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LIVING TOGETHER IN A MULTILINGUAL WORLD:
EXPLORING A NEW COMMUNICATION ORDER
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HUMAN COMMUNICATIONS are built on two pillars: power and trust. The experience of living together in a multilingual world, armed with new communication technologies, has brought a new scenario of 'haves' and 'have nots' in a digital divide. It is, therefore, necessary to give a clear expression not only to the rights of individuals and of speech communities belonging to smaller languages, but also to the duties of all concerned agencies (including dominating language groups such as those advocating global English) and the obligations of State and international forums, so as to lead to a 'holistic' understanding of the information society as such.

Every culture, irrespective of being ‘big’ or ‘small’ (in demographic/economic terms), serves as a bridge between others and as an instrument of interaction which is humanly universal. Relationship of language and culture is interwoven in a unique manner in different traditions. Many technological devices designed to facilitate the mode and range of communication transcending historical traditions do not always lead to better understanding among humans. Several processes of manipulation and acculturation through mass media have been dubbed by many agencies as indoctrination and cultural invasion — a sort of communication imperialism (Khubchandani 1986). The presentation here proposes to initiate a dialogue to gain some insights in understanding the communication ethos of plural society as revealed through the communication processes in contemporary Indian subcontinent.

BEYOND THE PHYSICAL SPACE
Symbolically man lives in different layers of space. In the context of verbal communication, a base for the community’s solidarity, a sense of belongingness, can be identified with:

- the communitarian space, manifested through the density and intensity of interactions among its members
- the physical space, as monitored by State; delineated by language accreditation and privileges in a political set up
- the cyber space, ‘networking’ tapped through the dispersed diasporas engaged in socio-economic activities on the global level, or attracted by the ‘perceived’ links of language, religion, tradition or any other socio-cultural traits which in physical space remain diffused around the globe (Khubchandani 1998a).

With the advent of information technology giving a fill-up to ‘knowledge’ and ‘culture’ industries, we are now entering into a phase of communication where dispersed cultural groups sharing a common tradition explore the space through convenient modes of mobility and electronic networking. In a way, living in more than one spaces has become a virtual reality. It is evident from the ‘restlessness’ manifested in the writings of transcultural migrant writers such as Salman Rushdie and others.

No doubt, economic and commercial factors of globalization tilt the balance in favor of those languages, which dominate the physical space, such as English on the electronic media (particularly in international forums and regional confederations like the European Union), being perceived as the killer language. (Fishman 1998, Khubchandani 1998b). But at the same time, human interactions conducted through demographically and economically 'weaker' languages
can assert their utility in less glamorous, but vital, domains known as the communitarian space (predominantly in oral interactions). Interactive technologies in the cyber space can also be utilized as a force for diversity, ushering in a new era of living together (resembling McLuhan’s notion of ‘global village’).

Cyberspace is created on the global scene through information highways (websites, e-mail, personalized home pages, and other networking devices) which, in course of time, can supplement or replace traditional channels of communication linked with physical proximity (i.e., neighbourhood, school, village, metropolis, etc.). The impact of this interactive media has begun to seep among many professional bodies and voluntary agencies which are diffused in character (such as the present World Forum).

Cyberspace is regarded as an “undefinable place where geography becomes irrelevant”. Space becomes quite fluid, encouraging interactions between the local speech community and the time-sharing diaspora across the globe. Escaping the issue of borders in cyberspace — “both/either” in an open-minded, non-exclusive fashion, telecommunications lead to a new kind of diaspora, a ‘virtual’ community which lacks place and continuity in time. But there is a basic desire to connect, to interrelate through a value system, a sense of collective stake as well as shared adversity — a sort of communication ethos (see the Section ‘Living Together’). By identifying and creating applications of multimedia technology and through its dynamic navigation, it can be within the reach of such transnational diasporas to translate their vision into a reality, by thinking globally and acting locally, and creating an effective community bondage.

Interactive technologies, equipped with the advanced techniques of connectivity and synchronization, could sustain and promote a sense of diasporic solidarity among the scattered groups across states and across nations. One can cite two such culturally sensitive diasporas, speaking Sindhi and Tibetan, as being nurtured in the pluricultural milieu of South Asia. These well-knit communities, hitherto belonging to relatively homogenous regions, one in Sindh Province before the Indo-Pakistan Partition in 1947, and another before the annexation of Tibet to Chine in the sixties.²

**LANGUAGE IN INFORMATION SOCIETY**

With a rapid penetration of mass media and information technology in all walks of life, a new linguistic order is emerging on the global scene. It drastically affects the role of languages whether perceived as 'big' or 'small', 'strong' or 'weak', 'developed' or 'developing' languages alike. By and large, new technologies can be instrumental in creating new avenues for the speakers of both 'majority' languages as well as of 'minority' languages of living in a plural world.

