

GANDHI AS A COMMUNICATOR

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Although Gandhi might appear to be a well-studied subject, there are indeed aspects of this subject that await serious scholarly attention. In our view, Gandhi as a communicator is one such. It is generally held that Gandhi was a great communicator and it has often been observed that Gandhi's success as a communicator was due to the various strategies that he had insightfully designed to communicate with the people of India, but this is perhaps only part of the explanation. Besides, one might argue that those strategies worked primarily because it was Gandhi who used them. The language and the style of Gandhi and his use of the verbal and non-verbal resources for communicative purposes await careful study. To understand his effectiveness as a communicator one might also consider studying his ideas and thoughts, although communication theorists tend to neglect the content or the interest value of what is being communicated in their attempt to build models of communication. Here we do not aspire to go beyond merely scratching the surface of the subject under study, namely, Gandhi as a communicator, and we propose to present our observations in the form of somewhat loose notes, rather than of a well structured essay containing a well formulated thesis.

It has often been asserted that Gandhi's impact on the people he met and spoke to was simply electrifying. These people were not just freedom fighters and politicians, writers and thinkers; there were among them slum dwellers and villagers, farmers and labourers, little-educated people and illiterates. But Gandhi wasn't a populist, saying what he thought his audience would like to hear; he was on the contrary quite capable of saying things or doing things that were rather incomprehensible to the people at large or were considered unacceptable, which may not be surprising since he was a great deal more than the leader of a freedom movement; he was a social reformer too.

Communication theorists see communication essentially as sharing: sharing of meaning, although they are not unanimous with regard to who are involved in this sharing (Fiske; 1990). Does this sharing involve, in all instances of communication - real life, day-to-day interactions, and reading of texts both - only the speaker (the writer) and the hearer (the reader) – one might use the term “speaker – hearer” in the context of real life interaction - or does this involve only the readers, who engage themselves with the text, the writer not coming into the picture at all? How much is shared in communication: only the basic meaning or the meaning and the entire emotional field in which this meaning is created? There could be obvious difficulties in knowing, except in the clear cases, whether in some specific instance there has been a considerable degree of sharing, no matter who the “sharers” are. But to the best of our knowledge main schools of

thought on communication do not dissociate sharing from communication on account of this or other difficulties. Communication, they would argue, is not the same thing as arriving at an interpretation of an utterance, an action, etc. It may be the case that each hearer decodes a meaning from, or assigns a meaning to, some message (a text), and that it is an individual act. But so long as at least another hearer does not assign the same, or basically the same, interpretation to the text concerned, no communication can be said to have taken place. If the interactants know that they have assigned the same, or at least somewhat similar, meanings to the given text, then they know that they have communicated. It is possible that they do not know this, being, say, at different places, but an observer does, in which case, as far as the observer is concerned, communication has taken place between them.

Problems with the encoding–decoding approach to communication are familiar. If the meaning decoded is not the same as the meaning encoded, which may be due to a host of reasons that are of no concern for us here, then communication can not be said to have taken place. But in principle it can never be known for certain what meaning the speaker actually wanted to communicate, because, the speaker, say, may not be reachable for clarification, or may not be cooperative in this regard. However for all practical purposes, there need not be any hesitation to bring the speaker into the ambit of the conceptualization of communication, when the speaker is accessible and is cooperative. Turning to a different matter, the question arises as to how close the decoded meaning has to be to the encoded one, so that one could say that communication has taken place? (The same question arises in a different form when the speaker does not enter into the picture: instead of the speaker and the hearer, only the hearers are involved.) Besides, one might have performed in a wide variety of communicative situations: one might have written letters to individuals, and expressed one’s views in newspapers or magazines, or written books, given interviews, spoken to individuals and to small groups, and spoken to large gatherings in public meetings, etc. Does the same notion of sharing explain communication in all these instances? Is it a context dependent notion?

