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A Critical Appraisal of the Communication Gap in the Liberation Struggle

by Sybil James*

Abstract

This paper calls for a critical appraisal of the use of the politically loaded words which are normally associated with liberation struggles. It suggests that these terms are often vaguely defined and mean different things to different publics. Their constant use, therefore, tends to obscure the message and to create a communication gap. The writer subscribes to the view that, contrary to the intention of the message senders, many of the descriptors used present a denigrating image of the groups they set out to help and that both these descriptors as well as the criteria for classifying the groups should be reconsidered. This she thinks, is one of the important assignments which development communicators should undertake.

Résumé

Cet article appelle à une évaluation critique de l'usage des mots à forte charge politique qui sont normalement associés avec les luttes de libération. Il suggère que ces termes sont souvent définis de manière vague et ont des significations différentes selon les publics. Leur usage indifférencié tend donc à obscurcir le message et à créer un problème de communication. L'auteur souscrit au point de vue que, contrairement à l'intention des émetteurs des messages, beaucoup des descripteurs utilisés présentent une image diffamatoire des groupes qu'ils sont censés aider et que ces descripteurs aussi bien que les critères de classification des groupes devraient être revus. A son avis, il s'agit là d'une tâche importante que les communicateurs du développement devraient entreprendre.

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A major impediment to social change and the development process of third world nations is the communication gap between the advocates of change and their target population. One contributing factor to this state of affairs is the fact that scholars and development planners use technical terms and preach abstract concepts which politicians and national leaders translate into cliches with which to feed their citizens. As a result the public invariably misunderstands vital issues or at least understands them partially. Even the implementators of the policies often read a totally different meaning in them than that intended by the designers. The political history of new nations over the past two decades gives ample testimony to this fact.

The 1960s, a decade of great militancy and mass movement towards independence, saw the rise of new nations amid loud sloganeering. Such terms as "Freedom", "self reliance", "self sufficiency", "capitalism", "marxism", "communism", were household words bandied from mouth to mouth and interpreted to fit into each person's expectations or prejudices. And, as each nation raised its national flag amid great rejoicing, many laboured under the impression that independence and therefore liberation had been attained. The experience of the past two decades has no doubt, had a solutary effect on the politically aware as well as the politically naive. Among the lessons learnt is that independence and its correlations, liberation and self-reliance are *not* human conditions to be attained once and for all, but dynamic processes which "require continuous rearrangement of existing commitments and an unimpeded, exchange and mobilization of all goods and services" (Weintraub 1973:22). Each Nation's perception of these processes therefore, and the extent to which it is equipped to cope with the continuous rearrangement of commitments, determine whether or not self reliance is an attainable goal. Development communicators have a duty to define these processes and expand their programmes to include a focus on the language of development communication. More specifically, they must be sensitive to the fact that meaning can be obscured when everyday words take on specialized meanings.

This paper attempts to operationalize the concepts "liberation" and "self reliance" and raises the question who should be liberated and from what. In the light of the answers suggested, it discusses the role of the development communicator in translating socio-political concepts into task related behaviours with which the laymen can identify; and which can enhance his personal qualities or qualities of "being" and his social skills or skills of "doing."

The Concept of Liberation and the Language of the Struggle

The word "liberation" like the word "development" has political overtones, hence its definition is determined by the political leanings of the definer. For developing countries of the third world it implies a greater opportunity to determine their own future, to achieve more justice in the use of their human and natural resources and simply to have a fuller life for their citizens (Fore 1985: 19). It is not an end in itself but "one of the stages to a non-exploitative society." (Mendele 1961).

History is replete with examples of nations and peoples fighting for liberation. These battles have been fought on battlefields and in parliaments; underground and in public squares; through passive resistance and open rebellion; with the pen and with the sword; and in every case the strategies, channels and language of communication have been determined by the specific circumstance. In other words one is always faced with the question, liberation from what?

