Intercultural Communication Study in India

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Geopolitically as well as socioculturally, India is uniquely positioned in the history of the human race. Multifaceted diversities in terms of linguistics, religion, and ethnicity (among others) yield rich opportunities for intercultural communication study. At this moment, however, the academic discipline of intercultural communication has yet to gain visibility in Indian academia, although some components of intercultural communication studies are taught in a few communication and other social-science departments. This entry presents the cross-cultural academic exchanges in the premodern and colonial period, discusses the absence of an intercultural communication discipline in contemporary Indian academia, and calls for more attention and engagement from scholars to examine various subdomains of intercultural communication.

Premodern India

Throughout history, Indian people have interculturally interacted, learned, and shared knowledge with the rest of the world, aided by India’s unique geographical location. On one hand, India is relatively isolated from other regions/civilizations, for instance, Chinese and other ancient civilizations, due to the presence of the Himalayas in the north, and the oceans (including the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, and the Bay of Bengal) in the south. On the other hand, the proximity of the historical Silk Road to some Indian cities facilitated cultural exchange processes. Scholars have argued that the Silk Road not only fostered trade and commercial relationships among the nations located on or near the route, but also was an enabler of intercultural dialogue and knowledge-sharing processes. For instance, Zoroastrianism supposedly borrowed some ritualistic practices such as usage of fire as a means of purification from Brahmanism. Again, intercultural exchange between Greece and India gave birth to an art form named the Gandharan tradition.

From age-old historical accounts, we know that many educational institutions existed in ancient India. Among them, Nalanda University and Taxila University were the two prominent centers for learning. Nalanda University, a center for higher education, was operational from 427 to 1197 CE—for more than seven centuries. Historical records suggest that it had over 10,000 students and more than 2,000 professors in its heyday. Some scholars have noted that Nalanda was one of the first great universities in the world. Students and scholars from various countries such as Japan, Korea, China, Indonesia, Turkey, and Persia attended the university. From their accounts, it is evident that the
intercultural exchange of ideas, knowledge, and religions (Buddhist, Hindu, and other religions) took place during that period.

Taxila, the other prominent center for learning, was older than Nalanda University; some historians date its existence back to fifth or sixth century BCE. Primarily Hindu and Buddhist scholars attended Taxila, and exchanged their scholarly thoughts. Several other centers for learning existed in premodern India, including Odantapuri, Vikramshila, Somapura, Jaggadal, Pushpagiri, and Ratnagiri in eastern India, Sarada Pith, Varanasi, and Valabhi in northern and western India, and Nagarjunakonda, Kanchipuram, Manyakheta in southern India, among others.

**Accounts of foreign scholars**

Our knowledge about premodern India, particularly its educational systems, cultural practices, and socioeconomic conditions, was primarily shaped by the accounts of foreign scholars who visited ancient and medieval India, including the Greek scholar Megasthenes and Chinese scholars Faxian, Xuanzang, and Yijing. Their accounts throw light on educational systems, particularly the educational practices of the Brahmins and teachings of Buddhist scholars. They also wrote about various societal aspects such as caste systems, legal practices, sociocultural norms, and commercial activities. In exchange, renowned monks and scholars from India, namely Dharmadeva and Atisa, visited China and shared knowledge as well as translated several ancient texts.

Later, European scholar Marco Polo, Islamic scholars Ibn Batutta and Al-Beruni, and Russian scholar Athanasius Nikitin among others wrote about their firsthand experience while visiting medieval India and interacting with her people. Their accounts present rich social portraits, and many of their descriptions resonate with the contexts and conditions of contemporary India. Writings of Islamic scholars suggest that Muslim rulers prioritized certain foreign languages, such as Arabic and Persian, during their reigns. Both languages became the languages of higher education, and Persian became the court language. They also note that an emphasis was placed on Islamic religious education. During the Mughal rule, Akbar sought to transform traditional Islamic educational systems by embracing a policy of tolerance; he encouraged Hindu youths to go to madrassas to become educated and also emphasized cross-cultural learning, harmony, and cultural exchanges among various sections of society.

