

COMMUNICATION-MEDIA-SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND CATHARSIS OF IDEAS

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Summary

Media is an instrument of communication conditioned by the human preferences and technological limitations. The convergence of knowledge –while influencing the millions across the planet, fragments the communities by individual preferences and collective complacency. Man’s urge to conquer the nature and his insatiable desire for better living has impoverished the biosphere as never before. The emerging technologies, instead of operating to indicate warning signals, only hasten his nervous urge to decorate his immediate present at the cost of losing a better tomorrow. Greenhouse gases, global warming, tsunamis, earth quakes, volcanic eruptions are but a few examples. The life supporting systems are being eroded in such a way that the geographical boundaries have to be reshaped and re-written due to the recent calamities. Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Maldives and Indonesian islands are a few examples. Communication systems project the individual choices and prejudices. Instead of helping the human judgment for corrective measures, they are shaping corrupting tendencies. Media stands as a testimony to human frailty and failings of impoverished majority. The present rate of environmental corruption outweighs the positive attitude of cornucopians to that of catastrophists.

This chapter discusses the role of communication in general, and media in particular, not merely for information dissemination, entertainment and amusement, but more as a

powerful tool to sensitize the human society to the critical issues of individual and collective life. The most important issues today being those of sustainable development and environmental concerns, the author underlines the responsibility of media in the context.

1. Ancient Model and Sustainable Development.

The 21st century is already declared to be one of many challenges. The Brundtland Commission in its 1987 report, *Our Common Future* called for collective global effort to ensure good living conditions for people of all generations, present and future. It proposed a kind of development along these lines and defined sustainable development as “*development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*”. Since 1992 a global movement began with the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro. It was here the key declaration on sustainable development was released. It is now famous as Agenda 21, meaning ‘*Agenda for Human Actions in the 21st Century*’. In 2002 the second summit was held in Johannesburg, South Africa. In between, meetings took place to assess the progress of sustainable development initiatives in the so called ‘Rio+5’ meetings. It is not easy to estimate the cost of all these events. But it is important to gauge the result of these. Governments can make policies and regulations but the actual implementation is often not very effective; the problem is with the human society which has to be truly sensitive to the issues and rules and regulations, policing, and penalties are weak solutions. Large armies are known to have been defeated by relatively small ones- the latter fought with spirit and not merely strength. Today we need a spirit to be strongly aroused in the human society, a commitment to preserve the life and its quality on this planet, and this will be true empowerment. The author’s discussion of this topic amply refers to the Indian examples and occasionally touches upon some irresistible cases outside.

Let us examine and evaluate the most ancient, time tested and resilient model of Hindu Society which conducted itself with understandable discipline in relation to the biosphere and the Earth’s life support systems and enjoyed the fruits of the Earth in a sustainable way.

According to Alvin Toffler, American writer and futurist- if the human history of the last 50,000 years can be divided into lifetimes of 62 years each, it is the history of 800 lifetimes. In this incomprehensible and unimaginable stretch of lifetimes, it is shocking to know that man lived in the caves for a staggering 650 life times. Only in the last 70 lifetimes has he started communicating with his fellow humans.

The earliest instruments of communication - if one may say so- were bones and stones. Sporadic evidences of crude cuneiform writing on stone walls tell this story. While the cave man and his earliest inheritor had no means of understanding and coming to terms with nature- he was endowed with abundant source of intellect, as any other species around him. Swami Parthasarathi, an eminent scholar and philosopher deciphers intellect as different from intelligence in a very subtle way. Intellect is a faculty given to all beings taking birth while intelligence is acquired by cultivation. Intellect can be enriched, but intellect

operates by impulses and instincts. It is a natural inheritance that is common to all living beings.

