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Mass Communication Education in Sri Lanka: Balancing the East and the West

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Abstract: Most of the Communication theories are euro-centric and have Anglo-American bias. There has also been a debate on de-westernizing of communication theories. Like any other Asian countries, Sri Lankan communication education is highly western centric since higher education started in the 70's. However, there have been some ad-hoc efforts, but, scholars in Sri Lanka are highly motivated to follow the euro-centric theories, methods and concepts in communication rather than looking for some authentic communication theories or models from Asia. They are also following euro-centric guidelines for their research work in order to get their research work accepted to be published in index journals by well known publishers based in the West. However, in the past two decades, as mass communication departments and schools across Asia have growth, there has been an increase debate about de-westernizing communication theory, at least that taught in Asian institutions. However, we cannot totally reject western born theories and concepts that are totally or to some extent far from representing Asian ground. It is better to think how both the Eastern and Western theories could be hybrid or balancing rather than de-westernizing communication theories and concepts. To do so we have to free from the colonial mindset.

Introduction

The Western world acquire the credit for inventing of the social sciences .They are knowingly or unknowingly, neglected or omission thousands of years of Eastern intellectual streams and /or traditions.

Social sciences, including communication discipline has been developed are highly western centric. *“Conventional academic views of communication have been skewed by Western frames of reference. They have not represented a sample of all possible conceptual positions from which the knowledge of communication be adequately constructed”* (Miike, 2002:1).

Most of the research in communication studies shows a Western bias (also known as Anglo-American bias) .However, some of scholars do not agree on the view of Western or Anglo-American bias on

communication theories. Sunanda Mahendra(2019) argues that *“I have not found Anglo-American bias as such in my teachings. One has to perceive what de-westernization means in the proper sense of the term, de-westernization. If the whole world is globalized, what does it mean by the term and concept de-westernization? I would like to take the challenge in the correct perspective and go ahead in my teaching career.*

However it is important to dig and unearth Eastern knowledge of treasuries to understand and address contemporary issues not only for Asia but also, generally, to the world. There would not be an easy way to achieve this goal though.

We can see discussions and debates on imperialism on various aspects. There is also a discussion on the phenomena of intellectual imperialism in areas like economics, politics and culture. Syed Hussein Alatas(2000:23-45), reveals six traits of intellectual imperialism, as follows;

- (1)*Exploitation: there is exploitation and control by the subjecting power over the people dominated .*
- (2) *There is a form of tutelage. In this regard the people dominated are consider a kind of ward within a tutelage system.*
- (3)*Conformity: the subjecting dominated power expects the dominated people to conform to certain aspect of life , its organization and its rules.*
- (4)*The dominated people will play a secondary role in the set up.*
- (5)*The existence of intellectual rationalization, which is an attempt to explain imperialism as a necessary stage in human process and that the business of the imperialist power is to civilized the people under subjection.*
- (6)*Imperialist rules: the subjugated country is very often run by inferior talents'.*

There is a real need to expand the field by studying communication through various non-Western viewpoints (Dissanayake, 2003:18). *'It is here that Asian approaches to communication become extremely important. Asian countries like China, India, Japan, Korea and so on have produced rich and complex civilizations that have grown over the centuries. No civilization is possible without a vigorous system of communication. Hence, it is of the utmost importance that we seek to explore Asian theories, concepts, perspectives and presuppositions of communication'*. The theories which are invented in the western world, are developed or devised in an environment, that lacks representation of cultural, political, religious, ideological and philosophical background from the Eastern world. Asian

human sciences are predominately based on Buddhist, Hindu, Confucius and Daoist philosophical teachings and ideas. We have not yet adequately associated mass communication with these philosophies (Senarath & Seneviratne, 2018). The field of communication needs revision with complementary research incorporating the Eastern philosophical perspective (Gunaratne, 2015; Senarath & Seneviratne, 2018; Seneviratne, 2018).

2. Theories as East and West?

Some scholars do not agree that there is a divide between communication theories as East and West. In this regards they generalized theories which has already been invented in one place as being applicable in general to rest of the world. But the question, which many of hem fail to acknowledge is - is it practical in social sciences to generalized one theory invented in one place to the other places which consists differences in time and space, as well as different religious, cultural, political, economical, and philosophical backgrounds/traditions of lifestyles?