After the Mughal rule, colonial powers invaded India and the British started ruling most parts of India. At the beginning of the colonial period, the Hindus used to go to *tols* and *pathshalas* and Muslims attended madrassas and *maktabs* for education. The mediums of instruction were Indic and Islamic languages, such as Sanskrit, Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Arabic, and Persian to name a few. Reductionist educational policies of the British colonizers sought to produce bureaucratic workers to assist the hegemonic administration in fulfilling its colonial agendas. Consequently, education of the masses was neglected and Eurocentric knowledge and educational practices were privileged. For instance, the British administration created laws for privileging English over Indic languages as the official language of the administration and the judiciary. In addition, missionary activities were encouraged to convert the local people to foreign
religions as well as to introduce English-medium education. Such efforts in turn significantly affected local religious and linguistic practices. In contrast, some of the members of the British administration realized the value of oriented learning; for instance, the Asiatic Society for Oriental Learning was established, which played a significant role in cross-cultural learning and knowledge exchange.

Several Indian leaders, such as Gandhi and Tilak, challenged the British educational system, which privileged one way of knowing (i.e., Eurocentric knowledge) over many ways of knowing, and favored global technologies over local indigenous knowledge and practices. Gandhi instead argued in favor of an educational system that addressed the needs of local underserved people and valued nonviolence, harmonious relationship between humans and nature, and welfare of the whole (sarvodaya). Though ideologically compelling, application of Gandhian educational philosophy is still limited throughout the Indian nation-state.

Postindependent India

After Independence, the government of India mostly followed the British educational system. Unlike anthropology and sociology (and other social sciences), the discipline of communication studies (with the exception of journalism and mass communication) never gained adequate attention in Indian academia. However, various aspects of culture and communication are taught, such as cultural studies, social sciences, and sociocultural anthropologies. For instance, communication departments of the University of Hyderabad, Mudra Institute of Communication, Gujarat University, Benaras Hindu University, and Jamia Milia Islamia teach topics like communication and culture, communication and social change, Indian society, and development communication. In addition, social science and cultural studies (and related) departments of various academic institutions such as Tata Institute of Social Science, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Tejpur University, and the University of Hyderabad (School of Social Sciences) offer courses on linguistic diversity, popular culture, social media, ethnicity, and culture and folk culture.

To address the gap in the study and research on intercultural issues, theoretically, methodologically, as well as empirically, the following sections of this entry present the scope and the relevance of some key aspects of intercultural communication studies in the Indian context.

Globalization, capitalism, and the marketplace

In this era of globalization, the complex dynamics of technology and capitalist economy conceptualize culture as a resource. Capitalism is one of the key driving forces of globalization processes; in the contemporary era capitalist moves such as liberalization, privatization, and deregulation have created newer disparities and inequalities across the globe. In 1991, India initiated economic liberalization and privatization programs, and started welcoming foreign direct investments. Advancement of communication and transportation technologies intensified movements and interactions of people and
cultural forms) locally as well as globally. By contrast, growing interdependence of socioeconomic, political, and environmental factors of globalization yield opportunities for sharing resources as well as for negotiating emerging tensions and conflicts. In such complex dynamics, understanding of culture is crucial to solving social issues, and to bringing about empowerment and social change.

The forces of globalization have created new opportunities as well as constrained access to resources in the context of India. The Indian economy is conventionally considered as agrarian, and the society of India is traditionally collectivist in nature. In contrast, the culture of capitalism and globalization promotes individualism, competitiveness, commoditization, and consumerism. Moreover, capitalist culture promotes and reinforces social discrimination and stereotypes, while devaluing human–human and human–nature relationships. Such emerging dynamics are yielding new complexities, scopes, and conflicts in Indian societies, which need to be examined through an intercultural communication lens.

Identity politics: Gender, age, ethnicity, and caste

India is a country of vast diversity; her people speak multiple languages, practice multiple religions, and follow a variety of sociocultural practices. In the context of such diversity, understanding cultural identities and behaviors is important, particularly to learn about how people's cultural experiences are shaped and their social locations are determined. Communication is a crucial component in understanding identity, particularly when identities are co-constructed, negotiated (avowed, ascribed), reinforced, and challenged through communication. Intercultural communication scholars have noted that identities are simultaneously multiple and dynamic in nature; they argue that identities are developed in a variety of ways in different cultural contexts. Some of the key sociocultural identities are as follows.

