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Abstract: This short but critical essay sets out to explore answers as to why the mass communication departments in Bangladesh still rely heavily on the western communication approaches, and prefer western textbooks and resources to Asian publications.

A postgraduate diploma in journalism was introduced at the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh¹ in 1962. It was also the commencement of journalism and communication education at tertiary level in this part of South Asia², which later turned into fully-fledged undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in Mass Communication and Journalism. Mass communication courses that were taught in the early phases (1960s -1980s) reflect a key aspect of the Modernization Theory, that is, mass communication for national development.. It focused considerably on the western communication theories; and concepts of modernization and approaches to development communication referring to the works of the American authors including Wilbur Schramm (1965), Daniel Lerner (1958) and Everett Rogers (1962, 1973, 1976)³.

In the 1990s, the liberalization of communications, market imperatives, as well as incorporation of critical thoughts in media studies propelled shifts in the mass communication curricula, but that did not cause any noticeable change in the almost exclusive use of western resources. Today, at least ten public universities and nine privately-funded universities in Bangladesh offer degree programmes in media, communications and journalism. With an exception of the courses in journalism, film studies, and history and culture that include local and regionally produced textbooks, key mass communication courses include Euro-American literatures, theories and resources. This essay attempts to answer as to why even today the media and communication

¹ Please note that Dhaka was then provincial capital of then East Pakistan. Bangladesh got independence on 16 December 1971.

² Department of Journalism was established at the University of Dhaka in 1962 according to the recommendations of the Press Commission (1958) headed by Justice H. B. Tayabjee. For an early account of the department and its academic programmes, see Nuruddin, Q.A.I.M. (1984).

³ Among other references and textbooks, *Communication and Change in the Developing Countries* (Lerner & Schramm, 1967), *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication* (Schramm, 1954), *The Process of Communication* (Berlo, 1960) and *The Effects of Mass Media* (Klapper, 1960) were highly recommended. This also resembles the commonly used mass communication books in the ASEAN region, as documented by Dissanayake (1993). For a comprehensive discussion, see The Need for Asian Approaches. In *Communication Theory: The Asian perspective* (Dissanayake, 1993).

departments in Bangladesh are heavily dependent on the western communication approaches, and prefer western textbooks and resources to Asian publications⁴.

Western bias as historical practice

Professor Nuruddin, a former faculty who was with the Department of Journalism (and later Department of Mass Communication) at the University of Dhaka in its formative stages, writes about the purpose of establishing a journalism department and the process of designing the courses:

In the 1950s few editors and personnel from news agencies expressed their willingness to become institutionally trained journalists. With a view to formulating a profession-oriented curriculum, editors of the national dailies, news agencies, different media organisations and senior faculty members from other departments were consulted.
(Nuruddin, 1984: 9)

He did not mention of any Euro-American or western (as the terms often used synonymously) influence in the making of a curriculum to teach mass communication in an Asian context. However, American influence could be traced around the contemporary decades not only on curriculum development, and in setting research agendas, but also in terms of financial and technical assistance to academic infrastructures, as well as to help to establish new disciplines in social sciences and applied sciences. In India, for example “US was the key source for concepts and theories related to communication research during the early years of communication research ... and played a role in the founding of key institutions” (Thomas, 2016:436).

The origin of the mass communication curricula, and the patterns of designing the courses at the universities these days suggest that the bias towards the western resources vis-à-vis textbooks is a continuity of the historical inclination, roots of which according to McQuail, “lie deeply embedded in Western social science where they are mixed with ideas about the superiority of Western ... society” (2000:1).

Reliance on the western scholarship

The historical trend of considering West as a source of ‘superior’ knowledge has eventually created dependency on the western scholarship. In spite of a remarkable media development, high economic growth and advanced technological skill, Asian communication scholarships have not yet reached the level of its Anglo-American counterparts in terms of regional and global use and acceptance. On the tendency and preference to study in the western countries for higher degrees and diplomas, a faculty who teaches public relations at University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh observes:

⁴ In order to substantiate my observations and arguments, I have consulted and interviewed a number of senior, mid-level and early-career academics in mass communication teaching, as well as media educators and trainers from state-run and nongovernmental communications organisations.

Many influential academics had their higher education (in communications) in the western universities – mostly in the UK, USA and Canada. Many aspirants now prefer Australian and continental European universities because of the reputation. I don't think this is a matter of mindset only, but credibility and acceptance, market value and employment opportunities are attached to this⁵.