One significant casualty of this development has been monolingualism in specific regions; it is on the way out. Multi-channels and multilingual inputs in mass media on a massive scale lead us to consider afresh the conceptual basis of information society. Heterogeneous media threaten the autonomous functioning of different languages. Multi-channels provide individuals in a community a greater access to diversified language-choice and its content. The simultaneous beaming of programs through satellite networks for cross-cultural audiences has added a whole new dimension to the life and experience of the masses. Current debate over language endangerment acquires a greater salience under the premise that language is a ‘standard’ entity, insulated within ‘well-defined’ enclosures, such as the languages enriched by literary traditions and administrative power; eighteen languages (out of over two hundred and odd) granted accreditation in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution is a case in point.³

In this paradigm, language borrowings, ‘open-ended’ lexical transfers, and ‘unstructured’ blending patterns of code-switching/mixing, code-neutralization, pidginization, when not legitimized by language custodians, are viewed as ‘language degeneration’, such as lingua
francas Hindustani and Angrezi (grassroots English) on the South Asian scene. Pursuing this logic, the reduction in functions of many minority languages and their subordinate/complementary roles in cross-cultural settings, is viewed by some linguists with great concern.

Information society, on the other hand, focuses attention to view language as an ‘open-ended’ ongoing process in everyday communications, a live force which remains in perpetual flux, in a state of becoming. This characteristic distinguishes it from the conventional notion of language as a ‘ripened product’, a crystallized being, conceived around normative entities as cultivated in school education. Social usage of such language on a massive scale is becoming so primary that it has led modern societies to a new awareness of communication (Khubchandani 1989).

The dynamics of ‘open’ systems in language gets more pronounced in mass media to meet the demands of everyday-life reality. Multi-disciplinary orientations to study such transient speech events bring into focus non-linear attributes of natural language. The phenomenon of language undergoing change along with usage, just as reality changes, has, in a way, rescued it from restrictive parameters and techniques of logical formalization, a characteristics of open systems. Effects of a discourse, as in advertising, are grasped from the proportion of its constituents, a harmonious blending of parts, forming a balanced whole. The integrative thrust of the ancient grammarians have rightly laid emphasis on the axiom: “Whole comes prior to its parts” (Khubchandani 1999).

The Indian and Greek schools of philosophy have a rich tradition dating back more than two thousand years and capable of shedding light on the humanistic perspective of communication (Chari 1990, De 1959, Burke 1966). Indian thought examined the relation of language to consciousness. All aspects of the world and human experience were thought of as illuminated by language. The Christian scripture also conceives of an absolute beginning of order. For modern natural science as well, there is no longer in the beginning the material object, but form and mathematical symmetry, as intellectual content (Khubchandani 1993b).

Probing into the philosophical foundations of communications in the contemporary world, we need to reflect over the conceptual basis of information society and the issues arising out of information deluge (another commonly-used metaphor is ‘information explosion’), relationship of ‘thought to techniques’ to understand the routines and methods of data processing at human level based on natural somatic functions (i.e. sight, touch, hearing, etc.), and relate them to emerging computing and communication technologies. Innovative researches developing Information Technology (IT) linkages for a dialogue among cross-sections of society can indeed lead us to a deeper understanding and help in gaining a much higher appreciation of physical reality by spending time in virtuality: A French philosopher Gerard Blanc (1985:78), hinting at the limitations of information technology, succinctly observes:

"Through the sensory organs of human body we get the meaning of the whole before those of the parts; through it we first learn to separate the relevant facts from irrelevant ones. Informatics, information systems, do not make these distinctions. .... Information technology gives the illusion that mankind has conquered space and time. But it is only an illusion to remember that the map is not the territory (emphasis added).

COMMUNICATION PARADIGM

Communication being dyadic in nature, communication can create social behavior from individual behavior; behavior which creates togetherness, a community. We must be able to distinguish in what ways personal communication differs from mass communication. What significance it has for the individual, the social group, and for society in general. Reciprocity is
characteristic of social or collective behavior; the harmonization of what one thinks and does to what others will think and do.

The collective structure of human communication is conditioned by:

1. openness, accessibility and approachability, (2) tolerance of the unexpected, as an unquestioned attribute of the interlocutor (i.e. serendipity) and (3) individuality more conductive to 'fuzzy' communication, than to the symmetrical concrete perfection (as in architecture) (cf. Eurich 1985, Khubchandani 1997, 1998c).