The most eloquent example of this intellect can be seen in full measure in the UNESCO World Heritage Site of the famous Ngorongoro crater at the Eastern edge of Serengeti in Northern Tanzania. Based on the fossil evidence, this crater was a consequence of a massive volcanic eruption some 3 million years before. This volcanic caldera is a marvel of the biosphere and a typical example of the rhythmic cycle of creation. There are 25,000 animals surviving in the crater entrapped by geological occurrence. These have multiplied, co-existed and have found their sustenance in their immediate environs. A lion co-exists with a hare and a gazelle lives next to a hippo. Each animal has its own code of conduct for survival- sometimes one is a staple food of the other. But they don't devour each other randomly. They live in that entrapped area, not by design but by their intellect. When a Lion satiates his hunger killing a wildebeest, it will not look at any animal for the next 8 days. After the Lion is done eating, hyenas and jackals devour the leftovers. And vultures, eagles do the scavenging. What remains would be consumed by small bacteria resulting in a clean up of the atmosphere. It is a silent way of sharing and caring, by instinct and not by design.

Coming to the Hindu society- great texts of knowledge were handed over to generations by the spoken word and by mere rendition alone. There was no written text to *Vedas* (meaning what is heard). An astounding knowledge was embedded in this great matrix, very meticulously composed to ensure that nothing was lost while transmitting from one to the other and from generation to generation. To decipher what was given in these texts and to decode its theme, one had to thoroughly learn grammar and mathematics. This was a scientific preservation of an invaluable message enmeshed with subtle craft to be handed over to coming generations. The basic tenet of this ancient text can be codified in one word, *DHARMA*. It is a loaded word that deserves a comprehensive explanation to get the full meaning. It is the generalized duty of the human kind, of a community, of an individual, of a society, of a generation- the scope is all-pervasive and everlasting. In short, it is a common denominator and the only necessary and sufficient condition for human sustenance.

The *Sanskrit* term *Dharma* is also used to refer to Religion but this must be avoided while reading this account. *Dharma* here should be taken as *Duty*. The false notion that the *Vedas* are religious documents *should* be abandoned. These and the related works of ancient scholars are highly evolved scientific documents- truly secular and revisit time and again for better living and sustenance. The whole *Vedic* literature is a coveted proof of ancient man's evolution.

Max Muller said: "*Vedas are the oldest text of the human race. And 'Agni Meele Purohitam' is the first verse of Rig Veda. In the most primordial time when the people of Europe were jumping like Chimpanzees, did not know how to cover their bodies, but with fig leaves, did not know agriculture and lived by hunting and lived in caves, at that remote*

past, Indians had attained high civilization and they gave to the world universal philosophies in the form of the Vedas.”

Very significantly- these ancient texts enunciate the core values of human living and it underlines one and only important basic need- the sustenance of life on this earth. We are not aware of any other scripture or literature in that age anywhere in the world has so precisely and succinctly epitomized the life and living.

Vedic literature does not teach a religion with any denomination or a particular god or goddess. It defines and teaches truly a desirable way of life.

For example- the second hymn in, a chapter in *Taittiriya Upanishad*, referred to as *anuvakam*, says:

*Annadhbhutaani jaayante, jaataanyannena vardhante
Adyatettica bhutani, tasmaadannam taducyata iti*

(All creatures are dependent on earth, they live for *Anna* (food) and lastly they dissolve into the *anna*. Also, they are born from *anna*. All life forms which are inter-dependent on earth live in the physical world. They live devouring food, and ultimately dissolve into matter. From dust into dust- that is the rule of physical layer.)

Is it not what the Holy Bible tells us? Is it not what Ngorongoro life cycle demonstrates or has been the case for the last 3 million years!