These question becomes particularly significant in the case of people like Gandhi, who did all of the above. People followed him, even when they did not see his point or grasp its significance, instances of which are easily available. Gandhi addressed a public meeting on the sands of the river Kathjori in Cuttack, and he spoke in Hindi (rather Hindustani, as he called it). Thousands attended the meeting, it is reported, and in our assessment it is unlikely that people understood what he was saying. However, they were as greatly influenced by him as people anywhere else. The eminent Oriya author Surendra Mohanty mentions an interesting incident which is relevant in the present context. His mother went to see Gandhi along with hundreds of people from her village and the neighbouring ones. Mohanty, a primary school student at that time, teased his mother by asking her what Gandhi had told her. She said that he didn’t tell her anything, but was merely asking people to give him their gold. He then asked her whether she did that, to which she irritatingly replied that she certainly didn’t, but had ceremonially greeted him with the gift of only a silver rupee. She never cared to know why he wanted gold from the people and was never willing to part with her gold, but she thought it necessary to greet him with the offering of a coin, although a silver one, since this is what

one traditionally does when one goes to a temple or goes to pay respects to a saint, etc. One of my uncles who worked as a prison official, had no love for the freedom fighters – the Gandhian Congressmen - because as far as he was concerned, they were an undisciplined lot in the prison, shouting anti-government slogans, observing fasts, etc. But he always remembered with great sense of pride and satisfaction that he had given Gandhi an *adhala* (one hundred twentieth of a rupee, which during those days was perhaps not an insignificant amount, at least for people like him, who were lowly paid government employees). It was again like an offering that one makes when one goes to see a saint and the like. He didn't understand what Gandhi said, and perhaps it didn't matter to him. He experienced fulfillment when he saw Gandhi, touched him, and made that little offering of the *adhala* to him. The tribals in some parts of Orissa suffered torture for participating in "Congress" activities but controlled themselves not to retaliate, because they were given to understand that "Gandhi Baba" did not want them to do so. They did not know Gandhi's reasons. It was perhaps sufficient for them to know from the local Congress leaders that Gandhi Baba advocated non-violence. If they followed him, it was not because they necessarily agreed with him or were able to appreciate the idea that non-violent struggle was the best way to fight for freedom under the prevailing circumstances; they followed him because he asked them to do so. Their faith on Gandhi was so great that they were willing to follow him; Gandhi was "Gandhi Baba" for them. What most villagers, the poor, the illiterate people, knew about what Gandhi was saying was what they had heard from their local Congress workers in some simple form – almost in terms of imperatives such as wear *khadi*, do not drink, do not practice untouchability in any form, etc.

Such near-deification even in modern times is not an unfamiliar phenomenon in this country which assigns the greatest value to asceticism and spiritualism and this phenomenon and the process that culminates in this can be looked at from various points of view: mass-psychological, socio-cultural, among others. It can be meaningfully looked at from the communicative perspective also; when the credibility of the source (of the message) is so high, message reduces to a great extent to the source – in some sense, the source "communicates" by mere presence, rather than by language or any other communicative resource. One might argue that calling this "communication" would amount to diluting the concept so much that it becomes almost vacuous, and suggest that a term such as "relate to" might be more appropriate. While communication might be included in the concept of "relate to", it need not necessarily be so, as evident from the instances above. One might then observe that Gandhi indeed "related to" certain sections of the population, but did not necessarily "communicate" with them in the familiar sense of this term.

At another level Gandhi interacted with a very different part of the population, namely, the educated and the sophisticated, through what he wrote and said. Language here becomes very important, being the main resource of communication. Even a cursory look at his writing reveals the sincerity and the genuineness of his concerns because of which his style had a certain character: it was simple, direct and clear. Consider these examples:

(1) Hinduism has sinned in giving sanction to untouchability (*Young India*, April 24, 1921).

(2) We glibly charge Englishmen with insolence and haughtiness. Let us, before we cast the stone at them, free ourselves from liability to reproach. Let us put our house in order (*Young India*, May 11, 1921).

(3) We are guilty of having suppressed our brethren; we make them crawl on their bellies, we have made them rub their noses on the ground; we push them out of railway compartment – what more than this has British rule done? What charge can we bring against Dyer and O’Dwyer, may not other, and even our own, people lay at our doors? We ought to purge ourselves of this pollution (*Young India*, May 4, 1921).