Most of the contemporary media theories were first developed in Europe late 19th and early 20th century and later further developed and amplified in the United States (Seneviratne, 2018). These theories are invented based on their own cultural contexts and circumstances of time and place and also difficult to treat as universal(Seneviratne,2018).Dennis McQuail(2000:6) explain this situation, *'it is hard to ignore the fact that most media theorizing has been done by 'Western' scholars, living in and observing the media of their own countries and inevitably influenced by their own familiar social cultural context and its typical values'*.To address Asian issues authentically, Asian communication scholarship is highly important. Miike (2002) tentatively define Asia centric communication scholarship as *“a theoretical system or a school of thought in communication whose concepts, postulates, and resources are rooted in, or derived from, the cumulative wisdom of diverse Asian cultural traditions”*. Accordingly, there are three important implications of this definition for theorizing culture and communication from Asia centric perspectives.

First, Asia centric communication scholarship does not simply refer to a body of knowledge, either theoretical or empirical, about Asian cultural systems of communication

(Miike, 2002:2-3). Second, Asia centric communication scholarship embraces the diversity of Asia and does not purport to reinforce a monolithic concept of Asia (Miike 2002:3). Third, Asia centric communication scholarship endeavors to complement, rather than to reject, U.S. Eurocentric communication scholarship (Miike, 2002:4).

Wimal Dissanayake (2003:19-20) identify four areas that could be productively explored in coming up with Asian approaches to communication.

'The first is the investigation into classical texts (philosophical nature), which would contain valuable concepts of communication.... A second area for exploration is the vast storehouse of concepts that could be recuperated from classical traditions as well as current cultural practices. ... Third, the whole arena of rituals and performances (folk-plays, folk-dances, ballads, rituals, and ceremonies) could provide us with a valuable cultural space in which to examine traditional concepts of communication and communication practices. Fourth, it is important that we pay close attention to the day-to-day communication behaviors and see how they have been understood and discursively enflamed by traditional cultures. This is not a simple undertaking as it might appear on the surface. It is useful to remind ourselves that theory is not detached from practice, but is a critical reflection of it.

Kalinga Senaviratne (2018:11-12) clearly shows that major limitation or problem of developing Asian communication theories.

“One major impediment may be to change the mindset of Asian communication researchers who look up to Western researchers and institutions for guidance and recognition. Changing mindsets does not imply outright rejection of western theories, but examine these critically with a good understanding of your own socio-cultural context and its application to such circumstances”.

“The age of globalization and ranking system for both journals and mass communication programs has been extensively skewed towards North America in particular, and this does

not provide scholars the freedom and the encouragement to challenge the Western 'norms' because their promotions and recognition depends on fitting into the western norms to get their papers published in so-called "first-tier" journals. If Asian scholars are to de-westernize communication theory they will also have to challenge this ranking system and proceed to set up one of their own as well"(Senaviratne, Sinthuphan & Phokaew, 2016).

3. Communication education and Search for Asian communication theories and concepts in Sri Lanka

Wimal Dissanayake's (1998) book titled "Asian communication Theory" geared to Asian philosophical thinking and traditions of communication are a good guide to researchers. In-order to the development of Asian based communication education, in 2016-2017, at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand, a group of scholars including Kalinga Seneviratne took the lead in embarking on a project to develop curriculum for journalism training in Asia using philosophical concepts from Asia. The project was known as "Mindful Communication for ASIAN Integration. This project was funded by the International Program for the Development of Communication (IPDC) of UNESCO. They developed a set of curriculum to train Asian journalists and published a book (by SAGE) that originated from this project titled "*Mindful Communication for Sustainable Development: Perspectives from Asia*"(Seneviratne, 2018). This book is an attempt in redefining development communication with a variety of perspectives from across Asia..However, there is a need to conducting authentic research and theory construction, which is still lacking,

The study of mass communication has spread rapidly across the world in the past three decades alone with the setting up of training institutions. The expansion has been quite rapid across Asia since mid-1990s. *'But most of the textbooks used in Asian mass communication programs are mainly written by American scholars, and then Asian scholars uncritically pass this knowledge and perspectives to their students, irrespective of whether it is relevant or not. Some see as necessary in order to achieve higher international rankings for their universities/programs. Thus, inevitably, young Asians are being indoctrinated with the idea that anything worthwhile learning about mass communication, freedom, and justice comes from the West* (Seneviratne, 2018:8).

However, It is important to mention here that, to theorize about Asia and theorize from Asian perspective are not to be considered as the same(Miike, 2003).

“One can address and appraise Asian people and phenomena without reference to Asian languages, religions/philosophies, and histories. Such an intellectual orientation is, however, fundamentally unsound if one wishes to see the Asian world through Asian eyes because Asians think and speak in Asian languages, believe in Asian religions/philosophies, and struggle to live in Asian historical experiences. In order to truly understand and appreciate Asian thought and action, therefore, one must successfully explore and examine the cultural agency of Asians in the linguistic, religious/philosophical, and historical contexts of Asia. To theorize from the vantage point of Asians as centered is thus to theorize from Asian everyday languages, religious-philosophical traditions, and historical experiences as vital resources”. (Miike, 2003:39-40).

