

*Political Economy of Communications in India: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, Pradip Ninan Thomas. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2010. 978-81-321-0449-0. 267pp.

*Negotiating Communication Rights: Case Studies from India*, Pradip Ninan Thomas. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2011. 978-81-321-0636-4. 252pp.

*Digital India: Understanding Information, Communication and Social Change*, Pradip Ninan Thomas. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2012. 978-81-321-0904-4. 205pp.

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### **Communication in India through Three Lenses**

India is one of the world's largest democracies, a rapidly though unevenly developing country, and an oft-cited IT industry success story. Its diverse population is also amongst the most economically unequal in the world. In comparison to Europe or North America, however, India's communication landscape is neither well documented nor well understood, leaving its citizens at a disadvantage when it comes to assessing the role and influence of information, communication and media in political, economic and social life. Pradip Thomas blazes a trail through this landscape with his trilogy of books on Indian communication. The trilogy addresses Indian communication through three different, but overlapping, lenses: political economy, communication rights, and the digital. The political economy approach, most evident in the first and third books, is marked by: a view of communication systems as vital institutions shaped (but not determined) by political and economic forces; attention to the views and activities of industry, state and civil society actors in the communication realm; and a focus on norms and values associated with communication as a public good. The communication rights approach considers civil society claims about the communication values and principles deserving state protection, including those expressed in the right to information, community radio, and open source software movements. The third lens takes in digital media developments in India, examining their animating forces and resultant social tensions. For readers wanting a critical take on the history, topography and fault lines surrounding media and communication developments in India, this trilogy will serve as an excellent starting point. In order to do them justice, I will discuss each book in turn.

#### *Political Economy of Communications in India*

The first book lays out Thomas's political economy approach, discusses the defining political economic features of modern Indian communication history, and examines a number of contemporary communication issues through the political economic lens. Thomas draws normative assumptions about emancipation, equality and the public good as social policy goals from the political economy

approach, as well as a research agenda aimed at understanding how power structures shape media industries in their interests. In India, national politics, domestic private industries with ties to international markets, transnational organizations, and US and EU interests are the primary actors shaping Indian communication systems, practices and policy regimes. Nevertheless, the public (made up of non-state and non-market actors) has a stake in media and communication because these symbolic goods affect their understandings of the world and influence their social, political and life choices. While there have been important homegrown communication movements in India, most notably around the right to information and open source software, such groups have been less effective at influencing communication policy or practice. Thomas identifies as areas for further study several issues around which tensions exist between dominant practices and the public good. These include issues of concentration, commodification, control, privacy, trade and governance at play in the production and circulation to information, media and culture.

Thomas divides Indian communication history into colonial (late 1700s to 1947), post-colonial (1948-1985), and new India (1986-present) periods, and tracks the shifting relations between the state, civil society and market actors in each period. During the colonial period, the British established national electronic communication systems, namely the telegraph and radio, in order to administer and protect empire. Pro-independence media, including theater, rallies and a vernacular press, were also present in this period. Thomas points out continuities between the colonial and post-colonial periods. The centralized communication systems established by the British were taken over by Indian elites belonging to the Congress party who used them to reinforce their own power. While private ownership continued in the print sector, public ownership prevailed in broadcasting and telecommunications. The state acted as both a regulator and arbiter of news and culture. A tryst with deregulation, privatization and liberalization, as well as growing ties to global markets, defines new India. In this current period, the state has become both regulator and rent seeker. As regulator, it has sought mainly to structure communication markets, rather than to protect a socially determined public interest. As rent seeker, it has distributed communication resources among market actors in exchange for financial benefits, often accruing to corrupt state employees. Commercial television companies have flourished and proliferated in this period. However, these media tend to profit a handful of owners, pander to bourgeois consumers, and ignore the interests and experiences of the broader population. Their lack of content diversity is dangerous for democracy. This history provides a barebones framework for understanding broad trends in Indian communication without unduly sacrificing their complexity.

