other public places are the places where the advertisement posters of political parties, films, detergents, soaps, fertilizers, and pesticides are painted or pasted. Besides the campus of the primary health centers also exhibits the family welfare planning, polio, and other posters.

The strong assumption of doing this type of exhibit is that their repeated use will help to favorably influence people's opinions and attitudes. Advertisement posters of party symbols and requests for party people's votes were painted on the walls of the shops, houses, and compounds in the village and its extension area. Different symbols are used for campaigning against different parties. The loudspeakers that blared the film songs and advertisements in favor of the party were crowd pullers in the village. Loudspeakers are also more effective in the announcement of polio drops or other family planning schemes.

Children and men gathered around the election vehicles to collect the handbills. Except for the BJP both Congress and A.G.P's (Asom Gana Parishad) supporters used a different technique to attract the village people because BJP has no supporters in the village. The campaigning of the Congress party workers was focused on popularizing the party symbol by exhibiting Indira, Rajiv, and Sonia Gandhi's garlanded photos with their respective chief and local ministers. On the other hand, AGP supporters also take the same way to popularize their respective candidate with pestering, painting their image and symbol on different areas like electric posts, on trees, on walls, and sometimes on their vehicles.

Generally, the people of Assam do not think about the candidate's community in elections or there is no system of dominant caste vote yet sometimes it also makes great issue. The traditional headman who is one of the influential people controls the political, social, and economic life of the village. However, the later result shows that the local forces like caste, community, traditional leaders, etc. at work had a lesser impact in comparison to the deep-rooted image of the candidate, their work, behavior, and effective campaigning of their party. So this case of the political communication process of the village shows that the initial convictions, decisions, ideas, and knowledge of the people did not remain the same. It also indicates the importance of the audience characteristics, their likes and dislikes, and image formation regarding the political leaders. The effectiveness of the posters of various types in the village also shows pay attention of the villagers to mass media. Except for a few most of the villagers were not so conscious to see the posters and

what the actual theme is going to publish. Besides all of them i.e. youth and literate people were aware that a small size is a happy family and for that purpose, big posters are hanging on the walls of the village health center and in other public places. But at present, through the ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activists) workers, all the villagers get information easily. Through these workers, they get all the new facilities and schemes, especially in the field of health.

Government Officials

The village people often come into contact with various types of officials from various departments. All the new schemes about agriculture they got information through agricultural assistant resides in the nearest village. The *gramsewak* (village-level worker) is another important source for disseminating agricultural-related activities. During the seasons of agriculture, different officers come into the village to train the village people with new scientific techniques for more production.

B.D.O (Block Development Office) takes a major role in this regard. The self-help group (especially more popular among the women), often used to go to this office to discuss new government schemes regarding poultry farms, cattle farms, etc. for their extra income. But sometimes there is a tendency of the officers to contact only the leaders, acquaintance and they do not disseminate the new schemes when it is more profitable. So in this way, the villagers get information about using high-yielding varieties, fertilizers, and pesticides for better production.

The primary health center always helps the villagers which is a group of one permanent nurse, two Auxiliaries Nurse Midwives (ANM), and one visitor doctor. The staff of the village primary center is more effective as one of the main objectives of the village health center is to protect the villagers from various diseases. Nowadays this center is more active due to the fastness work of the Asha workers. The Asha workers constitute one of the most important field staff of the primary health center in communicating new health ideas. They have performed all the necessary activities like deliveries, supply of vitamins, family planning motivation, and giving various vaccinations. Doctors and health workers have always tried to impress the use of modern medicine. Although not completely, the village people are more or less trying to reject the use of traditional and superstitious treatment. They were always inviting the villagers to use allopathic medicine.

Family planning campaigning also uses both traditional and modern media like field staff, officials, village headman, VDP secretary, and audio-visual aids: posters, projectors, loudspeakers, and organized folk songs to make the program successful. Through these interpersonal communications, the villagers get more information about health education with their prevention.

The school teachers are another important official to disseminate new information, values, and norms of behavior to the children and others in the village. During the period of data collection, it was noticed that the behavior of the children, their way of speaking, and attitudes towards polio dropped, vaccination is more standard and knowledgeable i.e. their educational communication is not bad.