In traditional societies individuals can perceive, grasp, register and place in relation to each other. In contemporary societies, the mass media's omnipresent 'perfect' images, allow individuality to degenerate and give way to a conditioned reflex to mass, public rituals and generalizations. We need space to exercise our basic human right to imperfection. Large-scale centralized systems, as visualized in an analogy of 'global village', require rationalization and efficiency, routines and hierarchies -- everything that runs counter to interpersonal contact, to communicative exchanges on an equal footing, to spontaneous discourse.

The all embracing nature of communication may seem abstract and timeless and applicable in all cultures and all social systems. But communication in everyday reality cannot work in isolation -- it is always specific, dependent upon me or you, at a particular time, at a particular place. It is dependent upon the social conditions which determine the limits of what communication has the potential to be. In this vein, mass media can be universal in reach but local in focus.

In this context, a threat is perceived to the quality of variation and pluralism in human communication. The abstract conceptual models pronounced by the affluent society and their distortions and delusions become the official versions of the happenings around the globe, as experienced from the CNNR coverage of the Gulf War in early nineties. This raises a moot question concerning the issue of individual freedom: How to assert the authority of 'personal' as opposed to 'public' or general experience?

The world at large has become more conscious of the issues concerning communication technology, information explosion, and so on. With the spread of technological mediation in everyday communications depriving individuals from one's own primary, personal, practical experience, one loses the self-reflecting processes of checks and balances, threatening the society as a community of communicating individuals. The universal electronic communication, and the erosion of 'distance' in a three-dimensional reality, implies disregard for cultural, social and linguistic particularities, which could ultimately lead to the denial of 'true' community. It has led many communication experts to be concerned with evolving a universal 'culture-faire' communication policy. International forums such as the United Nations, the UNESCO, the European Union have been engaged in formulating a consensus over safeguarding the collective and individual dimensions of linguistic rights in a diverse world. (MacBride 1980).

Concerns of 'haves' and 'have-nots' pose many questions relating to the issues of communication and community on the socio-political level. Accessibility of users i.e. the possessions of a means of communication and the content can lead to exploitation, a form of cultural imperialism of the affluent groups (also nations). How to counter the apparent domination trend of elite-accessibility at the mass level? The question that needs to be projected is how to generate necessary competence in the individual to withstand the pressures of high-power media; in another sense, how to be the real master of the new vistas opening up through the intensive use of technology in communication.

The transcending interests of human kind require developing infrastructures and frameworks for a dialogue among cross-sections of the society so as to ensure appropriate/desirable expansion of new communication technologies. New vistas of IT, with converging
attributes of harmonization and synchronization, will indeed go a long way in generating a sense of binding and security among diverse sections of populations conducive to international cooperation.  

**LIVING TOGETHER**

Most of the regions in South Asia are marked by plurality of cultures and languages in one space (village, town, district, state, nation). India has been a laboratory of living with a plurilingual ethos since the ages. In this milieu an *organic complementation* of different languages has thrived through various processes of synergy and serendipity in interpretation, and diverse strategies of fusion in language use, discussed in the earlier Section.

The Indian concept of *kshetra* 'field, region' views the issues of heritage and rights of different speech communities in a *pluralistic* framework. It covers a wide spectrum of linguistic and cultural *variation* in everyday performance, and helps to foster the feeling of *oneness* among diverse people in the region (Saraswati 1988, Khubchandani 1988). It is markedly different from the Western concept of *region*, defined as 'a cohesive and homogenous area' created by the arbitrary selection of features like language, tradition, religion, etc (cf. Gordon 1978, discussing the issues of structural pluralism). A 'civilization' state like India cherishes the bonds of plural cultural heritage and a common ethos, sharing a deeper sense of collective reality in their verbal repertoire across languages. As viewed by Gandhiji "There is fundamental unity running through all diversity".

A plural society such as India abounds in cases where grassroots plurilingualism among rural folks (mostly illiterate) on the one hand, and the expanding phenomena of code-switching and neutralized lingua francas in metropolitan areas on the other (such as Hindustani, Angrezi), offer a rich field to penetrate into the processes of acquiring speech from varied stimuli, and how a child learns to discriminate speech variation prevailing around him/her to meet with the demands of propriety and also to 'design' these variations for distinct communicative tasks.