Subsequent chapters outline the conceptual tensions surrounding various Indian communication issues, giving particular attention to the perspectives of critics and reformers. In the realm of intellectual property, pressure from the EU, US and multilateral organizations advocating global copyright regimes, along with the Indian government's desire to facilitate global trade and domestic industry, have

given rise to stricter intellectual property protections. Government policy has shown little regard for countervailing public interest objectives, says Thomas, like the development of a copyright commons, the protection of a public domain, and the circulation of affordable cultural goods. Global pressures have also led India to liberalize rules around the import and trade of cultural goods with scant attention to competing values of cultural diversity, national identity, and local creativity and innovation. Likewise, the rapid digitization and informationalization of biological and social processes have raised public interest issues that India has yet to examine. These issues include the terms and conditions of data collection and surveillance, the commodification of information and culture, and the uses of personal and genetic information. A chapter on Christian fundamentalism and the media feels somewhat out of place in this constellation, as does a chapter on poverty and the media, although the latter importantly addresses the systematic failure of India's market driven media to address poor audiences and poverty-related issues. The penultimate chapter considers the status of community radio in India and India's remarkable right to information movement. While community radio has enjoyed the backing of foreign NGOs and agencies, it has yet to find popular support or to overcome the opaque regulatory framework and labyrinthine application process decreed by the government. In contrast, local activist initiatives to improve delivery of core public entitlements related to employment, livelihood and food security galvanized the widely supported and largely effective right to information movement, demonstrating the power of locally relevant claims for communication rights. Drawing on the RTI movement and to a lesser extent the FOSS movement as examples, the final chapter argues that local needs and interests and traditional civil society associations (not elite-run NGOs) must drive communication rights advocacy in India. While these chapters paint a broad picture of the political economic forces operating in the communicative sphere, the law and policy status of these issues are sometimes hard to make out. Thus, I sometimes found myself longing for more nuts and bolts details about the current status and workings of Indian law, particularly in the domains of intellectual property, personal data, and the right to information.

### *Negotiating Communication Rights*

The idea of communication rights as legally defined human rights arose with the United Nation's MacBride Commission Report in 1980 and was largely abandoned in the 1990s. Thomas's second book recounts the history and theory of this concept, and attempts to draw various public interest communication advocacy efforts under this umbrella. This endeavor is difficult for two reasons. First, "communication rights" is an amorphous concept with a multiplicity of meanings and theoretical rationale. Its theoretical pluralism allows its advocates to highlight the centrality of communication to a variety of political, social and cultural processes. However, its supporters have not articulated how communication rights harmonize with dominant understandings of related rights, including speech rights, copyrights, and privacy rights. This lacuna makes it difficult to imagine the operationalization of the concept as a legal right. Second,

although the advocacy initiatives profiled attempt to reshape information and communication practices in various ways, they do not themselves adopt the mantle of communication rights. Thomas is aware of many of the concepts shortcomings, but holds on to the heuristic value of communication rights as a tool to advance the thinking of public interest advocates around information and communication. However, such advocates would still need to articulate and fight for these rights within more established and specific spheres of law and policy, and the concept seems particularly limited in this regard.

Thomas characterizes communication rights as an umbrella term for a number of communication problems identified by a number of theories. These include theories of dialog, public spheres, human rights, and democracy, as well as proto-norms of respect and self-respect. Rights covered by this umbrella pertain to media and information access, participation in cultural environments, media diversity, the development of communication capacities, and the ability to be understood and to use one's own language. Thomas notes that the complexity of the concept, as well as the logistical difficulties involved in advocating for a global human right, led to its abandonment. Although he essentially retains the concept, he argues for its redefinition given its failure to achieve traction at the global policy level. He calls for local actors around the globe to define, theorize and advocate for communication rights in their own contexts. He also considers the ability of India to take up this call. Although India has indigenous theoretical traditions to draw on, as well as some full fledged or proto-movements concerned with communication-related rights, it faces several challenges to articulating and implementing such rights, says Thomas. These include: a tendency towards communication practice without theory; the unsuitability of some prominent Western-centric theories to Indian contexts; a disconnect between grassroots civil society organizations and NGOs; opaque and volatile state policy processes; and religious spheres that view communication as an instrumental tool for the expression of religious dictates, rather than a realm for the exercise of individual rights.

