COMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT: ROLE OF UNESCO IN INDIA - BY J.S. YADAVA

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Information is knowledge, and knowledge is power. Communication is the process of information dissemination and empowering people. Through communication we seek willing cooperation of others and build social organisations of varied complexities. It is through communication that fire of hatred and conflict is fanned and so are done the tender feelings of love, cooperation and peace. It is in this context, perhaps, that the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) pro-claimed that "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the 'minds of men that defences of peace must be constructed" as its preamble and emphasised the need to collaborate in the work of advancing the mutual knowledge and understanding of the peoples, through all means of mass communication in Article 2 of its Constitution.1 As such, information and communication development has been one of the major concerns of the United Nations in general and UNESCO in particular since their inception.

The United Nations Conference on Freedom of Information, in 1948, called freedom of information, one of the basic freedoms, and free and adequate information, the touchstone of all freedoms to which the United Nations is dedicated. It was generally believed that for free and adequate information in any country there must be adequate development of mass

'Fernando Valderrama, A History of UNESCO, UNESCO Reference Books, (Paris: UNESCO, 1995).

communication in that country. Therefore, all countries were and are concerned about development of their communication systems. In India, such a concern for development of communication system was clearly reflected in the country's first Five Year Plan itself.

Internationally, efforts were made to facilitate the growth and development of communication facilities, especially in new and emerging countries. In 1958 the UN General Assembly called for a "programme of concrete action" to build up press, radio broadcasting, film and television facilities in these countries as part of economic and social development. To draw up a suitable programme and assess the resources required, the General Assembly requested UNESCO to carry out a fact finding survey. Based upon the UNESCO report submitted to UN, the General Assembly, in 1962, unanimously adopted a resolution "expressing its concern that the survey disclosed 70 per cent of the population of the world lack in adequate information facilities and are thus denied effective enjoyment of the right to freedom". The UN General Assembly also emphasised that information media have an important part to play in education and in economic and social progress generally and that new techniques of communication offer special opportunities for acceleration of the education process. Consequently, governments, especially of newly emerged developing countries, were urged to include in their economic development plans adequate provision for development of national information media. UNESCO was specially called upon to play active role and support programmes and activities leading to development of communication systems in the developing countries.

Development and growth of communication facilities is a complex process and their consequences and impact on society are multiple. However, the question of communication

110

1

and the role of UNESCO in India could be examined from three distinct, though related, stand points of view: viz. (i) as a means of bringing about desired social change, (ii) the issues and concerns relating to free flow of information, (iii) institution building.

SOCIAL CHANGE

The part that information communication can play, if used wisely, to speed and smooth what Julius Nyerere called the `terrible ascent' of the developing nations towards social and economic change, has been of special interest to all developing countries, including India. The contribution that effective communication can make to social and economic development is of vital importance to developing countries. Free and adequate information which the UN and UNESCO have emphasised is not only a goal in itself, it is also a means of bringing about the desired social change.[2] It is strongly believed and rightly so, that the goal of economic and social development, an agenda high on the most developing countries' priorities, can be facilitated by adequate and effective communication. Conversely, without adequate and effective communication, efforts for economic and social development would be seriously hampered.

In India the significance of communication in equipping people with new information and skills and mobilising them for their willing participation in various development programmes and activities has been well recognised and emphasised in various Five Year Plans, the blue print of country's development strategies. In the first Five Year Plan itself,

2 Wilbur Schramm, Mass Media and National Development, The Role of Information in the Developing Countries, (Paris: UNESCO, 1964).

111

the need for understanding and appreciation of the various development programmes and schemes by the people was clearly underlined. In the subsequent plans, the concern about communication with the people even in remote villages has been voiced with increasingly greater emphasis and force. Consequently, all available methods of communication have been developed and strengthened manifold over the years.

Responding to the UN General Assembly's call to strengthen and develop information and communication facilities, UNESCO and the Government of India, launched in 1956 a pilot project "Radio Rural. Forum' covering 150 villages in Pune region of Maharashtra. Learning from the Canadian experience of Farm Radio Forum (1940s) India started radio rural forums on pilot basis with the help of UNESCO. It was an experiment in utilising broadcasting to create greater awareness among rural people about various improved techniques of agriculture production, health and hygiene, and other community development programmes. The project followed innovative approaches in the form of programme planning and presentation, organised listening and discussion and evolving a mechanism of feedback from the audiences to ensure greater involvement and participation of people as well as making more relevant the programme contents of the radio broadcasts.