Early career academics also opt for diplomas and training from Germany, Netherlands, Denmark and Norway, for example. Media educators in the NGO sector too prefer to receive training from the western institutions. Although generally they are not in the business of making academic syllabuses, individually many of them with their western orientation teach in public and private universities and media institutes. The situation leads to the pertinent issues - whether it is predominantly our historical leaning towards western mass communication resources, or if it is also a matter of access to and availability of relevant textbooks and resources.

Access to Asian resources

Unavailability of Asian textbooks and scholarly publications on media and communication is a reason for the scarce use of the academic resources published (or used to be) by the Asian universities, research bodies and media organisations, like Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC). Very few Bangladeshi institutional subscribers and the individuals (teaching staffs) have access to the Asian journals, such as the *Asian Journal of Communication* and *Media Asia*, but the university libraries in general do not subscribe to such journals and periodical that focuses on Asian media and communication researches. On getting access to Asian books and periodicals, a faculty who teaches international communication at the university of Dhaka says:

The level of supply of AMIC books to Bangladesh was always poor. We find their publications in our libraries sporadically. One can find few books (published by AMIC) commonly available in the media and communication departments. Except for the journal articles (as e-resources), we have limited access to the printed books written by the Asian authors⁶.

Local book suppliers hardly recommend Asian publications in media and communications, although they import Indian books, which are mostly on journalism, and history of publication and broadcasting in the Indian sub-continent. Most of the communication faculties are of the view that before judging the standard or scholarly account of the works by Asian authors, first it is important to ensure that there is a good supply of the resources.

Relevance of Asian resources

Dominant western communication resources are developed and written generally in the context of North America and Western Europe, and they reflect the western media experience. However, most of the communication faculties I talked with for the purpose of this essay think that theoretically, western resources, particularly the textbooks have universal relevance. It then

⁵ Ashfara Haque's interview with the author in September 2019, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

⁶ A S M Asad's interview with the author in October 2019, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

becomes a matter of comparative judgement whether the research findings and analyses put forward by the Asian scholars amply reflect common Asian experiences and agendas; and how many of them are designed to be used as textbooks in teaching and learning communications across Asia? A mass faculty in mass communication at the University of Dhaka thinks:

There are scholarly publications by Asian communication scholars, but a small number of them are textbooks. Again they do not propose any Asian perspective. The contents are the same as in the western textbooks. In order for us to consider any communication textbook, we are required to check its credibility and newness⁷.

As I have mentioned earlier, selected AMIC and Indian books are included in the reading lists of few courses including the non-media courses. Some of the AMIC publications that could be valuable resource (textbook) for Asian mass communication courses would be ‘Rethinking Development Communication’ (Jayaweera & Amunugama eds, 1987), ‘Communication Theory: Asian Perspective’ (Dissanayake, 1988), ‘Media’s Challenge: Asian Tsunami and Beyond’ (Seneviratne ed, 2007) and the Asian Communication Handbook (published in different years).

Books written in Bangla by the Bangladeshi authors are also included in some syllabuses. Some manuals and journalism resources prepared in the context of Bangladesh, produced by media development NGOs have been useful in teaching journalism courses. References and case studies from the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, India and Nepal, for instance are used in the courses like communication and development, media advocacy, development journalism; and environmental communication. Still I should note that there is a lack of enthusiasm to revisit the western bias in the syllabuses; and to redesign the courses in line with the development of Asian media, technologies, and communication approaches and practices.

Conclusion: making Asian resources useful

In the current practice, communication degree programmes in Bangladesh is heavily dependent on western resources which usually refer to the Euro-American media structures and theories. I have argued in this essay that the reasons for adopting the western approaches to mass communication curriculum is multifaceted. It is a continuation of a historical dependency on western academic sources and scholarships along with at least two other evolving factors – access to and usefulness of Asian communication resources. Despite possessing the technological skills, funds and necessary resources, the Asian academia, government and private research bodies and think tanks have not been able to outweigh the western bias in media and communication education, neither has there been any concerted initiative to distribute their communication resources across Asia and beyond.

It has been around thirty years since AMIC published *Dissanayake’s Communication Theory: The Asian Perspective* in order to propose Asian approaches to communication theories. We have

⁷ Afroza Bulbul’s comment in interview with the author in October 2019, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

not found another similar forward looking initiatives to produce quality textbooks, construct communication theories from Asian perspectives, and documenting the media and communications experiences which could be relevant to both students and teachers in most of the continent. More so, very few Asian communication researchers have attempted to apply these Asian Communication theories to their research work in Asia. Unless collective and institutional actions are taken, it is not possible for the mass communication departments and educators alone to break away from the western bias, and to Asianize the media approaches and way of teaching communications.

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