In order to perpetuate this value called *Dharma*, the elders of yore in their wisdom- created several versions of creative models to drive home this truth. They are the *shastras*, mythologies and some are epics. These various forms percolated into human society and became homogeneous part of the lore. The commonest of common man, who had no equipment to write or read, and who was not exposed to this exercise- was fed with these manifestations and they were absorbed by him at the micro-plane. His investment in this process is a very valuable commodity called *faith*. Faith is a time- tested truth- conceived, verified and a filtered tenet. It signifies only the goal and will not deliberate the path. It enunciates the values, but doesn't explain the cause. It denotes but doesn't define, because it is being handed over to the raw specimen of the society at the tail end of the system, who has neither the equipment nor inclination to do so, because, more often than not, one is endowed with abundant intellect that is not nurtured by intelligence. The “extreme” inheritor assumes it, adopts it, and organizes his way of life as enunciated. This is an unwritten, unchallenged, age old custom. It was given a great name called *tradition*. Tradition is a habitual adherence to the core values of a community over a period without bothering to verify them- it has only answers and will not entertain or accommodate questions, because it is not its prescription. You do a work because your father did it. He did it because his father did it and so on and so forth. Tradition is a blind alley, but with a torch in your hand. It will not define the route but defies the darkness. The torch will guide you. That is tradition.

The Ramayana

Now, let us consider the power of communication. The greatest instrument of communication fully clothed with traditional values- that was handed over to generations- not in one country- but almost to every country- some 32 of them –East of Mediterranean- was *Ramayana*. It was not an epic of a country, but of a civilization. You find any number of stories, lore in Thailand, Indonesia, Laos, Sri Lanka to name a few. The corner stone of this great epic is the preservation of *Dharma*. The religious ethos encapsulated in this story embedded with all the core values that are defined as vital in each society- became all-pervading and omnipotent. The story seeped to the grass-root levels- independent of the faculty to communicate- in the form of ballads, songs, puppet shows, dramas, pageants etc. The result was even more astounding. The societies adhered to the propagated *dharma* not as an imposition but as a tool and instrument to co-exist. Every tree, fig, animal, snake, scorpion, leopard, cat, mouse- you name it- has a significance and a role to play in this biosphere, and one should respect its role on this planet – the commonest of common man will tell you this. They lived and let their fellow beings survive for generations. This is a clear case of inter-dependence and co-existence. Again, it was not an imposition but a common adherence to a faith. The result was a healthy sustenance and the symbiosis achieved in the process is amazing. In a vast country like India, with all its varied cultures, languages and disparities- you find the manifestation of influence of this great epic “*Ramayana* ”. If you travelled from Kashmir to Kanyakumari- you would find a Ram Singh, Ram Yadav, Ram Naik, Ram Narayan, Rama Iyer, Rama Sastry, Ram Deo, Ram Roy, Ram Rao, Ram Atawale. This is an emotional integration in an unprecedented way. This is the greatest achievement of mass communication- of one epic- transcending the entire civilization and harmonizing their thought process- for centuries. And, more importantly *Dharma* prevailed. The people don’t know what is sustainable development nor trans disciplinary science, nor billions of years of evolution and survival. They only knew that by adhering to certain core principles the Earth, which for them was “MOTHER” yielded the best results. And it did! Thus homogeneous, fool-proof, sustainable societies thrived, unhampered.

2. The Recent Model and its Limitation

After the modern media explosion came *another Ramayana*, this time as a TV-serial in India. This great epic which transcended their lives came to their drawing rooms in smaller capsules. A great epic and a great media converged to influence the modern viewer. One *Ramayana* was enough to ventilate social discipline for generations. Now it gained another dimension and range. The result was stunning. It hit the millions like a tornado. During its telecast, the trains stopped, the traffic on highways came to a screeching halt, marriages postponed, meetings deferred, even human relations revisited. Everybody was glued to the idiot box with bated breath. This was the second and most powerful thrust of the same “instrument” in a new but powerful form. The modern communication media could give this theme another dimension and another charge to hit the masses. The result was total and lethal.

