

Is Communication a Vidya or an Avidya according to Hinduism?

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Abstract

This article discusses the discipline of communication as a vidya (true knowledge) according to Hinduism. The present article is a revisit to an older article (Adhikary, 2010). It presents Hindu perspective on communication concerning the Sadharanikaran Model of Communication, employing the message- or artifact-oriented research approach. This article observes moksha as the highest of purushartha chatustaya (four goals of human life) based on Hindu belief and presents an appraisal on verbal communication as a means for attaining moksha-in-life. In addition, the article recognizes different kinds of yoga, such as jnanayoga, karmayoga, and bhaktiyoga in Hinduism and examines whether the process of communication qualifies to be regarded as the sancharyoga. Then, it concludes yoga is a communication model, and the discipline of communication is a vidya itself, being relied on perspectives of Hinduism

Keywords: communication, Hindu perspective, moksha-in-life, sancharyoga, Sadharanikaran Model of Communication, vidya

Vidya and Avidya in a Continuum

Vidya as a word is used in different ways in Hindu scriptures. Sometimes it is used to refer to mere theoretical knowledge of the scriptures or meditation on various deities (for instance, in Brihadaranyaka Upanishad-4.4.10; Ishavasya Upanishad-9; also see, Vipashananda, 2006). But in its positive sense, the same term refers to true knowledge, Brahmajnana, which leads to immortality (Kena Upanishad-2.4). It is in the latter sense vidya has been used in this article. Opposite to vidya is the avidya, which is “[t]o know about world and worldly things” (Vipashananda, 2006). Spirituality and moksha attainment are the concerns of vidya.

According to Hinduism, the dignity of any discipline of knowledge would be high only when it qualifies as a vidya (true knowledge). This implies that every discipline of knowledge must be a discipline (shastra) of moksha at its peak (Adhikary, 2007, p. 2). Accordingly, the communication discipline also needs to align with this Hindu belief if it is to earn the status of Sanchar-shastra according to Hinduism. In other words, the communication discipline would be regarded as true knowledge (vidya) in the Hindu milieu if and only if the process of communication qualifies as a means for the attainment of moksha.

The Sancharyoga

The term sancharyoga consists of two words: sanchar and yoga. Sanchar has several meanings in Sanskrit, and one of them is the same as what is understood by communication in English. In fact, in various languages of Sanskrit origin, including Hindi and Nepali, sanchar has been the common word used as an equivalent to the word communication. It has been used here in the same manner. Yoga is also used in a variety of senses in Hinduism. Here, it denotes such means or system through which one attains moksha — the highest goal of human life in Hindu belief. Thus, sancharyoga would

signify the process of communication that succeeds as a means for the attainment of moksha (Adhikary, 2010, 2014, 2016).

Hindu society represents a civilization with a known history of thousands of years and a distinct cultural identity of its own. It is the inheritor of a culturally rich civilization rooted in the Vedic period. As such, a communication tradition, rich and refined both in theory and practice, has been an inseparable part of Hindu society. As Dissanayake (2003) observes, “No civilization is possible without a vigorous system of communication” (p. 18). According to Dissanayake (2006),

It is evident that countries of Asia ... have fashioned vibrant and complex civilizations that have evolved over the millennia. One cannot conceive of any sophisticated civilization without the presence of a multi-faceted order of communication. This makes it imperative that we probe into how scholars in Asia have sought to formulate and conceptualize their respective understandings of human communication. (p. 4)

Communication, as an academic discipline, has been witnessing “the multicultural turn” (Miike, 2007, p. 272). Consequently, the sphere of communication discipline has been broadened and various indigenous insights from philosophy, arts, literature, religion, and also other branches of knowledge are being incorporated. Particularly, “a great upsurge of interest in the study and research in Asian theories of communication” (Dissanayake, 2009, p. 7) has been noticed. Theorizing communication from Asian perspectives is advancing in such an extent that even the Asiatic School of communication theories is said to be emerging and developing, and becoming increasingly significant (Chen, 2006; Edmondson, 2009, p. 104). This marks “the promotion of universal humanity and the preservation of cultural diversity in an age of glocalization” (Miike, 2008, p. 69).

Both communication and theorizing communication are indigenous to Hindu society. Various Hindu texts consist of inquisition/exposition on communication. In other words, diverse and enormous sources are available in this regard. But very few of them have been studied so far from the vantage point of communication discipline. However, the field of theorizing communication from a Hindu perspective is also emerging and evolving.