Gender identities

In most parts of India, the societal structure is patriarchal. In a traditional sense, women are perceived as weak and emotional, and are supposed to stay at home to do household work. While such perceptions are being increasingly challenged, particularly in metropolitan areas, many suburban and rural societies still subscribe to traditional patriarchal practices. Apart from such gender disparities, females face some difficult and inhuman challenges, such as female feticide, rape and abuse, child marriage, and dowry death. For example, the recent rape and murder of a female student of New Delhi received significant attention in international media. In addition, intercultural communication scholars need to pay attention to third-gender and transgender issues and stigmatization and discrimination negotiated by LGBTQ populations. Moreover, most of the third-gender and transgender population (including hijras) of India do not have any job security and respectable social status, especially when the government of India is not ready to recognize their identities.
Religious identities

India is the home of the largest Hindu, Sikh, and Jain populations and the third largest Muslim population, and it is the birthplace of the Buddha. While India values the significance of religious harmony and peaceful coexistence, its history is not completely peaceful or without conflicts. Recent incidents like the Babri Masjid demolition and mass murder at Godhra, Gujarat, are some of the examples of religious conflict. Understanding relationships both within and among various religious groups is important for facilitating peacebuilding dialogues and resolving crises. In addition, intercultural communication scholars need to pay attention to sociopolitical aspects of minorities, and emerging cultural issues such as intolerance, practiced by religious bigots.

Ethnic and caste identities

Traditionally, many Indian societies (primarily Hindu society) follow the age-old caste system. Owing to hierarchal caste distribution, upper-caste people enjoy their privilege, while lower-caste people still face lifelong discrimination and marginalization. Such marginalization is not only economical, but also sociopolitical, cultural, and communicative in nature; this needs to be studied and examined in more depth by intercultural communication scholars.

Disability identities

The 2011 census of India noted that more than 2 percent of the Indian population is disabled. In other words, more than 5 million people are visually disabled, about 5.5 million people are orthopedically disabled, over 2 million people are mentally disabled, and the numbers of people with speech and hearing disabilities are about 2 million and 5 million respectively. Presently, many disabled people in India do not have access to basic infrastructure, structural resources, and job/social security. Moreover, they often face discrimination and stigmatization, as disability is often associated with the “karma” of the person’s previous birth.

Other identities that require scholarly attention are regional identities, class identities, sexual identities, among others.

Migration and cross-border matters

India shares her borders with several countries, including Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. Throughout history, movements of people from one geographical region to another have facilitated cultural exchange processes as well as created scope and avenues for new cultural dynamics.

As studied by intercultural scholars, such movements of people are both voluntary and involuntary in nature. For instance, during the partition of India thousands of people migrated from Pakistan and Bangladesh to India and vice versa. In many cases,
such migrations were involuntary in nature and impacted on the lives of migrants significantly. The memories of partition triggered a variety of cultural expressions including literary works and performative pieces. In addition, in the name of development, marginalized people from various parts of India were forced to relocate to new territories, which are considered as involuntary migration. From intercultural communication perspectives such migration cultures can be viewed as deterritorialized (i.e., cultural subjects are uprooted from their familiar geographical spaces) as well as reterritorialized (i.e., cultural subjects are relocated in newer geographical spaces).

By contrast, people have also voluntarily moved from one place to another in search of a better future, education, or health, and for other personal purposes such as tourism. Owing to both voluntary and involuntary movements, a new set of identities often emerges, namely diasporas. In the Indian context, interstate and international movements of people have produced various diasporic communities such as desi (Indian communities abroad) and udbastu (migrated people without land property). As the notions of “home” and “host” are continually constructed and deconstructed, migration processes produce hybrid cultural spaces and identities, which also need attention from intercultural scholars.

Regional economic and resource disparities often caused migrations. Sometimes such migrations are challenged by nativistic movements, for instance, laborers from Bihar who work in the Mumbai region often face threats from the right-wing political forces of Maharashtra. Consequently, migrant people rely on migrant networks and social capital for their safety and security; these community networks pay attention to various socioeconomic aspects, such as health and well-being, housing, unemployment, and education. Cultural and communicative processes of migration in the Indian context are a promising area of intercultural communication studies.