Education and Communication

Education is an institution by which society transmits cultural traits and socializes its members for differential social roles. It trained the upcoming generation to participate in various social and economic activities. Education is a means to determine the occupation of an individual and also promotes to adoption of new technological means related to various aspects of life. Most

of the respondents, fathers, and mothers also have high school degrees. Both male and female father's education is primary and high level. So, most of them are in engaged agriculture. Similarly, most of the respondent's mother's occupation is housewives. Besides most of the respondents' occupations are housewives, students, and unemployed. Although most of the respondents have low education almost the same respondents engaged with business. So they try to adjust to modern communication processes by compromising with the traditional standard of living. The majority of the respondents have a high degree of household consumption pattern. Hence, it can be concluded that the respondents have diverse social and economic backgrounds.

Urban Contacts

The Villagers of Dopdar frequently use towns like Sivasagar (23 km.), Jorhat (approx. 55 km.), and Dibrugarh (approx. 100 km) for various purposes. Due to all headquarters generally the people of the village visit Sivasagar for administrative works like the court, school inspector office, etc, and most of the people visit Jorhat for business or to meet their relatives and for medical treatment. People's contact with Dibrugarh is related to AMC (Assam Medical Collage), the University, or relatives. For necessary goods like fertilizer, pesticides, machinery and implements repaired, house utensils, and primary medical treatment they used to visit Amguri or Halwating town situated at a distance of 6 and 4 km from the village respectively. To contact towns like Simaluguri, Nazira Duliajan, Tinsukia, etc. They always prefer Barahibari railway station which is at a distance of less than one kilometer from the village. The visiting goods sellers also play an important role in introducing new dresses, utensils, and other stationary goods, especially women's make-up articles. Women can get new information about makeup articles like hairpins, mirrors, combs, necklaces, soaps, powders, earrings, etc. through these traders. Besides they are the introducer of new brands of dresses like inners of women and children, pants and shirts, brassiers etc. in the village.

Different analysis regarding respondent's levels of education indicates that there is an intimate relation between high education and way of communication. 19% of the respondents have higher education in the village. Their way of living, behavior, lifestyle, and contact with the outside world proves that more qualifications can get more opportunities for communicating with others. The analyses also reveal that the respondents who have high incomes are more liberal in adaptation to the modern way of technology in the communication process.

So this case of the political communication process of the village shows that the initial convictions, decisions, ideas, and knowledge of the people did not remain the same. It also indicates the importance of the audience characteristics, their likes and dislikes, and image formation regarding the political leaders. From the different speeches of the villagers, it can be said that mass media are the means through which even small events get blown up and may become an issue of concern in the whole nation. So the power of the media can hardly be over-emphasized.

New Technologies and Communication

Regarding the use of new technologies, it is found that the respondents have a high degree of computer access in the village. Most of the respondents use a computer at their home and use it for a minimum of one hour for educational purposes. Although all the respondents heard about the internet media most of them do not use it. Generally, the internet user is either a youth or service

holder and uses it for academic and downloading materials regarding various matters. The entire internet user respondents used to go cybercafé because there was no internet connection except one. Mobile is another important new technology which is more popular in the village, especially among youths. Most (54%) of the respondents think it is a very useful instrument for communication. Most of them prefer camera facilities and handsets with memory cards. They use it to communicate their relatives, friends, and with business partners. Maximum people of the village are called and received 1-10 in a day. So they have been categorized as very high-degree users of new technology.

The analysis shows that most of them use faxes either for official purposes or for personal. The analysis of their habit of sending messages through fax within the last three months reveals that they have medium exposure to using it. Letters are also used by the villagers for communicating the other people. They use the post office which is one kilometer from the village. All the people prefer registered posts for various purposes. Although letters occupy an important role in the village due to the invention of a faster device in the way of communicating with people, the rate of transactions through letters has been decreasing. In this way, the traditional rural communication system is now more integrated with the modern urban communication system.

Conclusion

Thus, the villagers communicate through interpersonal, traditional, Religious, and modern media. Sometimes they use traditional rituals (Pujas) to satisfy gods and goddesses, on the other hand, they also use computers, mobile phones, internet to communicate with the outside world. These types of communication systems are not only in Dopdar village but also in other villages of India. Thus, after analyzing the different types of forms and patterns of communication, it can be concluded that the communication system of the village is open and has more integration between the traditional forms and the modern mass media communication. They have adopted both tradition and modernity in their lifestyle. Although some scholars and scientists are very worried about the devil's effect of the Western culture on village people through these modern mass media, we can still preserve our valuable traditional customs, and norms which are required for the smooth running of a society. Besides the study confirms that a society can function smoothly with the help of modern technologies. The social system can well adjust with this new media of communication process.

Finally, the study confirms that the rural communication system (in India) is an open communication system. The traditional forms of communication are well integrated with the modern mass media and these traditional communication systems are also well integrated with new communication technologies.

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