An account of the Hindu perspective on communication has been presented with the help of the sadharanikaran model of communication (SMC) in the following section. Then, the article presents an appraisal of verbal communication as a means for attaining moksha-in-life. Moreover, it examines whether communication, as envisioned in Hinduism, qualifies to be regarded as a kind of yoga. Finally, it is observed that the discipline of communication can be considered a vidya in Hinduism. In this course, the researcher has employed the message- or artifact-oriented research approach.

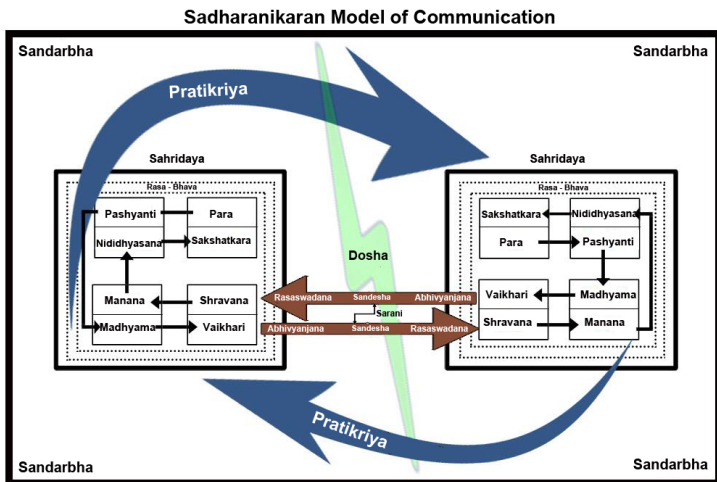
Understanding Communication from a Hindu Perspective

There are many conventional concepts, theories, and methods in Hinduism, which have their contemporary relevance and significance to the discipline of communication. With vast diversities within the Hindu society, there is scope for many theories and models of communication. Various efforts (such as Adhikary, 2003, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2014, 2016; Babbili, 2001; Davis, 1988; Dhole, 2006; Dissanayake, 1981, 1982a, 1982b, 1983, 1986, 1987, 1988a, 1988b, 2003, 2006, 2009; Gangal and Hosterman, 1982; Gumperz, 1964; Gunaratne, 1991; Jain and Matukumalli, 1996; Jayaweera, 1988; Kirkwood, 1987, 1989, 1990, 1997; Kumar, 2005a, 2005b; Lloyd, 2021; Majumdar, 1958; Miike, 2017, 2024; Mohan, 1992; Oliver, 1971; Saral, 1983; Sitaram, 2004; Tewari, 1980, 1992; Thirumalai, 2003, 2004; and Yadava, 1987, 1998) have been made to understand, discuss and/or theorize communication from Hindu perspective. The Sadharanikaran Model of Communication (often

abbreviated as the SMC) primarily draws on the *Natyashastra* of Bharata Muni and the *Vakyapadiya* of Bhartrihari, and illustrates the process of communication from a Hindu viewpoint. It was initially presented in 2003 (Adhikary, 2003, p. 84), and revised versions were presented over the years. An international seminar was recently organized to celebrate the two decades of the SMC (Dahal, Kafle & Poudyal, 2024).

Figure 1

The Sadharanikaran Model of Communication



Sadharanikaran as a concept/theory should not be confused with the Sadharanikaran Model of Communication. The former, which is one of the significant theories in Sanskrit poetics, has its roots in the *Natyashastra* of Bharata Muni and is identified with Bhattanayaka. Bharat Muni describes sadharanikaran as that point in the climax of a drama when the audience becomes one with the actor, who lives an experience through his/her acting on stage and starts simultaneously reliving the same experience. The process has been described as *rasaswadana*. When sadharanikaran happens, sharing or commonness of experience takes place in full form. According to Bhattanayak, the essence of sadharanikaran is to

achieve commonness or oneness among the people. The latter refers to a model of communication (see the figure), which draws on the classical concept/theory of sadharanikaran along with other resources in order to visualize the Hindu perspective on communication.

The SMC is a systematic presentation of a process of attaining mutual understanding, commonness, or oneness among communication parties. It illustrates how the communicating parties interact in a system for the attainment of saharidayata (for further discussion on the model, see Adhikary, 2009, 2014).