(4) The curse of foreign domination and the attendant exploitation is the justest retribution meted out by God to us for our exploitation of a sixth of our race and their studied degradation in the sacred name of religion (*Young India*, December 29, 1920).

There is no ambiguity in the language, no hedging, and no avoiding saying directly what he thought about some matter in apprehension of the possible resentment that these thoughts might evoke in the people. In fact, it is this directness that makes his expression forceful.

Gandhi eschewed rhetoric in favour of clarity and directness. One rhetorical device that Gandhi used effectively, like many other effective journalists, was rhetorical question. He used it only occasionally, as in the third extract above and in the following:

(6) The Qaid-e-Azam says that all the Muslims will be safe in Pakistan. In Punjab, Sind and Bengal we have Muslim League Governments. Can one say that what is happening in those provinces augurs well for the peace of the country? Does the Muslim League believe that it can sustain Islam by the sword (Speech at a Prayer Meeting, September 7, 1946)?

(7) What good will it do the Muslims to avenge the happenings in Delhi or for the Sikhs and the Hindus to avenge cruelties on our co-religionists in the Frontier and West Punjab? If a man or a group of men go mad, should everyone follow suit (From a Prayer Meeting, September 12, 1947)?

Apart from rhetorical question, he sometimes used irony, as in (8) and occasionally, a simple metaphor, as in (9). Simplicity of language, the balanced structure and the irony make (8) effective.

(8) I believe myself to be an orthodox Hindu and it is my conviction that no one who scrupulously practices the Hindu religion may kill a cow-killer to protect a cow (On “Hindu Muslim Unity”, April 8, 1919).

(9) Let not future generations say that we lost the sweet bread of freedom because we could not digest it (From a Prayer Meeting, September 12, 1947).

An unexciting metaphor, a student of language might say, but an intelligible metaphor from the point of view of the common man. He could use gentle satire quite effectively;

when, after the reception at Buckingham Palace, King George V warned him against attacks on the British Empire, Gandhi's reply was (10):

(10) I must not be drawn into a political argument in Your Majesty's Palace after receiving Your Majesty's hospitality. (Gandhi, R. 1995: 117)

It is often observed that Gandhi had developed an idiom with which to express himself as he interacted with the common man. Like many other successful leaders, who were great communicators, he explored the common Indian's belief system, his awareness of his myths, his strong religious orientation, etc. to make his experience and thoughts readily intelligible to him: *raam raajya* becomes the name of the ideal state; *harijan* is used refer to one belonging to an oppressed caste; *satyaagraha* is the term for non-violent non-cooperation with the oppressor. We do not wish to suggest that here was a false ring about all these in the sense that these expressions were just nothing more than part of his strategy to pursue a hidden agenda. It is possible that being religious, he might have made sense of the reality around him that way and his language merely reflected this. (Of course those who think like Akeel Bilgrami (2002, p. 79) that a proper assessment of Gandhiji is that he was a shrewd politician, would probably maintain that Gandhi's style was nothing but a mere strategy. We would avoid saying anything in this regard. We believe that genuineness or otherwise of a person can hardly be determined with any certainty without knowledge of his intentions, among others; but one does not wear one's intentions on his sleeve, as it is said.)

His language was polite, shunning harshness, as is evident from his interactions with the English men and women, and also from what he said in response to highly critical remarks about India from people like Churchill. Consider just one instance. When Churchill made extremely negative remarks about the post-Independence violence in the subcontinent, Gandhi responded to the same in the following way:

(11) Mr. Churchill is a great man...He took the helm when Great Britain was in danger...he saved the British Empire from a great danger at that time... If he knew that India would be reduced to such a state after freeing itself from the rule of the British Empire, did he for a moment take the trouble of thinking that the entire responsibilities for it lies with the British Empire? (Gandhi, R. 1995:143)

As far as the language for communication is concerned, he chose to express himself in Gujarati, Hindi (or Hindustani, as he would call it) and English. The choice of the language obviously depended on who he was addressing to. He would however say that English was not in the best interests of India, because it was and would always be used by a very small section of the people. "Our English speech," he said, in an answer to a student's question, "has isolated us from the millions of our countrymen" (December 12, 1925).