Popular culture and Bollywood

In this era of globalization, popular (or “pop”) culture is conceptualized as one of the pivotal forces that determine how we make sense of and perform our cultural identities. As a vehicle of capitalism, popular cultures shape our opinions by conforming to the agendas of cultural industries and dominant power structures. Indian pop cultural artifacts such as movies, television, and mediated performances have often influenced her people’s understanding of society and societal forces. India has one of the largest television networks in the world: more than 168 million households watch television across the country. According to 2012 data, more than 800—including over 200 pay channels—telecast their programs for Indian viewers. The Indian cinema industry is also one of the largest globally. Though Bollywood is popular among international audiences, there are several regional movie industries, which also produce a large number of movies in regional languages (such as Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Bengali) every year (FICCI-KPMG, 2014). The Bollywood film industry, primarily a producer of Hindi movies, is one of the largest centers of film production on the planet, which makes about twice the number of films produced by Hollywood annually.
For intercultural communication scholars, it is important to study how different cultural groups are represented and stereotyped by the television and movie industries in India, and how ordinary people have reacted to (and often resisted) pop cultural representations in response. It is also important to study what roles dominant forces like capitalism and ethnocentrism play in producing and propagating cultural corruption, homogenization, dominance, and fragmentation. Moreover, intercultural communication scholars need to examine how Indian pop cultural texts and artifacts construct and convey values, norms, and beliefs.

**Conflict, peacebuilding, and terrorism**

After Independence, India fought a number of wars with her neighboring nation-states. Particularly, India’s relationship with Pakistan remains tense, with several wars taking place and attacks by Islamic terrorist forces resulting in moments of crisis and devastation. Apart from external threats, India has also faced challenges from internal conflicts, such as the Khalistan movement, insurgencies in northeastern regions, and Naxalite and Maoist movements. From an intercultural perspective, it is worth exploring how cultural dominance, bilateral and multilateral relationships, and processes of globalization shape, reinforce, as well as play roles in resolving conflicts.

By contrast, India has produced several scholars and personalities such as Gandhi and the Buddha who developed pro-peace philosophies and spread words of love, compassion, and empathy all over the world. Again, another aspect of Indian culture is valuing religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence in order to negotiate crises and conflicts effectively. All the major religions of India advocate peacebuilding and conflict-resolution processes, by paying attention to human values like truthfulness (*satyagraha*), nonviolence (*ahimsa*), forgiveness, mercy, and reflective engagement in conquering worldly desires. In the context of growing tensions and conflicts, it is important to interculturally examine the roles and values of the aforementioned qualities in order to make the world a more tolerant and better place to live.

**Competence and workplace**

Liberalization and privatization processes of globalization have accelerated the movements of capital and resources, including human resources, across the globe. Increasingly, business entities like multinational corporations and transnational corporations prefer offshore manufacturing units and long-distance customer support for their products and services. In such emerging contexts, intercultural competence (the attitudes, skills, and knowledge to engage effectively in multicultural contexts) becomes crucial for individuals as well as for business entities. In addition, a vast diversity across India in terms of language, religion, and cultural practices also calls for interculturally competent behaviors in both individuals and workspaces.

India has recently produced a large number of information-technology (IT) workers who travel to and work in various places outside India. In addition, the country is
home to a growing international student population—one of the biggest globally. Both overseas employees and international students work in diverse and multicultural situations, where they meet people from a variety of national and ethnic backgrounds. Understanding cultural nuances and practices is therefore crucial for them to perform effectively and efficiently. In addition, India has produced the biggest workforce in the call-center/IT outsourcing industries, which engages in business activities in long-distance and virtual modes; awareness of potential misunderstandings and conflicts is an important determinant for success in such work environments. In this emerging Indian context, interculturally studying the roles and relevance of competence in contemporary workspaces is necessary for both individual and organizational purposes.