Communication as a means for moksha-in-life

Hinduism envisions four goals of life _ purushartha chatustayas (Hiriyanna, 1952, pp. 65-68; 1993). Though the four goals encompass all of the three dimensions — adhibhautika (physical or mundane), adhidaivika (mental) and adhyatmika (spiritual) — in orthodox Hindu life “[t]he spiritual motive dominates” (Radhakrishnan, 2004a, p. 25). According to Aurobindo (1999a), “Brahmajnana, Yoga & Dharma are the three essentialities of Hinduism” (p. 64). Thus, it is evident that moksha (Brahmajnana, salvation, liberation, freedom) is the highest purushartha in Hindu belief. As Swami Ramsukhdas (2005) puts it, “All the worldly pleasures without attaining salvation are useless ... it is the main duty of a man to attain salvation” (p. 66). Such a view is shared by virtually all schools of Hinduism except the philosophy of Charvaka (Balasubramanian, 1990, p. 17; Sinha, 1987, p. 252).

The word moksha in Sanskrit has been derived from the root muk and has many connotations due to the pluralistic tradition of Hinduism (Adhikary, 2007, p. 40; Radhakrishnan, 1996, p. 119). But this does not mean that there is no coherence. To get freedom from the law of karma is a necessary condition for moksha:

It is conceived as freedom from subjection of time. As birth and death are the symbols of time, life eternal or moksha is liberation from births and deaths. It is the fourth state of

consciousness beyond the three worlds, what the Bhagavad-gita calls paramam brahma or brahma-nirvana. It is freedom from subjection to the law of Karma. (Radhakrishnan, 1996, p. 119)

A primary concern here is whether moksha is a theoretical enterprise only. If it was so, from a practical point of view, it would be worthless in its utility in real human life, and hence moksha would not have been termed a purushartha. Incorporating it in the set of purusharthas implies that moksha is both a theoretical as well as a practical enterprise. Moreover, the unity of theory and practice is a common view of orthodox Hindu philosophical traditions (Balasubramanian, 1990, p. 16; Bhattacharyya, 1990, p. 10; Sen, 1990, p. 77), and this view applies to moksha too. Moksha is a theoretical enterprise, it is obvious, but it has to be attained in the domain of practice.

In Hinduism, moksha may be jivan-mukti (i.e., moksha-in-life) or videha-mukti (i.e., moksha after the cessation of the body). “While jivan-mukti is deliverance during life, videha-mukti is deliverance after death, when out of bodily form” (Radhakrishnan, 1996, p. 121). Jivan-mukti and videha-mukti denote the same state but from two different standpoints. “There is only one liberation in the sense of liberation from bondage, though it may be viewed in two perspectives in the context of the continuation or cessation of the body” (Balasubramanian, 1990, p. 21). According to Swami Vidyananda (1996), “The two types of liberation mentioned are distinguished only by the presence or absence of the body and the sense organs; the experience is the same” (p. 34). The result is the same: “In either case, the soul is freed from conditioned state” (Radhakrishnan, 1996, p. 122).

What is necessary for moksha is to transcend time and space irrespective of bodily existence. In fact, moksha is the natural state of atman, which is by its very nature capable of transcending time and space (Abhedananda, 1992, p. 37). It is not that the world ceases to

exist altogether, but all illusions and desires have vanished, thereby making the self mukta — liberated (Dasgupta, 1969, p. 161; Hiriyanna, 2005, pp. 173-174; Vidyananya, 1996, p. 20). In Hindu belief, moksha-in-life is a possibility for everybody (Shastri, 1976, p. 196).

Thus, moksha is the highest attainment of humans; it is not just a theoretical concept, and it can be attained even during life by getting freedom from subjection to the law of karma. It is only in this light studying the issue of attainment of moksha through communication becomes significant in terms of its utility in real human life. First, as moksha is not a theoretical enterprise the issue cannot be dismissed as just wandering of mind. Second, as it is not a post-mortem state this concern has something to do with real human life. In other words, the moksha that is to be attained by means of sanchar is jivanmukti (moksha-in-life). In the words of Aurobindo, “The aim of our Yoga is Jivanmukti in the universe; ... we have to live released in the world, not released out of the world” (1999a, p. 104).