According to Yoshitaka Miike(2003),three content dimensions are essential in search of the Asia-centric knowledge of human communication. They are: *“(1) concepts in Asian everyday languages; (2) principles from Asian religious-philosophical traditions; and (3) struggles in Asian historical experiences”* (Miike, 2003:46).

“First, Asia centric communication theorists should explore and establish Asian concepts in Asian everyday languages in order to reconsider and re-conceptualize the nature of human communication' ...Second, Asia centric communication thinkers should draw out fundamental principles of human interaction from Asian religious-philosophical traditions and propose new theoretical models of communication.... Third, Asia centric communication historians should pay due attention to struggles in Asian historical experiences in their attempts to enrich the theoretical underpinnings of human communication problems, ethics, and competence” (Miike, 2003:46-49).

'While communication scholars both in Western countries and in Asia make use of Western models and

paradigms of communication, very little effort is made, except by a handful of scholars, to understand communication from an Asian perspective. This is primarily because there is a shortage in academic circulation any Asian theories and models that communication teachers and students can readily use. Moreover, communication scholars in Asia have been, by and large, trained in the West and make use of books and journals and research papers published under a Western scholarly dispensation. If communication is to become a more meaningful mode of inquiry in Asia, and indeed in the rest of the world, it has to connect with indigenous intellectual roots, situated knowledges and local modes of thinking. Hence the need to move along the path of constructing Asian approaches, concepts, theories and models of communication is most urgent'(Dissanayake,2003:18).

Wang and Shen (2000) note that even though there is a growing community of Asian communication scholars and journals dedicated to the study of communication in Asia. Asian communication researchers are yet to accomplish its mission to come up with Asian communication theories. According to Wang and Shen (2000:15):

“Until today there have been few communication theories that can be labeled undoubtedly 'Asian'. This is serious because theories have a specific role to play in scientific research: they are not just demonstration of original thinking, but determine the direction and the structure of inquiry. Every time 'Western' theories were shown to be inadequate in explaining changes in Asia, and every time Asian values and traditions were mentioned to suggest theoretical development, those in the Asian academic community are confronted with the question “where is 'Asian' communication theory? The inability to come up with a satisfactory answer indicates 'mission unaccomplished ', thus a lack of substantial contribution to the field of communication of communication from the part of the Asian researcher”.

Though this observation was done over a decade ago, nothing much has changed (Seneviratne, Sinthupan& Phokaew, 2016).

If we are looking for more meaningful mode of inquiry in Asia and rest of the world, we need to penetrate into indigenous intellectual tools (Dissanayake, 2003; Gunaratne, 2010; Seneviratne, 2018) including philosophical base. Hence, the need to move along the path of constructing Asian approaches

concepts, theories and models of communication (Dissanayake, 2003).

Sri Lankan Media Education

Mass communication education was introduced to Sri Lanka in the 1960's in junior universities. These junior universities are similar to technical colleges. Then, in 1973, the Department of Mass Communication was established at the University of Kelaniya. Since then, education programs on Mass Communication, Journalism, Mass Media and related courses have been offered by universities, government and semi-government institutions and privately owned institutions. Aforesaid universities and institutes offer certificates, diplomas, undergraduate and postgraduate programs and those courses have a huge demand. Some of government universities, including University of Kelaniya and Jayawardanapura also offer Mass Communication as a subject of their distance (external) undergraduate program. Meanwhile, 'Communication and Media studies' is a subject of General Certificate of Ordinary Level (GCE-OL) and Advanced Level General Certificate of Advanced Level (GCE-AL) school curriculum.

In Sri Lanka, not only higher education but also school education is highly western centric. Sri Lankan education system is designed to meet the standard of western education system and far behind in incorporating their traditional and philosophical knowledge to their western based standards. In Sri Lanka, still not adequate research is done on communication and depend on offshore, especially western based research reports.

In the university systems they are encourage to follow the western research standards and the reports following index journals are highly evaluated and consider for the marking when they apply for the promotions. Not only that, the universities are encouraging their academics to publish their articles in indexed journals. However , finding enough funds for researches are quite difficult not only within the university system but also from the outside sources such as government and privately owned funding agencies.