Thomas offers several case studies of public interest communication advocacy, India's RTI and FOSS movements being amongst the most developed. He calls the RTI movement India's most important and widespread post-independence social movement. This remarkable grassroots campaign, which grew out of a rural development and poverty alleviation movement among peasant farmers, culminated in the passage of a national Right to Information Act in 2005. Activists saw the right to information as a tool to fight government corruption and to secure government mandated entitlements. RTI was championed not as a free speech or democratic right, but as a vital means to secure personal livelihood and well-being. By demanding government transparency and accountability, and monitoring public expenditures and accounts, rural activists could gain leverage over corrupt government officials who would otherwise divert public funds to their own purposes and pockets. Today, many use India's RTI Act to monitor and expose government activities and to access government-held data. For Thomas, the RTI campaign was an exemplary communication rights

movement because it was relevant to marginalized communities and built a broad base of support. While FOSS advocates have not generated a similarly broad support base, they have articulated a strong critique of proprietary, closed source software and a strong argument in favor of open source public sector software. FOSS advocates have criticized intellectual property and software patenting regimes seen as inimical to Indian interests. These interests include local software innovation and development, the creation of adaptable and relevant information environments, and affordable and accessible public sector software. Adoption of FOSS technology by the government of Kerala and some other government agencies are their most visible signs of success.

Less coordinated, organized and effective advocacy initiatives include the community radio, women and media, and citizen journalism movements, although to call these initiatives “movements” may be an overstatement, as Thomas acknowledges. Although community radio can increase media diversity and provide marginalized groups with an opportunity to speak and be heard, scant support from local civil society groups, an opaque and convoluted licensing process, and a lack of attention to its definition and structure in policy has stunted its development. Communication activism around women and media has centered loosely around issues of media representation, professional employment in media, and the use of media to promote feminist causes. Thomas views citizen journalism as a development with the potential to increase diversity and communication rights, but notes that it can also be employed for less liberating purposes and that little is known about how citizen journalism is enacted in India, by whom and for what purposes. While each of these domains could contribute to movements for communication rights, says Thomas, he is cognizant of their shortcomings and challenges. By and large, their articulations of communication rights and reforms remains inchoate, while their practices fail to address popular needs and concerns that might help them build more widespread support.

The book concludes with the call to define communication rights in India in relation to core deficits felt by the majority of its population, namely the material and physical needs and wants that come with extreme poverty, and to resist distorted definitions of communication rights emanating from transnational donors and Western-centric theories. Thomas also holds that democracy, freedom and identity provide less resonant rationales for communication rights in the Indian context than in the West. While Indian needs, experiences and interests certainly should inform their claims to these rights, Thomas may be undervaluing the potential of democratic theory to assist with struggles for communication rights in this budding democracy. Indians need not appropriate democratic ideas originating in other contexts wholesale, but can reinvent and reinterpret these ideas in light of local knowledge and experience. Amartya Sen (1992) does something like this when rethinking the concepts of freedom and equality from the Indian context. Sen argues that we can understand equality not only as equality of opportunity, but also as equality in other chosen realms such as primary goods, incomes and well being. Likewise, Sen understands freedom

not only as the absence of restraint, but also as the capability to achieve valued functions and objectives. Articulating social needs and perspectives in terms of democratic values, like freedom and equality, could provide a fruitful way forward for public interest communication advocates.