**Language matters**

From a linguistic perspective, India is one of the most diverse countries in the world. A study in 2013 showed that the Indian population currently speaks 780 languages, while the country has lost about 250 languages in the last five decades. The study further showed that only 122 of the 780 languages are spoken by populations of more than 10,000. In other words, many of the Indian languages are on the brink of extinction. Moreover, many of the endangered languages spoken by Indian communities do not have any script; therefore the preservation of those languages is critical.

Recognition of languages is another key issue. Presently, 22 languages are recognized by the government of India as official languages. Consequently, the other languages are struggling to gain legitimate status in judicial and administrative spaces. Such delegitimization of certain languages also creates some tensions in various regions of India; for instance, many indigenous groups organize protests for recognition of their languages. Intercultural communicative perspectives essentially advocate for an ecology of languages; challenging the linguistic inequity and hegemony, the perspective calls for a right to languages, equality in communication, multiculturalism, and multilingualism to ensure security and cultural empowerment. Ecology of languages essentially seeks to create critical awareness and consciousness about linguistic and cultural pluralism and opens up avenues for development of a more equal and just language policy; intercultural scholars need to take active initiatives in fostering and nurturing ecology of languages.

**New media and social media**

Emergence and worldwide proliferation of social media and new media have created new communication possibilities and dynamics. Increasingly, newer forms of online interaction and connectedness are coming forth, addressing the needs of society at large. In terms of the number of Internet users, India is among the top three nations on the globe, with about 400 million users. Despite a relatively undeveloped telecommunications infrastructure and slow Internet speed, India is the second-largest market of Facebook globally. By contrast, a recent United Nations (UN) report suggested that,
in terms of people’s access to information and communication technology. India’s global rank is 131st (PTI, 2015). More specifically, the people of rural and remote regions of India still remain isolated in terms of information access. Such a digital divide further delegitimizes the voices and the issues of marginalized communities and underserved spaces. For instance, the language of the Internet is predominantly English; lack of knowledge of mainstream languages such as English and Hindi prevents many members of underserved communities to communicate via social media platforms. In spite of various communicative and infrastructural barriers, some of the underrepresented communities have recently started using social media resources such as Facebook and Google+. Apart from studying social media users and their digital behaviors, intercultural researchers need to explore the dimensions and implications of the digital divide in underserved spaces in order to create avenues for greater digital equality and ensure both qualitative and quantitative participation and representation.

**Co-culture: Writing history from below**

Because of globalization, human societies are experiencing a magnification of inequalities across the globe as the gap between the haves and have-nots is increasingly widening. Nearly half of the global population currently lives on less than 2.50 USD per capita per day. Socioeconomic inequalities are alarming in the Indian context too; recent data suggested India is home to 33 percent of the global poor. Among the underserved communities, the situation of *sudras*, the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe populations, is particularly a matter of concern. The UN report noted that the poverty of the Indian scheduled tribe communities is comparable to that of the indigenous people living in sub-Saharan Africa. Again, many rural groups in India have become marginalized owing to national policies and unilateral actions taken by government and dominant organizations. For instance, in the name of development, a large number of economically poor people have lost their lands and access to domestic resources. Again, unorganized workforces across India, constituting nearly 90 percent of Indian workers, are facing difficulties with inadequate government policy provisions; many of them do not have any social security or health insurance coverage, for instance.

In the context of growing disparities and inequalities, intercultural communication scholars need to be cognizant about their roles in bringing about social transformation. On the one hand, as engaged researchers they need to reflectively listen to the voices and issues of marginalized communities in underserved spaces; and, on the other hand, it is necessary for them to engage in action-research activities to facilitate processes of social change, in order to help bring about a more equal and just world.

In conclusion, this entry describes the relative lack of intercultural communication studies in Indian academia; it identifies some potential areas/subdomains of intercultural communication studies in contemporary Indian contexts and discusses their scope and relevance. The people and cultures of India represent a rich history of intercultural encounters and knowledge, and present a myriad of opportunities for communication (and other social science) scholars to bridge disciplinary gaps, create
new knowledge and intercultural understanding, and thereby lay a foundation for bringing about a society which is more tolerant, habitable, and humane.

SEE ALSO: Identity and Intercultural Communication; New Media and Intercultural Communication

References


Further readings


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