

EDITORIAL

Towards reconciliation of Eastern and Western philosophy: A special reference to communication theory

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ABSTRACT

The paper approaches the communication discipline as a field of comparative study through which better understanding of the Eastern and Western philosophies can be promoted. First it presents an overview of the West-versus-others paradigm in communication theory followed by an appraisal to recent theorizations contributing for moving the communication discipline from such dichotomy. It argues that indigenous theorization of communication provides more opportunities for comparative studies thereby paving way for reconciliation between different perspectives.

Key words: Communication theory, Eastern and Western philosophy, Indigenous theorization, Reconciliation.

The West-versus-others paradigm in communication theory

The field of communication theory has been considered being dominated by Western philosophy since its institutionalization in the academia, and the endeavors to critique and enrich the field from Eastern/Asian philosophical perspectives started decades ago (for instance: Dissanayake, 1981, 1986, 1988; Kincaid, 1987; Tewari, 1992; Yadava, 1998). This highlights the inherently problematic position of communication discipline in the countries like Nepal and India. In fact, as a discipline of knowledge or as an academic field of study, communication has been subjected to the conflict of indigenous versus exogenous approaches in many non-Western countries.

On the one hand, these countries indigenously inherit the concept of communication and have been practicing it since time-immemorial. And, as communication discipline is increasingly embracing different schools of indigenous philosophy, its roots are being found in ancient texts as well as current practices (for further discussion in this regard, see: Adhikary 2008, 2011, 2012a, 2014a). On the other hand, communication-as-modern-discipline-of-knowledge originated and developed in the West (for further discussion in this regard, see: Adhikary, 2014a; Ayish, 2003; Bormann, 1980; Dues and Brown, 2004; Edmondson, 2009; Gordon, 2006; Harper, 1979; Hechter, 2003; Kim, 2002; Miike, 2010; Peters, 1999; Tate, 1981; Thayer, 1979; Woelfel, 1987). Its institutionalization has been largely as "Euro-American discipline" (Kim,

2002, p. 6). As Gordon (2007) puts it, "Human Communication Theory: Made in the U.S.A." (p. 51).

The non-Western countries had three options while they were developing curricula of communication and/or allied disciplines. First, they could have drawn on native perspectives thereby primarily incorporating indigenous concepts, if not theories and models, of communication. Second, it was much easier for them to adopt solely the Western discursive paradigm. Third, they could have adopted comparative approach thus incorporating both indigenous and Western contents, and facilitating 'indigenization'. [The two terms – indigenous and indigenization – have been distinguished thus: Where as indigenous theories are native, rooted in specific cultures, and emphasize the human experience in specific cultures; indigenization refers to processes of transforming U.S. theories so that they are appropriate in other cultures (Gudykunst, 2005, p. 85).] Of these, the adoption of the Western paradigm has been the general practice as it suits the project of globalization, which legitimizes unidirectional gateway for flow of information.

Xiaoge (2000) observes, Modernization in Asia, to some extent, has been equated with Westernization as far as technology and management transfers are concerned. With the inflow of Western technology and management, Western ideas and values are flooding into Asia, influencing the ways thinking and acting among Asians and thus diluting the local cultures.

The advent of communication as a discipline of knowledge does not seem free from such

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influence. As Miike (2008) observes, "Many researchers, Asian and non-Asian alike, in the field have assumed the universal applicability of the meta-theory and methodology of Eurocentric communication scholarship" (p. 57).

In such background, it is no wonder that the study of communication in the universities of Nepal had not been the study of Sanchar (communication) in the native sense but, in fact, the study of communication as evolved in the West. Miike (2008), who criticizes "European intellectual imperialism" for "the intellectual dislocation of non-Europeans," says: "Eurocentric studies of Asian communication have often dislocated Asians out of their cultural context and have thereby denied the centrality of Asians in the communication process" (p. 57).