### Digital India

The final book examines issues surrounding digital networks and technologies in India. These include the role of the IT sector in economic growth, implications of recent telecommunications developments, the myths and realities of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for development, implementations of e-governance, state policy on intellectual property and public sector software, and the branding of informal market providers of cultural goods as cultural pirates. In examining each of these issues, Thomas emphasizes the concerns of political economy: how power shapes the development and use of ICTs; the divergent values and positions taken by state, industry and civil society actors with respect to communication issues; and the public interest dimensions of contested domains of communication policy and practice. Thomas demonstrates that the state is a complex, contradictory and ambivalent actor with respect to communication policy. Sometimes it supports social justice, economic redistribution and democracy. At others it abandons these values, allowing neoliberal thinking, international influence, corruption, and dominant powers to motivate policy. Thus, the state ascribes to intellectual property laws that chiefly serve international copyright holders and proprietary intellectual property regimes, even while it seeks to insulate traditional knowledge from this system and at times to deploy FOSS on state computers and networks. The book also calls attention to civil society perspectives on these issues, wherever they are manifest. Since public interest perspectives on communication policy and practice have little visibility in Indian media or policy spheres, their inclusion here raises their profile.

Thomas maintains that to understand digital media in India, we must consider how Indians experience digital technologies and networks in everyday life. The on-the-ground experience of ICTs has been accompanied by practices and phenomena that scholars have yet to fully examine or understand. These include the state's redistribution of land and other resources to the IT sector at others' expense, the imprudent tendency of ICT for development projects to ignore the social contexts of their sites of implementation, the ability of imported intellectual property and software patenting regimes to stifle access to local knowledge and innovation, the need to access government information through available and interoperable technological systems, and the ability of the informal economy for cultural goods to act as a source of information and livelihood for many Indians. Thomas proposes that such issues be viewed in light of an expanded set of social goals and values. Goals such as diversity, equality, identity, access and livelihood, says Thomas, go beyond those typically invoked in developed nations, but are more appropriate to the highly diverse and unevenly developed nation that is India.

The book further argues that in order to understand the relationship between technology and social change, we must look at the processes ICTs are said to change and be sensitive to the ways in which technologies, their producers, and their users exercise agency in social change. Several short case studies recounted in the book exemplify this approach. The book does not develop grand theory about the uses or effects of digital media in India or extrapolate new theories from the Indian experience. Nevertheless, the book serves to orient readers to recent developments surrounding digital media and networks in India. More importantly, it sets a scholarly and advocacy agenda around communication in India. Thomas calls for more critical, empirical research on the social consequences of ICT developments and projects, and warns against presumptions that market forces alone will produce the communication systems Indians need or desire. A political economist at heart, Thomas is attuned to the ways in which entrenched power and privilege, whether emanating from the public or private sector, seeks to influence or control the design, distribution and use of technology in information-oriented economies. Thomas recognizes that technology may create opportunities for freedom and justice, but does not assume that it will override the power of the state, industry, or the more abstract but pervasive influences inscribed in the institutions of caste, class and gender. Finally, he exhorts members of civil society to recognize their interests in the shape and structure of communication systems, which are central to people's opportunities and capabilities for life and livelihood.

Overall, the trilogy sets an agenda for communication studies in India and calls needed attention to the political economy and policy dimensions of this agenda. The trilogy's readers will gain a relatively concise orientation towards communication developments in modern India and a sense of some of the most important questions facing Indian communication studies. Despite its strengths, the path Thomas charts has a few bumps. At times, the books treat overlapping subject matter. For example, Thomas writes repetitively about the right to information and community radio movements in both the first and second books, and about dilemmas in Indian intellectual property laws in the first and third. A related weakness is the prismatic structure of some sections of the books. Individual chapters do not always hang together well, follow logically from one another, or build upon each other. The structure sometimes occasions redundancy, such as the multiple accounts of India's liberalization of its telecommunications sector in early chapters of book three. Finally, aiming for breadth over depth, the books sometimes make assertions without offering complete explanations or giving adequate empirical evidence to assess the analysis. However, given the substantiality of the undertaking, such faults can be forgiven. Other scholars who follow in his path can pick up where Thomas leaves off in mapping this complex, but consequential, terrain.

Sen, A. (1992). *Inequality Reexamined*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.