In a plurilingual milieu language boundaries remain fuzzy and fluid, and a verbal repertoire gets blended across ‘well-knit’ language systems; speakers in such a situation are hardly aware of operating across language boundaries. This milieu is characterized by a *continuum* between oral tradition and literate culture which is going through phenomenal changes resulting from the pursuits of modernization (cf. Khubchandani 2003). In such set up, one can enumerate, at the surface, many different languages and different scripts. Within one language tradition, one may also notice many variations in everyday speech such as, in accent, inflection, derivation, lexicon, etc. At the same time, Indian masses through sustained interaction and common legacies have, by and large, developed a common way of sharing experience, of thinking. Speakers belonging to different language groups for instance, the way they argue, the way they persuade one another and exchange courtesies, and the way people express their preferences or apathy, are surprisingly common. I call this characteristic in speech, the *communication ethos*, i.e. values through which one communicates — a sort of general orientation to which speech is regulated (Khubchandani 1983, 1997).

Such underlying ethos points to the direction in which a culture is oriented, it aims at, prizes and endorses, and more or less achieves. It provides a strong supportive base in heterogeneous communications. People do not feel serious constraints when communicating through different, but related, language-codes. Plural societies comprise many such situations; such as in market places, banks and other working environs. Proceedings of the Indian Parliament (similar to informal parleys in many Scandinavian forums, and lately in the European Union as well) provide many insights into the management and the observance of *decorum* of plurilingual communications. It is not necessary for them to shift every time from
one language to another, as they endorse and cherish the underlying communication ethos in the midst of diversity.

The Indian experience tells us that a genuine understanding of plural societies will largely be guided by viewing language as a ‘synergic’ network inspiring trust in cross-cultural settings, along with the complementarity of empowering the ‘particular’ (Khubchandani 1993a). On the contemporary scene the media plays a pivotal role as a live force for diversity.

Communication patterns in contemporary India reveal that the trends of globalization through mass media and information technology have intensified this diversity. Television and radio broadcasting networks in India can be considered as the classic examples of being multilingual to the core. One generally anticipates the potential of multilingual audiences and viewers, and consequently various strategies are adopted to cater to their demands in different languages (for a detailed account, cf. Khubchandani 1999, 2001a).

It is to the credit of the All India Radio, with a network of over three hundred transmission stations spread throughout the country, to adopt a liberal policy in giving representation to local languages. It caters to nearly sixty languages for regular news broadcasts and developmental-educational programs; many more ‘vernaculars’ are represented in folkloristic events, particularly when targeting development-oriented programs to rural audiences.8

Television programs are networked on over twenty-five regional channels (and the number is on the increase), where arrangements are made for the simultaneous beaming of select programs in prominent regional languages, through dubbing, flash translations, transliteration, etc. The network is geared to the demands of multilingual viewers: DOORDARSHAN 1 (known as DDI) is primarily targeted to all-India viewers on the National network covering programs in pan-Indian languages, Hindi and English, and the Regional network covering languages of respective regions. Apart from the daily viewing of programs in three or four languages, the National network organizes weekly bulletins in Sanskrit and Urdu, and shows regional cinema in different Indian languages, with or without sub-titles or summary in Hindi, English or the respective regional language. Sometime back a South Asian Regional Conference EMMIT (Extending Multichannel and Multilingual Information Technology) was held in Pune by the C-DAC (Centre for the Development of Advanced Computing) for addressing the issues of language diversity in the region (Khubchandani 1998a).

**UNIVERSAL LINGUISTIC RIGHTS**

Universal Human Rights Movement in the contemporary world order is gathering momentum with an agenda to assure dignity to every human being irrespective of her/his caste, creed, culture, nationality and language. This movement articulates issues concerning the identity, freedom of expression, upholding copyright and privacy in communications, and protecting the heritage of individual groups and nations.

Many state agencies, pressure groups, voluntary organizations and international forums such as the United Nations, UNESCO and others have been actively engaged in the ideological and legal debates concerning the issues ‘perceived’ in the context of the individual per se as well as of the community in general. As a student of language and communication, I have taken particular interest in pursuing the aspirations of different linguistic groups in plural polities and have been exploring the phenomena of language rights with a view to striving for a just and fair order of communication in the strife-torn world (Khubchandani 1981).

Some of the contours of human communication were first expounded in the framework of social dyad (moving away from the concerns of individual rights) by a UNESCO Work Group “Right To Communicate” at the University of Hawai, Honolulu during the seventies when the UNESCO Commission headed by the Nobel Laureate MacBride prepared a report on
the New World Information Order titled *One World Many Voices* (1980). Subsequently as a member of the Barcelona Group working since 1990 on the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights with support from UNESCO, I have been engaged in this enquiry particularly drawing attention to the nature of the communication ethos as prevailing amidst plurilingual and pluricultural societies in the Oriental world. The UNESCO Report (MacBride 1980), discussing the challenges and opportunities of the new modes of communication, very eloquently sums up:

“Communication can be an instrument of power, a revolutionary weapon, a commercial product or a means of education; it can serve the ends of either liberation or of oppression, of either the growth of individual personality or drilling human beings into uniformity”.