The pilot project was a great success and was extended to many other areas. In 1969, about 0.2 million radio rural forums were operating in different states and union territories. Although, subsequently with the advent of transistor revolution the relevance of community

3 J. C. Mathur, and Paul Neurath, An Indian Experiment in Farm Radio Forum (Paris: UNESCO, 1959).

112

radio-sets and radio rural forums declined, even so these are still operative in many parts of the country as "Charcha mandals" (discussion groups) etc.

2

Furthermore, the basic concept and philosophy of radio rural forums was adapted and adopted in a decade long programme in 1980s on use of radio in support of mother- child health care. Similarly, beginning from Literacy Mission, Lucknow in 1960s radio has been extensively used in promotion of adult literacy in the country.4 Thus, deriving inspiration from UNESCO-supported pilot project in radio rural forum, broadcasting in India, first radio and later television, has been playing important role in disseminating information and creating awareness about topics and issues relevant to the needs of rural masses thereby contributing to the process of development and social change in India.

FREE FLOW OF INFORMATION

The sanctity of freedom of expression and its importance to mankind is enshrined in Article 19 of the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" and was reiterated by the UN Conference on Freedom of Information in 1948. As early as 1952, the UN General Assembly resolved that "it is essential for a proper development of public opinion in under-developed countries that independent domestic information enterprises should be given facilities and assistance in order that they may be enabled to contribute to the spread of information, to the development of native culture and international understanding". The UN General Assembly invested UNESCO with the responsibility for matters pertaining ID information and freedom

4 J.S. Yadava, Media and Adult Education: Indian Experience. A study conducted for UNESCO (New Delhi: Indian Institute of Mass Communication, 1984).

113

of expression and urged UNESCO to evolve a concrete plan of action in this respect. As stated earlier, this led to undertaking of a survey of communication infrastructural facilities available in different countries so that appropriate policy initiative and support could be provided to ensure adequate development of communication facilities so as to achieve the objective of free flow of information.

Consequently UNESCO and various U.N. bodies supported many programmes in developing countries to build mass media infrastructure and institutions.

"Freedom" and "Freedom of Information" are. one of those terms that cast a spell on peoples' mind. People seldom pause to ask whose freedom of information to be true, has to be equitable and reciprocal.5 However, freedom of information as obtaining, is largely freedom of western developed countries. Similarly free flow of information is largely one way from western developed countries to developing countries. Against this inequitable and largely one way flow of information, many developing countries started protesting in various international fora as it was being increasingly realised that such a situation is detrimental to their economic, political and cultural interests. At the 1974 general conference of UNESCO, the third world developing countries maintained that the concept of free flow would have little meaning until action has been taken to put all nations on a free and equal footing in their ability to communicate.

There was growing realisation among many developing countries that the political freedom which they have acquired in recent years through great struggle and turmoil would

5 D. R. Mankekar, Whose Freedom? Whose Order?, (New Delhi: Clarion, Delhi, 1981).

114

have little meaning in the absence of economic freedom, which is consequently related to information and communication situation prevailing in these countries. They realised that though they have become free, the economic structure and information communication flow structure continue to be broadly-along the patterns set up during the colonial period. As such there was a.

3

growing demand from the third world countries for a "new international economic order" and also "new world information and communication order".

Consequently there were fierce debates at various levels. The Nonaligned Movement was spearheading the demand for a new world information and communication order which was vehemently opposed by the western developed countries in the garb of freedom of expression and desirability of free flow of information. UNESCO became the focal point of this great debate during 1970s and 1980s. An intense series of professional, scientific and diplomatic activities involving communication in general and international communication in particular were initiated at various levels.5 A number of scientific research studies were undertaken to marshal facts in support of their respective positions. UNESCO appointed McBride Commission to find out facts and report. Many "national media policy" documents were prepared.

The great debate on issue of freedom of expression and free flow of information versus equitable and balanced flow of information became, at times, so intense as to acquire confrontational postures threatening the very existence of UNESCO. It may be recalled that it is in this context that the United States and the Great Britain (along with Singapore)

6 Kaarle Nordenstreng, The Mass Media Declaration of UNESCO (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1986).

115

withdrew from the UNESCO in 1984. Some of the highlights of this debate can be summarised as follows:

News and views circulated through mass media have significant bearing upon attitudes and actions relating to international relations. With the revolution in communication technologies the world is shrinking into a global village, making interdependence of nationstates imperative for the very survival of human race on this planet. Relentless battles for minds are fought through mass media. Today, not only sophisticated technologies like satellites and computers are utilised to generate enormous news and information but subtle techniques are put into operation to colour such news and information.7

In the information game the western developed societies have tremendous advantage over the developing third world Afro-Asian countries. The international flow of news and information is largely one way; from developed west to the developing South.

