Social communication in India: A minority view

V. S. Jodha
Social Communication
In India: A Minority View

Vijay S. Jodha
Freelance Communication Specialist, Delhi

Social communication in India has always been a complex and difficult process. The presence of diverse communities and social groupings based on varying combinations of caste, religion, culture and language, and the hierarchies they represent has determined the flow and denial of information throughout Indian history. While the foundations of a modern Indian nation state are only half a century old, the process of social communication in the subcontinent has always been burdened with all kinds of limitations.

In his scholarly book covering this form of communication in late Mughal and early British India, author C. A. Bayly, (Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870. New York, Cambridge University Press, 1996), informs us that like the Mughals before them, the British too had difficulties in accessing information in such a complex society where the written word was produced and confined to a few, and where oral communication dominated. Their success with such communication (intelligence gathering), determined the success and failure of their colonial fortunes both in conquest and administration.

The ruling elite in pre-British, pre-print and largely oral India had a history of patronising the writers, poets, record keepers and others. Nevertheless, it was only through the British Raj, using a variety of social communication forms in their administration, that the print culture, the Macaluyan education system and educational institutions led to the birth of a large reading public and a modern Indian bureaucracy.

The role of social communication in post-independent India has been performed largely by the state while non-government organisations (NGOs) and the private sector play a smaller role. This is due to the state’s monopoly over radio and television, the most far reaching and cost effective means of communication in India with its high level of illiteracy and low per capita income. Both these mediums were introduced in India with the purpose of information, education and entertainment (Development
It is only in recent years that private players have entered the television industry. A critical factor has been the transition of the Indian state from its socialist governance to one driven by market forces. Parallel to this has been the process of economic structuring, (popularly referred to as ‘liberalisation’) and the opening of various facets of the Indian economy to the forces of globalisation. With commercial concerns gaining importance even in state-owned media, financially non-rewarding communication such as social communication is bound to suffer. The private sector and corporate interests that have been driving this change in the state’s mindset now have a broader responsibility in dealing with this aspect of communication.

Here it must be pointed out that besides the means of mass media, the state also carries out the task of communication through the various publicity and media outreach departments (usually called Department of Audio-Visual Publicity, or DAVP) within the different ministries. While this process has not been interrupted by the new market-driven mindsets, its fortunes are certainly tied up with the financial fortunes of the state and the role the state sees for itself in the changing environment.

In 1998, I collaborated with a photographer who had been working on a number of social communication projects, ranging from creating publicity materials for various ministries of India to working with Indian and international NGOs on issues as varied as female reproductive health in rural India, prevention of sexually transmittable disease among sex workers in large cities, fund raising for organisations working with children at construction sites and publicity for organisations working with the elderly. The collaborative project, “Ageing in India” was a direct outcome of working on such social communication exercises. As communication practitioners we felt that issues of social importance debated by activists, policy makers and specialist organisations rarely moved out from the field of the specialists into the public domain.

For instance, in India the NGO’s interaction with the general public seemed largely confined to fund-raising activities such as art auctions, fashion shows or sale of greeting cards. This, we felt, had reduced the efficacy of any social communication exercise as the fund-raising activity was far divorced from the NGOs primary activities. More critically, it also promoted a certain empathy and public indifference as the average person was made to feel that by buying a work of art or a greeting card, one had done one’s bit for a particular cause or society at large. This sort of interaction between an NGO and a donor also appeared to be...
prompted by an absence of effective communication vehicles to make the donor or the general public understand a complex issue.

For a number of reasons, the problems of the aged have become an area of serious concern over the last few years. For one, due to better health care and delivery systems, the average lifespan in India has grown over the years, doubling from what it was half a century ago to 60 plus. While this is a positive achievement, it has also created fresh challenges in what is still a developing society with inadequate resources. As is common in many of such societies, due to the changing family patterns from joint (extended) family systems to smaller, nuclear units coupled with (or as a direct consequence of) migration of younger people from villages to cities or from smaller to larger cities within the country and overseas has translated to a rapid erosion of traditional systems for taking care of the elderly as well as keeping them productively engaged.

In the case of India, where the majority of the population is poor and/or employed in the unorganised sector bereft of any retirement benefits, the aged are often forced to fend for themselves to the very end. Although most states in India have some sort of pension schemes for the elderly, they are far from adequate in terms of the financial assistance or the coverage. Thus decline in traditional family structures in the absence of a comprehensive formal system of social security have only worsened matters for the elderly.

As in any social issue, the media have the opportunity to either play a positive role or accentuate the negative. In the case of India, there is an ongoing change in value systems taking place and in which media are playing a significant role. Values and their various manifestations that were more common to western societies -- such as a more youth-centric focus to the exclusion of all other age groups and especially the elderly, a shift of ideology from that of family or community to the ideology of the individual, an obsessive focus on being younger and ageing as a negative phenomenon -- are fast becoming part of the Indian ethos. Needless to say promotion of such mindset and values is detrimental to the well-being of the aged in societies like India since, unlike Western societies, there is an absence of a formal safety network for the elderly and their responsibility lies with younger people and families. Thus one finds that the elderly are marginalised not only in the economic sphere but also in the public mindsets and media concerns. The problem is particularly severe if one considers that younger people in India, due to their background in nuclear families, do not have any elderly living with them and have little or no interaction with this age group in their daily life. Their concern and sensitivity towards the aged is
largely formed by media images. Thus the common perception of the aged is that of a physically ailing person or a person in retirement and hence a burden on society.