Meanwhile, communication, as an academic discipline, has been changing. Scholars are beginning to realize that it is multicultural and multi-paradigm discipline. It is not believed that one major paradigm is capable of explaining all communication behavior. The idea of a universal meta-theory of communication has been firmly rejected. Instead, the scope for multiple concepts of communication has been accepted. It is considered that the exploration of different models of communication relative to different cultures and philosophies is due to communication scholars' orientation toward what is called intercultural communication research. It began during the 1950s and 1960s. Several important concepts came out of earlier efforts in this regard. And, in the early 1980s, the "Asiacentric terrain of theoretical pursuit emerged in the early 1980s" (Miike, 2009, p. 1). Two books – each edited by Kincaid (1987) and Dissanayake (1988) are considered as seminal works in this regard.

Xiaoge (2000) locates "the exploration of Asian perspectives in communication since the mid-1980s and the debate about Asian values in journalism since the mid-1990s." He observes, The realization of the incompatibilities of Western communication theories with the Asian contexts has led to the need to modify or adapt the parameters of Western communication theory to the various local conditions and situations in Asia. Moreover, Western-oriented theories can be enriched by using Asian communication processes, behavior patterns, and experiences. In their search for Asian perspectives in communication, Asian scholars turn to their own rich and long traditions in the fields of religion, philosophy and arts, the core of great cultures.

Dissanayake (2009) observes "a great upsurge of interest in the study and research in Asian theories of communication" (p. 7). Though it is not possible here to present an assessment of various such works it is to acknowledge that they have certainly enriched the academic study of communication. Consequently, the communication discipline has been changing as the Western discursive paradigm is being challenged, if not completely replaced, by alternative paradigms.

For instance, The field of Asian communication theory has grown to such extent that even an Asiatic School of Communication Theories is being envisioned (Miike, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2012, 2016). [Also see: Chen, 2006; Chen & Starosta, 2003; Chu, 1986, 1988; Goonasekera, 2003; Gunaratne, 1991, 2009a, 2009b; Ishii, 2009; Miike, 2016; Ray, 2012; Wang & Shen, 2000.]

The theoretical construction and development of two communication models – the Sadharanikaran Model of Communication (Adhikary, 2003, 2014a) and the Bhatta-Mimamsa Model of Communication (Adhikary, 2012c) – are to be noted herein. Furthermore, an alternative to Eurocentric notion of theory itself has been outlined and the agenda has been brought forward for developing methodology of theory building (Adhikary, 2013).

Moving beyond the West-versus-others-dichotomy

"Communication theory is a field of thought that is rich in diverse ideas, but lacks coherence. There is no universally agreed upon general theory of communication" (Craig, 2009). However, any communication theory is concerned with some basic issues such as: "'How are messages created?' 'How are messages transmitted?' 'How are messages constituted?' 'How are messages received?' 'Why is this case?' 'Is it because of factors outside the message?' 'Or is it because of factors inside the message?'" (Cobley, 1996, p. 1). As Mangion (2011) observes, communication always takes place within a context of production, reception and action (p. 7). The concern of communication theory certainly treats of these aspects.

The communication discipline "needs all the theorization it can get" (Cobley, 1996, p. 32). For this, there needs going beyond what is known as the "Eurocentric" scholarship and taking insights from other sources too. In other words, it demands moving beyond "European universalism" (Gunaratne, 2009b). [Also see: Alatas, 2002; Joseph, Reddy, & Searle-Chatterjee

1990.] Classical Sanskrit texts have much to offer in this regard.

By virtue of insights on fundamentals of human communication, many classical Sanskrit treatises have contemporary value even in the age of mediated communication (Adhikari & Shukla, 2013; Adhikary, 2015). Even a mere perusal of the contents of many classical Sanskrit texts, including *Natyashastra*, *Vakyapadiya*, Jaimini's *Mimamsa Sutra*, and so on, shows that they treat of the basic concerns of any treatise on communication. In fact, the above mentioned treatises have been explored from communication perspective in order to theorize communication (for instance: Adhikary, 2003, 2008, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d).