The imbalance in news flow not only portrays the world realities in a distorted fashion but also creates geopolitical environment detrimental to the third world's political, economic and cultural, interests, There is an increasing realisation that political freedom from colonial rule, if not meaningless, is not enough in the. context of prevailing world economic and information orders. The conduits of western influence and domination established during the colonial period are still operational and are even strengthened with the advancement of communication revolution.

7 J. S. Yadava, Politics of News: Third World Perspective (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Co., 1984).

116

As such, the developing countries in general and the nonaligned in particular have been demanding restructuring of the existing patterns of international relations. There is some progress as a consequence of the decade-long debates and discussions in international fora. The concept of `new world information order' finds wider acceptance today.8 `News Pool' and many other third world initiatives and bilateral arrangements have come into existence to facilitate the process of greater exchange of news and views about and among themselves.

It was the nonaligned countries, at their summit in 1973 at Algiers, which first asked for a change in the monopoly of information by the western media.9 UNESCO gave a call for a New Information Order in 1978, five years after the Algiers summit.

Then onward, of course, UNESCO extended strong support to the concept and formulation of the new information and communication order. The MacBride Commission,10 appointed by UNESCO in 1977, underlined the imbalance in the information flow, and the formulation of the resolution on the New Order was completed at the General Conference in Belgrade in 1980.

Some of the western countries have taken the view that the New Order is an attempt at legitimising government control of the media. Even though there is no reference in any of UNESCO's documents justifying, directly or indirectly, a code of conduct or censorship or

8 Hamid Mowlana, Global Information and World Communication, New Frontier in International Relations (New York: Longman, 1986).

9 Indian Institute of Mass Communication, News Agencies Pool of Non- aligned Countries: A Perspective (New Delhi, 1983).

10 UNESCO, Many %ices: One World: S. McBride Commission Report (Paris, 1982).

government control of the media, the campaign against UNESCO on this account has continued unabated.

However, despite all difficulties, UNESCO succeeded in adopting by acclamation a declaration on Mass Media which is of great importance. This UNESCO declaration called Declaration. On Fundamental Principles concerning the contribution of mass media to strengthening the peace and international understanding, to the promotion of human rights, and to countering racialism and apartheid and incitement to war, is perhaps the most painstakingly negotiated text about journalism, mass communication ever adopted in UNESCO. By adopting the Mass Media Declaration in which UNESCO played a pivotal role, the international community laid down for the first time overall guidelines for the mass media. In the words of Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, the then Director-General of UNESCO, the Mass Media Declaration is, "a new set of principles which all creators and distributors of information. would be able to endorse", "since for the first time the international community has at its disposal a body of principles and ideals such as can provide guidance for action and practice of all those whose hearts are set on justice and peace".*11 It also led to the setting up of a special programme, IPDC,-International Programme for Development of Communication -- at UNESCO.

In this great debate on free flow of information India played a very significant role, and UNESCO India office made valuable contribution by supporting some studies of the issue and facilitating a number. of debates and seminars that were organised to put the whole issue into proper perspective.

11*The Mass Media Declaration of UNESCO.

INSTITUTION BUILDING

Right from the beginning UNESCO has been extending support to programmes leading to the development of mass communication infrastructure and institutions in India. In 1960, the UNESCO India Office extended its support by inviting a team of international experts to study communication and development scene in India, which led to recommendation and setting up of the National Institute - the Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC) at Delhi. In the initial stages, UNESCO also provided for two consultants to start the training programmes at. the Institute. It also provided funding of some equipment for journalism/mass communication at the Institute. The objective of the IIMC is to train media personnel from India and third world

countries. Over the years UNESCO has supported several training and research programmes at the Institute.

To build infrastructure facilities, UNESCO also started National Institute of Audio Visual Education, which later developed and merged with the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT). UNESCO also helped to some extent development of facilities for news agency journalism, and setting up of the news pool at Press Trust of India. Of late there has been greater emphasis on informatics and library science. UNESCO has supported many programmes and activities relating to development of skills and facilities in computers and information science. The IPDC has been supporting a number of activities in support of developing communication infrastructure in developing countries, including India. The Centre for Mass Communication Research at Jamia Milia Islamia got some grants from IPDC. India has also been making financial contribution to IPDC, beside supporting strongly its philosophy and plan of action.