But, alas, the second volcano didn't provoke the society as the first one. The influence of the earlier *Ramayana* brought harmony to the millions, while the second, lured them, but only created chaos, to say the least. The life moved on. The first one was an interpreter while the second one was only an entertainer. People knew those values, heard about them, learnt their resilience, but.....somewhere down the line, it ceased to penetrate the modern man's psyche. It did not percolate into their lives as the earlier one did. The earth's supporting systems were eroded by these very people, while their ancestors understood and abided diligently to the core values. What is the sea change that occurred amid yester and recent generations?

This was a marked media blast, an explosion— a tornado and an avalanche that engulfed the masses. The reason can be diagnosed in one word-communication. Is it a case of propagation or distortion? What is happening? That is the second part of this enquiry.

3. The Advent of a “Word ”, Collapse of a World

Let us start at the beginning.

And then, something remarkable happened to the cave man. He has developed the faculty to communicate. A “word” is born. Without trying to be retrograde in perception and to have a logical comprehension of the situation- a whole world collapsed with it and an altogether new world manifested.

Silence is the language that is universal. It transcends the time, space and operates at the instinct level. The operative instinct that is common to a human as also to an animal at that stage was silence.

Charles Chaplin lamented that with the advent of talkie, a great language that transcended the media died instantaneously. Its name was SILENCE. What is more, in a picture he produced in 1940, he made an observation that “Our knowledge has made us cynical; our cleverness hard and unkind. We think too much and feel too little.”

Spoken word limits the meaning to a particular thought and confines its appeal and sometimes retards it. Silence has a “depth” while a word has “width ”. Silence is a great generalization while word localizes its appeal. A thought projected by a word is one-dimensional while silence is multi dimensional, depending on the reflexes of the being. Again, silence is a vast expanse without limits, while a word is a conditional cage well crafted and chiseled.

The eyes of a dog convey its love towards its master much more than a person expressing it in words. Word is an interpretation, while silence is inference. The meaning of a word is finite in its scope, while the silence is infinite. Does it mean that the spoken word killed a different and deeper language that existed than when a man learnt to communicate? We will presently enquire.

To understand this rather blatant statement, one has to look at the earlier life style of the cave man, as compared to the present day man, who is exposed to supra-intelligent world. Mother Nature was never trampled then, the bio-diversity was never interfered with, the Nature's cycle never tampered, because

1. He doesn't know that it is possible.
2. More importantly, he doesn't require it.

He co existed with the nature around him, drawing his sustenance, whenever and wherever required. It was an unwritten law, blissfully unknown. The bio-diversity was intact in its virgin form not by design but by default.

Knowledge extends the scope of a person's perception and conditions his intellect by the same token. Lack of it confines him to a mundane existence – yet another example of primitive discipline of an animal. His sole aim is to survive and sustain himself and his community- not by motivation but by habit.

Communication qualifies the thought and makes a person react. And mass communication at its evolved best- helps people to understand each other and by the same token, fragmentation sets in based on social, economic, geographic, ethnic, and even by the pigmentation of the skin. "Apartheid" was not even known to the earlier man. This obfuscation is more palpable as the sensitivity and emphasis on the disparities are highlighted.

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Biographical sketch

Gollapudi Maruthi Rao, a post graduate in Mathematical Physics from Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, South India (1956-59) worked as a journalist in vernacular Daily for 3 years, as a broadcaster in All India Radio for 20 years, wrote articles for Telugu Encyclopedia on Theatre Movement, published several novels, plays, essays, stories, Column writer for more than 30 years, wrote screenplay and dialogues for 80 films in Telugu and acted in Character roles in 220 movies. There are three Doctoral degrees on his writings from three universities in Andhra Pradesh (namely Osmania University, Sri Venkateswara University, Andhra University) and three M.Phil degrees on his short stories, plays and a novel (from Sri Nagarjuna University, Madras University, Sri Venkateswara University) He is presently Editor of Telugu Monthly being published by Times Of India group from Hyderabad. Gollapudi Maruthi Rao's works won several awards and he

received awards for lifetime achievement and has been facilitated by a large number of organizations in India. He is a frequent keynote speaker in many literary conferences.