Mass media’s most captivating, and very often vulgarizing, impact is felt in the forms of propaganda for socio-political control and of advertising for commercial profiteering. The high-power media could inundate man with points of view, which may well turn out to be the negation of progress, freedom and human dignity. The phenomenon of ‘hypnotic’ control through mass media could expose helpless masses to political and economic pressures of every kind, as pointed out earlier. The imaginative use of sound and image in the audio-visual media can, on the one hand, be an exhilarating experience in elevating the mind, and on the other, it can be devastatingly effective in enslaving it;” The power of the word, particularly the word spoken over and over again, can be devastating. It may be harmless harangue .... or it may be a calculated bit of political indoctrination with a veneer of objectivity” (Menon 1976).

**CONCLUSIONS**

In the contemporary ambiance, it will be essential to develop infrastructures and frameworks for a dialogue among the cross-sections of the society to evolve a code of conduct for ensuring protection to individuals/societies/nations from the manipulative aberrations of ‘man-machine’ communication, on the lines similar to the ethics of enduring fresh air and pure water as bare necessities for a minimum quality of life on the globe.

In a paradigm of fair communication, rising above petty interests and narrow loyalties in a transcendental sense, the prestige and dignity (and not powerlessness) should go with the language networks encouraging complementation (such as lingua francas), and not with those aspiring to promote exploitative and hegemonistic networks of communication (through ‘majority’ pressures and market forces) on the local, national, regional and global scenes. It is necessary to bring a pluralist vigor in making policies for fair play in communication through the flowering of cultural diversity (as environmentalists show respect for nurturing bio-diversity). Formulating a coherent policy of the rights of lesser-used languages, knitting together complex pluralities, can contribute to the quality of communication in a changing society for an integral cultural development of humankind.

**Footnotes**

1. A recent installation of *Trinidadeshwara Shiva* in Trinidad presents a case of shifting sacred space in the context of global Hindu identity.

2. A proposal is under consideration to develop a battery of programs through the multimedia and multilingual networks to empower marginalized transnational diasporas such as Sindhi and Tibetan in the South Asian subcontinent (Khubchandani 2002).

3. David Crystal (2000), a popular writer and broadcaster on language issues, forecasts: “By some counts, only 600 of the 6000 or so languages in the world are ‘safe’ from the threat of extinction. By some reckonings, the world will, by the end of the twenty-first century, be dominated by a small number of major languages”. The rapid endangerment and death of many minority languages across the world is a matter of widespread
concern, not only among linguists and anthropologists but among all interested in the issues of cultural identity in an increasingly globalized culture. This phenomenon, like the large-scale destruction of the environment, is both peculiarly modern and increasingly global.

4. Many physical scientists have also been debating over the methods for building a bridge from ‘being’ to ‘becoming’ (Prigogine 1980).

5. In this context, a recent collaboration initiated between the Multi Lab Asia Project at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Ministry of Information Technology, Govt. of India, opens up the avenues of an intellectual environment leading to demonstrate visions of the future (Negroponte 2000).

6. Khubchandani (1983, 1997), surveys the global scene under the paradigm of ‘Plurality Square’ and highlights the characteristics of organic pluralism reconciling the feeling of oneness in the midst of linguistic and the cultural variation in the region i.e. Indian kshetra.

7. Near-dialectization of Braj and Awadhi literary standards during past one hundred years in favor of Delhi-based Khariboli as the standard for the entire Hindi community in northern India is a case in point.

   Similarly in the European context, a century earlier the Illyrian movement among Croats in the Balkan region, prompted the ‘Kajkavian’-speaking elite to patronize the centrally-located ‘Stokavian’ variety as a literary norm of the Hrvatski (Croatian) language, in order to pursue the unifying identity of the South Slavs; thus voluntarily reducing the Kajkavian variety, which had a rich literary heritage, to a vernacular status. (Khubchandani 2003).

8. As an illustration, the Kohima Radio Station in Nagaland broadcasts cultural programs in almost all Naga languages (numbering 19) on a weekly schedule, plus news bulletins in the lingua franca Nagamese and pan-Indian languages Hindi and English (Sreedhar 1988, Khubchandani 1992).

REFERENCES


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