While on Gandhi's language and style, it might be worthwhile to bring some other great communicators into the ambit of this discussion to hopefully understand Gandhiji as a communicator better. One could think of Churchill and Hitler in this regard. They too

have been regarded as great communicators. They invoked God to inspire their people. They all reminded people of their great past, and of their great latent power. They all asserted that their fight was for a just cause, and presented their fight as one against the forces of evil. The language each used was simple, straightforward, and unambiguous. But what separates Gandhi from Hitler is the extreme egotism that one finds in Hitler's but not Gandhi's language, which is not surprising, since Hitler saw himself as a kind of saviour and had no hesitation in giving expression to it in public. Consider this from his speech "My patience is now at an end":

(12) In this hour the German people will unite with me! It will feel my will to be its will. Just as in my eyes it is its future and its fate which gives me the commission for my action...And so I ask you my German people to take your stand behind me, man by man, and woman by woman (September 26, 1938).

As for Churchill, he sometimes used offensive language that brought out his prejudices, as (13) would show, whereas Gandhi's language was free from hatred. Although the latter had no doubt that his fight against the British Empire was indeed a righteous fight against grave injustice, there was no trace of Hitler's egotism or Churchill's offensiveness in his language.

(13) I do not agree that the dog in a manger has the final right to the manger even though he might have lain there for a very long time. I do not admit that right. I do not admit for instance that a great wrong has been done to the Red Indians of America or the black people of Australia. I do not admit that a wrong has been done to these people by the fact that a stronger race, a more worldly wise race to put it that way, has come in and taken their place. (Roy, A. in *Frontline*, October 11, 2002)

For an adequate understanding of Gandhi as a communicator, it may be necessary to bear in mind that he had, as already mentioned, a very diverse audience, comprising at one level, people belonging to various religions and castes, who often perceived their interests to be mutually conflicting, and were consequently hostile to one another. The partition riots were not spontaneous, but actually an outburst of accumulated mistrust and hatred of the warring communities over a period of time. Gandhi condemned all those who indulged in violence, as the relevant extracts from his work, cited above, show. As the extracts also show, he didn't say what would please his audience; he often said the contrary. But he talked about non-violence, togetherness, and harmony. He talked about *sarvodaya*, the "rise of all". In contrast, Hitler harped on the humiliation that the Germans felt they had been subjected to after the First World War, and Churchill led his people, who were naturally beset with anxiety and a sense of insecurity, during the war. They did not talk of harmony. They did not talk in terms of "hate the sin but not the sinner", in which terms Gandhi in contrast spoke. In a way Hitler and Churchill told their respective people what they wanted to hear, unlike Gandhi. But their receptive audience was restricted to the Germans and the English respectively and excluded their adversaries. The same cannot be said about Gandhi. He could speak to the textile workers of Lancashire who were adversely affected by his call to boycott foreign cloth, and could win their understanding. Perhaps one communicates with a wider and a more diverse

audience if one talks the language of peace and harmony, rather than the language of discord and hatred. The language of peace and harmony brings to mind the possibility of a humane society; it reassures people of each section of a pluralistic society; it expresses an affirmation that everyone has a rightful place in the society irrespective of one's religion, language or any other similar identities. The language of hatred and violence divides people, creates fear and uncertainty in some section or sections of the society to start with, but subsequently it engulfs the entire society. Therefore those who use this language have a limited receptive audience.

It has been mentioned earlier that communication models are not concerned with the content of the message that is communicated, and communication theories do not seem to characterize successful communication in terms of the content of the message that is communicated: for example, whether the message is one of affirmation or of rejection, whether it seeks to uphold values that elevate people or spread thoughts that threaten to disintegrate a society. But the contrastive instances of Gandhi on the one hand and people like Hitler on the other show that perhaps the content of the message needs to be taken into account seriously by communication theorists because it might throw some light on why some persons have a more abiding impact on the people than do some others.

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