Liberation struggles in the third world began with the fight against *colonialism*, that is, the system in which a nation's economic, political and social policies were dictated by its colonisers. These "colonies" had been acquired in the 15th and 16th centuries by European nationals who captured them in the name of their sovereigns - emperors, kings, queens - exploited their resources, enriched themselves, expanded the territorial boundaries of the sovereign countries which in turn gained considerable wealth and power. *Imperialism* therefore which is a correlate of *colonialism* and which is derived from the word emperor, refers to the extending of one country's political, economic and military authority over another. These circumstances have therefore led to the word "exploitation" being associated with the liberation struggle.

Another group of words, "capitalism", "communism", "marxism", and "socialism", have been introduced by political thinkers who set out to interpret the conflict within an ideological framework. Each of these terms describes a specific economic system. A full discussion of each of these is outside the scope of this paper but a simple dictionary definition will suffice to make this discussion meaningful.

Whereas *capitalism* advocates competition and a profit-oriented economic system, *communism* advocates collective ownership of the production, distribution and supply system by the whole of a "classless" society, and the wealth shared each according to his need and each yielding according to his ability. *Marxism* is the

political and economic system advocated by Marx and Engels and its teaching informs the philosophy of the communist system. It sees capitalism in terms of the exploitation of the *proletariat* by the *bourgeoisie*.

Like communism and marxism, *socialism* also advocates collective ownership of means of production and control of distribution. It is based on the belief that all, while contributing to the good of the community, are equally entitled to the care and protection which the community can provide. This theory assumes different forms according to the relative stress laid on its social, economic and political corollaries. While Marxist socialism stresses economic issues, christian socialism stresses social issues and democratic socialism stresses political aspects accepting compromise in the economic field between state and private enterprise. All forms of socialism are opposed to capitalism and seek equality of opportunity.

In the contemporary political scene, in particular in the liberation struggles, these are highly emotive words. They are used as terms of abuse against political opponents; they punctuate the diatribes that incite mass rallies; they cover the flamboyant with the cloak of radicalism; they impress the gullible and raise false hopes in the naive.

The second major political war of liberation in the Third World has been the struggle against apartheid, a political system built on social prejudice and the total subjugation of one sector of the society by another. It is a system that keeps a majority group socially, culturally and physically oppressed. The words "oppressor and oppression" have therefore been legitimately identified with this struggle. As with the anti-colonialism struggle discussed earlier, the motivation is clear and the goals of liberation spelled out. They include:

- the destruction of the structures of separatism (Tambo).
- the building of a society where race and colour are of no consequence, where people serve according to their abilities and skills.
- the destruction of the white racist regime.
- the abolition of national, cultural and religious privileges of whites over blacks.

In these struggles the goals have been clear and the vocabulary unambiguous. But there are many other types of liberation battles to be fought on the road to self reliance. The nature of these is not as

clear cut and the objectives are not as easy to pursue; since the problems are to a large extent, internally generated. The forces that enslave operate both at the national level and at the group and individual levels.

At the national level, among the many factors from which Third World countries need to be liberated are the following:-

- the patron - client relationship with the developed countries (Guioguo, 1984). The dependency exists at the economic, political and cultural levels and as such threatens the existence and autonomy even of our communication network.
- the paramountcy of foreign capital which makes it impossible for capital generated within a given country to accumulate there and work towards the development of a self-sufficient economy (Jayaweera, 1984: 8).
- cultural domination which contributes to the destruction and disruption of indigenous values, behaviour and technology.

At the individual and group level, there is need for liberation from:-

- unscrupulous politicians and national policies.
- the groups within the society that monopolise the sources of production and distribution and hoard the supplies.
- political charlatans who confuse issues with their high sounding lofty language, trample on the people's intelligence, and on their human and civil rights.
- selfishness, greed and the desire to amass wealth at any cost.
- ignorance, poverty and superstition.