In Sri Lanka communication and media research should be empowered (Dissanayake, 2018). It can be common trend that remarkable portion of academics in the university system do their researches as a mandatory requirement of confirmation of their post and then they drop their interest to continue

doing their researches. Most of the submitted abstracts of their researches for the conferences merely to collect marks for their promotions and/or to get salary allowance, but mostly they do not complete and publish the full paper. These most of the abstract are submitted can be seen by done without a scientific study. Meanwhile, sometimes, evaluation/review of scholarly works including research works can also be questionable. Many intellectuals suspect their works evaluate/review on a personal ground rather than scholarship (Gunaratne, 2010).

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The Department of Mass Media, Sri Palee Campus has introduced master degree program titled “Master in Media Research and its curriculum is focused on westernized theories and concepts.

Professor Sunanda Mahendra (2019) one of the leading scholars who introduced mass communication as a subject to University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka in 1973 says;

I sincerely feel that Mass Communication subject is still taught in the pattern as taught in 1970s and 1980s. Things have changed. We need to revise our conventional syllabus in keeping abreast with new ‘knowledge strengths’ such as ‘globalization’, ‘convergence’ and ‘demassification’ giving sufficient food for thought. One of the main barriers as I see it is the primary acceptance of the subject itself. Those who become qualified at the university level of education have not proved themselves as either researchers in the subject or as creative communicators in the subject via the media channel as found in the country. The teachers as well as the students tend to be in a beaten track. The political ideology on the issue is dismal and negative. I think in order to overcome these barriers one has to be acquainted with the teachings as laid down in Orientalism. As such, mere teachings of cross cultural communication per se will not be justifiable. Instead, one has to transcend those barriers and ascend the oriental knowledge streams in a better scientific outlook. We need to, in the first instance, reconsider our stance in the subject area as regards: 1.Content; 2.Treatment or expression. The research topics have to be updated from its traditional patterns to selection of a better form for teaching. The subject pertaining to Sri Lankan context has to be updated.

Dr S.Raguram, Head of the Department Media Studies , University of Jaffna expresses his

view on balancing of East and West theories of Communication as follows ;

“While we give over prominence to western theories at present condition we should revisit to our own models particularly relevant to local culture and try to put forward them for academic studies and research orientations. It’s a high time to explore the richness of traditional communication models and theorize them for research and debates and make them to reach international communication research platforms. But, one thing we should keep in our mind that the total de-westernization in the arena of communication theories is not possible and it cannot be accepted in academic perspective. Even though the western concepts and models are largely not fit with local context, we can have them for comparative analysis and get to understand the development of thoughts in outside. Hence, the issue is how to manage the influence of Western communication theories and keep our own identities in the flow of westernization in a balanced ways and, it should take into consideration rationally not emotionally.”

Conclusion

It is high time for Asia-centric communication specialists to call this taken for-granted Eurocentric methodological approach into question. *‘Although external validity is of great value in other disciplines for legitimate reasons, Asia centrists should rethink to what extent it is necessary and appropriate for the study of human communication—the ever-changing and dynamic process of human interaction in context’*(Miike,2003:53-54). It is important for Asian scholars to critical analyze and assess when applying western based communication theories in Asia.

Seneviratne(2018) shows that there are two principles based on Asian traditional thinking that can be considered as Asian theory of mass media function that could lead to an alternative to Anglo-American perspective. In this regard, that is taking into account the idea that things are impermanent and subject to change (Seneviratne, 2018). *Accordingly, being mindful of this change and been able to understand, acknowledge and analyze it to assist people and society to adjust to these changes* (Seneviratne, 2018:15). Western societies value individualistic and are highly concern with personal freedom while Asian cultures are value collectivistic and highly value the harmony of the society. In this regard, *‘second, are which naturally leads from the first, is that social harmony is paramount and journalism*

should pay a more positive role rather than an adversarial role'(Seneviratne, 2018:15).

Asian communication syllabuses should be revised and need more theoretical and conceptual inputs based on Asian philosophy. However, this does not mean that we should embark on a project to de-westernize communication theories and concepts, rather we should supplement and where needed supersede these theories with our own. Additionally, we need to take a fresh look at syllabuses of high schools. With international schools being the flavor of the month on some countries, such as Sri Lanka, young people are graduating from schools without much knowledge of their history and cultural heritage. Without a strong Asian cultural studies education at secondary schools level, developing Asian communication theories at tertiary level will be a harder task (Senarath&Seneviratne, 2018:60).

When we are looking for the invention and the development of Asian based communication theories and concepts first, we need to be ready for the de-colonized our mindset. Then, need digging deep toward of our Asian philosophical roots in order to comprehensively understand and address issues ,questions and problems of Communication in Asia.

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