Any endeavor in human life should lead, or at least agree with, the attainment of the purusharthas, and communication cannot be an exception in Hindu belief. Thus, any model of communication, if it is innate in Hinduism, should be able to describe communication as such a process that is capable of guiding even toward moksha (Adhikary, 2008, p. 284). The SMC not only illustrates the process of human communication but also illustrates the process of attaining moksha. According to this model, when taken in the adhyatmika context, communication is the process of moksha attainment (Adhikary, 2009, pp. 81-82).

The process of sadharanikaran is possible between atman and Brahman because Brahman is the rasa (“Rasovaisah” — Taittiriyaopanishad, VII.1; also see Raju, 1993, pp. 601-602) and atman has the capacity to accomplish rasaswadana. As Vatsyayan (1996) observes, “the aesthetic experience is akin to the mystic

experience of Brahman” (p. 146). Hindu scriptures (shastras) use the same word — Purusha — for atman and Brahman — “as if to lay stress upon the oneness of humanity with God” (Aurobindo, 1999a, p. 7). In the state of sadharanikaran, there is perfect communication between atman and Brahman, and they are identified as sahridayas — “Brahman is the Atman and the Atman is the Brahman” (Radhakrishnan, 2004a, p. 146).

As shown in an earlier study (Adhikary, 2007), Hindu thoughts on verbal communication, especially in a spiritual context, resort to the concepts of Shabda Brahman and Shabda Pramana. In both approaches, verbal communication qualifies not only as a process of human communication in a worldly setting but also as a means for attaining moksha-in-life.

The concept of Shabda Brahman is not new for the students and followers of Hinduism. The Pranava (the letter Aum or Om) is a signifier of Brahman, and it is the Shabda Brahman. Considering Pranava as Brahman is in accordance with the view of the Upanishads. In *Vakyapadiya*, Bhartrihari also has identified Brahman with speech. This approach has been envisaged in the SMC in the continuum of para-sakshatkara, wherein the vak (word or speech) is identified with the Brahman. In other words, the word (shabda) in the para level is Brahman, and the moksha-seeker (mumukshu) attains moksha if he/she does sakshatkara of the para vak. Here, atman experiences oneness with the Brahman (“Aham Brahmasmi”). Once the identity is established, the two terms — Brahman and Atman — become interchangeable and it makes no difference whether the Absolute is understood as Brahman or Atman (Krishnamurthy, 1989, p. 83).

In the second approach, Shabda has been treated as Shabda pramana. In this view, Shabda or word is not only considered a source of valid knowledge but also “as the decisive source of our cognition about all those matters that transcend the limits of possible

sensory experience” (Mohanty, 2001, p. 11). Even it is claimed that, “as a pramana, it is the strongest of all. At least in certain privileged domains, it cannot be challenged by any other” (ibid., p. 16).

Considering shabda as pramana does not mean that mere reading of the scriptures is sufficient; rather, understanding them and realizing the highest Truth described there is vital (Abhedananda, 1992, p. 98). It is in the domain of realization the language transcends the world of plurality thereby leading to “the ultimate realization of the universal unity of existence, consciousness and bliss” as a result of sakshatkara “of the great sentences like ‘I am Brahman’, ‘that thou art’ and so on” (Bhattacharyya, 1990, p. 14). Thus, the approach of considering Shabda as Pramana ultimately leads to Shabda as Brahman. And the above-mentioned second approach finally subsumes within the first approach.

Envisioning Communication as a Yoga

From the above discussion, sanchar (communication) as envisioned in Hinduism in general, and as illustrated by the SMC in particular, has been established as a means for attaining moksha-in-life. Then the immediate question arises whether sanchar being as a means for attaining moksha, qualifies as yoga too. In other words, there can be sanchariyoga, just like jnanayoga, karmayoga and bhaktiyoga.

Yoga does not mean the same all the time (Adhikary, 2007, p. 61; Aurobindo, 1999a, p. 18; Misra, 2008, p. 15; Radhakrishnan, 2004b, p. 337). It is to be noted that there is a system of philosophy named Yoga, which is identified with Patanjali. But here the word yoga does not refer to his system. Literally, it means ‘yoking’ and connotes the means or system through which moksha is attained (Adhikary, 2007, p. 63; Radhakrishnan, 2004b, p. 337; Shastri, 1976, p. 202; Vidyananya, 1996, p. 87).