The foregoing analysis highlights the need to shift the liberation battle to the home front once political power has been wrested from those who wielded it externally. This to my mind, is the second stage in the liberation struggle - a stage which many Third World Countries seem to be short circuiting. Development communication working at this level must begin with the policy makers and the national planners. Once these fonctionnaires are committed to the task of emancipating themselves morally and spiritually they will be better equipped to combat the multifarious problems associated with economic emancipation. It seems to me, therefore, that a change of direction and objectives will go a long

way in helping the common man to put the struggle for self sufficiency into its proper perspective. When the pendulum eventually swings, as it must, and it is his turn to join in the struggle for his own liberation from ignorance, poverty and internal oppressors, he can understand and appreciate the part he is called upon to play. For, as one researcher aptly put it, the interpretation of signs and symbols lies within the person not in the symbols themselves.

National self sufficiency or self reliance is the next stage. This should involve all the people - - - the urban poor and the urban rich; the rural poor and the rural rich; the various groups that have special needs and special contributions to make; those engaged in farming and agriculture; those concerned with sweeping the streets and environmental sanitation; women as a group - the market women and the food sellers; mine workers, truck, train and taxi drivers. Each of these groups with its own problems and needs can be identified. All these must be involved in the liberation struggle and while being taught to fight for their rights they must also be schooled about their commitments to their duties since these two (rights and duties) always go hand in hand.

The familiar cliches such as the masses, the suffering poor, the oppressed people in the rural areas, the illiterate masses should be avoided. They do little more than present a picture of an amorphous group with no voice or identity of its own, waiting patiently for some social worker, development communicator, missionary or benevolent dictator to deliver them from their woes. This image while serving the purpose of the funding agencies and those anxious to improve the lot of the downtrodden, does not help the process towards self sufficiency. I share the view of David Briddell (1985, p. 20) that poverty, imbalance of resources, and oppression can be documented and presented in such a way that there is no loss of dignity or misrepresentation in the process. In fact, the habit of sticking to the old hackneyed rhetoric makes it difficult to see when the "suffering poor" moves on to become the "struggling poor" and later rises to be the "liberated poor".

Another danger in this persistent use of these blanket terms is that the need to diversify efforts at development education is lost sight of. For example, most of the programmes for the "oppressed people in the rural areas" seem to focus on agricultural and farming or health and environmental programmes. No one can deny that agriculture is vital to the life and sustenance of the nation and is a revenue earner but are all rural folk farmers? Don't the others need education and to improve their means of

livelihood? Are development planners only concerned with what will increase the national coffers? Shouldn't they be just as concerned with the improvement of individuals within the various sectors?

A look at the various pressure groups that emerge in society should give us a clue. This is 'feedback' enough. Development communicators should take their cue from these and work out a fresh and more viable strategy for classifying citizens when they plan their development programmes.

What do we mean by self-reliance?

The term self-reliance has political, economic, social and cultural implications.

White (1982, p. 25) focusing on the political implications notes that self-reliance implies:-

- A controlled selectivity in the importation of scientific information and cultural products.
- Autonomy in the making of all national decisions.
- A high level of discriminability with what must be considered essential imports.
- Ability of leadership to win the confidence and the mandate of the nation in its search for national identity and an alternative form of government.

The socio-economic indicators of self reliance are:-

- A capacity of the people to control their environment, accompanied by a wider distribution of benefits resulting from such control (Inyatullah 1974: p. 4).
- Ability of the majority of the people to take charge of their own lives and cope with the ongoing societal changes.
- Literate populace willing to utilise the best available means of production.
- The ability to provide food and shelter for all.
- Willingness and the ability of the inhabitants to participate in the governance of the nation.

Cultural indicators include:-

- A national appreciation and understanding of traditional values and norms.

Development communicators need to examine these basic indicators of self reliance, and with the assistance of the various pressure groups who constantly articulate their needs, utilise the most appropriate channels to achieve their goals. They should use the language with which the groups they set out to help can identify. These groups spring up naturally because their members share common interests and have common problems. Their symbols and terms of identification are self imposed, not inflicted on them by external agencies.

When this approach is adopted and leaders demonstrate the level of commitment expected of them, self reliance will be an attainable goal.

In summary, therefore, self reliance is the end product of liberation. But since liberation is an on-going process, the indicators of self-reliance are constantly changing. Development communicators should be sensitive to these changes, and should find in the various pressure groups emerging at all strata of the society a forum through which to reach their targets.

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