Here it must be pointed out that if mainstream media have unconsciously been projecting values detrimental to the interests of the aged, there has also been a conscious attempt at focusing on the problems of the aged especially with the United Nations Declaration of 1999 as International Year of Older Persons, the following year being declared the National Year of the Elderly and the Indian government formulating a National Policy on Elderly in 1999.

It was against the above background that much of the work for the Ageing in India project was carried out and disseminated in the public domain. The project attempted to capture the changing world of India’s elderly through research, interviews, photographs and films, and using a series of engaging human interest stories in the voices of the elderly themselves. Each story represents one or more facets of ageing. The project concept itself was divided into three sections for the purpose of research. Some of the subjects are more productive and well-known today than anytime in their long career, others are doing something quite extraordinary often against great odds and usually away from the limelight, while some represent a larger, significant issue related to ageing. Included in the foremost category representing productive ageing, were people

Khushwant Singh, writer, born Hadali, Pakistan, 1915.

"Being an agnostic I don’t waste my time on god or prayer. I just read and write from almost 4:30 in the morning till whiskey time at 7:00 in the evening. The other day Shobha De was doing a television interview with me and asked how I managed to be so productive at my age and I said, “no one has invented a condom for the pen yet.”

Photograph: Samar S. Jodha
VIJAY S. JODHA: Social communication ...

like writer Khushwant Singh, who at 86 years still puts in over 12 hours of work in a day and is more known, widely read and, in his own words, “making more money” than anytime in his long career. The second category of unsung or forgotten heroes, included people like H.D. Shourie, a retired bureaucrat who has been taking up a variety of issues affecting common people through judicial means. One of his litigation relating to discrimination by government in doling out pension to retired government employees itself benefited as many as four million people countrywide. Others included in this category was Dr. B.K. Seth, a practising doctor who had made collecting cornea for restoring eyesight to the blind, as his mission in life. Visiting cremation grounds and facing a lot of social opposition, he succeeded in persuading relatives of the dead to donate corneas of the deceased. Performing surgery on-site, he was responsible for about 5,000 blind being able to see again.

The third category focused on individuals who even though leading a life without fame or any extraordinary achievement, individually represented one or more significant issue in ageing. Thus there were abandoned and forgotten widows in temple towns through whom one was able to highlight the fact that the majority of the aged in India are not male, but female the majority of whom are widowed and a significant number left to fend for themselves. Since the elderly are often the last repositories of cultural traditions that are otherwise disappearing, a focus was on these subjects from a variety of communities. In India, as in
most traditional societies making a transition to modernity, the elderly were once the only source of learning. With the coming of professional educational institutions, this process has all but disappeared. The project also focused upon many of the traditional arts and crafts where this practice remains alive.

The project team researched and identified 400 such subjects all over India and completed the work with over a hundred by mid-1999, when the United Information Centre in India and HelpAge India (India’s leading NGO working with the aged), presented an exhibition of some of the photographs and interviews from this project in the form of a travelling exhibition. Their association with the presentation was non-financial in nature and even though the project team could not get support for the project from the government or private sector, it was able to present it in Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai. The response from the specialists working on the aged issue, from artists and members of the creative community to the media and the general public was overwhelmingly positive.

What was pleasing was the amount of interest the project drew from younger people especially students. Media channels in India catering to the youth such as Channel V and MTV Network provided extensive coverage to the venture. The exhibition coverage provided a good starting point for the media to focus on the issue of ageing. Although there were critical resource constraints, the exhibition provided a platform for various senior citizens associations and NGOs working with the elderly to conduct workshops and other activities which carried on beyond the few weeks that the exhibition was presented at a given venue. Many teachers and students expressed interest in hosting the exhibition at their respective educational institution.

This project is ongoing. Although attempts at getting support for the project have failed to materialise as the subject does not seem to draw commercial interest, plans are being drawn to reach different schools and colleges with cheaply produced multiple sets of exhibition materials from this project. The lessons in the entire effort, if any, are that social communication exercises even when addressing the serious, but commercially unattractive topics can be effective as long as they are designed with definitive social change objectives and target audience in mind.

VIJAY S. JODHA: Social communication ...

VIJAY S. JODHA studied for his Masters at the Department of Culture and Communication and film making at the School of Visual Arts, New York University. He has worked on projects in India and overseas including films for the Smithsonian and PBS, film and multi-media projects for Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, Sanskriti Foundation and a variety of corporate clients. Email: vijayjodha@hotmail.com