Thus, yoga implies a particular state of the atman:

Yoga is getting to God, relating oneself to the power that

rules the universe, and touching the absolute. It is yoking not merely this or that power of the soul, but all the forces of heart, mind, and will to God. It is the effort of man to unite himself to the deeper principle. We have to change the whole poise of the soul into something absolute and uncompromising and develop the strength to resist power and pleasure. Yoga thus becomes the discipline by which we can train ourselves to bear the shocks of the world with the central being of our soul untouched. It is the method or the instrument, *upaya*, by which the end can be gained. (Radhakrishnan, 2004a, p. 532)

Aurobindo (1999a) holds a system approach to yoga, where any system of particular characteristics could qualify as yoga:

Yoga, generally, is the power that the soul in one body has of entering into effective relation with other souls, with parts of itself which are behind the waking consciousness, with forces of Nature and objects in Nature, with the Supreme Intelligence, Power & Bliss which governs the world either for the sake of that union in itself or to increase or modify our manifest being, knowledge, faculty, force or delight. Any system that organizes our inner being & our outer frame for these ends may be called a system of Yoga. (p. 19)

In another place, Aurobindo says that the complete practical aim of yoga is “to rise into divine existence, force, light & bliss and recast in that mold all mundane existence” (p. 102). For him, yoga is a means to arrive “at union with the Truth behind things through an inner discipline which leads us from the consciousness of the outward and apparent to the consciousness of the inner and real” (p. 327). He defines yoga as “the science, the process, the effort, and action by which man attempts to pass out of the limits of his ordinary mental consciousness into a greater spiritual consciousness” (p. 327). It is

a “methodized effort towards self-perfection” (1999b, p. 6).

Aurobindo has used the term “in the most general sense possible as a convenient name including all processes or results of processes that lead to the unveiling of a greater and inner knowledge, consciousness, experience” (1999a, p. 329). He firmly declares,

Any psychic discipline by which we can pass partly or wholly into a spiritual state of consciousness, any spontaneous or systematized approach to the inner Reality or the supreme Reality, any state of union or closeness to the Divine, any entry into a consciousness larger, deeper or higher than the normal consciousness common to humankind, fall automatically within the range of the word Yoga. (1999a, p. 329)

Thus, yoga is any means through which one gets connected, identifies with Isvara or Brahman or Paramatman; or attains moksha. For instance, jnana, karma, and bhakti are different paths for moksha, and hence they are established as different yogas. And, there is still scope for developing more yogas because there is no end in the pursuit of moksha.

Sanchar, as envisioned in Hinduism, has already been proved as a means for attaining moksha. After establishing the fact that yoga refers to any system or method for the attainment of moksha and already establishing sanchar such means, there is nothing for not considering sanchar as yoga. Thus, it is evident that the process of communication (sanchar) can be accepted as a kind of yoga provided that process results in the attainment of moksha. Hinduism has set moksha as the highest of the purushartha chatustaya (four goals of human life) and has introduced different paths, that is, different kinds of yoga, for the attainment of moksha. The sancharyoga is an addition in this regard.

Communication as Vidya

It is already discussed, regarding the Sadharanikaran Model

of Communication, that communication can be a means for the attainment of moksha. In other words, communication, as envisioned in Hinduism, qualifies not only as a process of sadharanikaran in a worldly setting but also as a means for attaining moksha-in-life. In addition, it has been established that the process of communication (sanchar) can be accepted as a kind of yoga. This provides sufficient ground for the communication discipline to qualify for being considered as a vidya according to Hinduism.

Approaching communication as a vidya does not imply discarding the avidya aspect. As mentioned above, the Hindu mode of communication deals with all of the adhibhautika (physical or mundane), adhidaivika (mental), and adhyatmika (spiritual) dimensions of life. Whereas the communication discipline is avidya in the physical and mental domains, it becomes a kind of vidya by incorporating the notion of sancharyoga. The co-existence of vidya and avidya aspects in the communication discipline (sancharshastra) does not invite any contradiction or problematic situation; rather, it heightens the significance of the discipline. Because one who knows vidya and avidya together attains immortality through vidya by crossing over death through avidya (“Vidyamchavidyam cha yastadveda ubhayam saha, Avidyaya mrityum tirtva vidyayaamritamashnute” — Ishavasya Upanishad-11).

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