Though the academic curricula as well as research in the field of communication are yet to reflect it communication (*Sanchar*) is not new concept for Nepali society. Rather, both communication and theorizing communication are indigenous (Adhikary, 2011, 2012a, 2013). Drawing on the theoretical construction and development of two communication models – the *Sadharanikaran Model of Communication* (Adhikary, 2003, 2014a) and the *Bhatta-Mimamsa Model of Communication* (Adhikary, 2012c) – the field of communication theory is claimed to have moved beyond what is called the de-Westernization and beginning of the re-orientation era in Nepal as well as India (Adhikary, 2014b).

Whereas Bharata's *Natyashastra* and Bhartrihari's *Vakyapadiya* are the principal sources for the *Sadharanikaran* model of communication (SMC), it employs Vedanta philosophy for its worldview. And, the *Bhatta-Mimamsa Model of Communication* employs the Bhatta School of *Mimamsa* philosophy in this regard. The development of these two models from Hindu philosophical perspective has paved way for mainstreaming two Schools of classical Hindu philosophy – *Mimamsa* and *Vedanta* – in the field of communication theory (Adhikary, 2003, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2012c, 2014a). In the larger context, the scope for mainstreaming indigenous *Bharatavarshiya/Hindu* scholarship in the communication discipline contributes moving beyond the West versus others dichotomy thereby paving a way for reconciliation of Eastern and Western philosophies from communication perspective.

The field of communication theory has been witnessing a paradigm shift thereby promoting multicultural and multidisciplinary theorization of communication. Seeking indigenous theories of

communication does not mean mere rejection of something Western, but it further enriches the human understanding about themselves and their world. From a panhuman vantage point, the significance of such an understanding is enormous.

Now, it is high time to get rid of the misconception of considering theory as “a product of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment [of Europe], the foundations of which can be traced to European classical philosophies” (Wong, Manvi, and Wong, 1995, p. 138), and even considering theory as the product of the 19th century West (Waugh, 2006, p. 5). Such considerations clearly assumed theory as the Western notion. But, an exposition (Adhikary, 2013) shows that those who were considering theory as a Western construction were wrong. The evidence of theorization and methods of theory building in ancient Sanskrit texts certainly encourages for indigenous *Bharatavarshiya* theorization of communication from every possible perspective. Keeping in view of the communication scholarship prevalent till the date, it seems that there needs more efforts for mainstreaming the agenda of indigenous theorization of communication.

Concluding remarks

Communication (both as a field of study or as a discipline) has been multidisciplinary and multicultural. And, the emphasis on multidisciplinary and multiculturalism is ever growing. Considering communication as a multidisciplinary and multicultural field certainly demands incorporating insights from different cultures while studying and theorizing communication. For instance: the field of *Hindu/Bharatavarshiya/“Indian”/“Nepali”* communication studies has been successful to give new insights on different aspects of communication (For further discussion, see: Adhikary, 2014a).

As Craig (2009) rightly opines, it is “not by reaching a universal consensus on one grand theory, but by promoting dialogue and debate across the diverse traditions of communication theory” that it may accomplish “a kind of intellectual coherence.” In fact, there is need of developing theories and models from different cultural locations and philosophical traditions followed by comparative understanding of them. A comparative study of different concepts of communication is a must for co-cultural respect and for the improved understanding of the communication process and the advancement of the discipline. As the communication discipline is

already moving beyond the West versus others dichotomy, there is a conducive environment for indigenous theorization of communication thereby preparing more grounds for comparative study.

If different philosophical traditions open themselves to each other's differences and if each examines itself in the light of that recognition, there would be better chances for understanding both of the East and the West. The communication discipline and the field of communication theory can offer tremendous opportunities for such endeavors. The study of comparative communication theory should be encouraged and promoted as it paves way for reconciliation among different perspectives.

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