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Communicating Climate Change: A Linguistic Approach

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Abstract:

Though climate change, its impact on the global health and the measures taken or will be taken are all grave matters pertaining to great scientific relevance and to broad general interest, there are some problems related to the part of communication of this most serious affair of the world. The purpose of this paper is to outline some of the problems inherent to the communication of climate change, to list some of the challenges ahead and also describe some of the action needed in order to communicate this more widely and effectively.

Keywords: Climate change, Environment, Communication, Language, Strategies.

Introduction:

The recent report of the WHO (World Health Organization) on air pollution and the most polluted cities (as per air pollution) in the world, in which Indian cities continued maintaining their leading positions Byrnihat (Meghalaya) being at the top of the list and 12 other Indian cities out of the first 20 most polluted cities, is alarming. New Delhi featured as the world's most polluted capital for the sixth consecutive year, with a PM2.5 concentration of 91.8. It is needless to mention that air pollution remains a serious health risk in India, reducing life expectancy by an estimated 5.2 years (World Air Quality Report 2024). According to a Lancet Planetary Health study published in 2023, about 1.5 million deaths in India every year from 2009 to 2019 were potentially linked to long-term exposure to PM2.5 pollutions. More alarming than this, according to the report of the WHO, is that nine out of ten people on the planet breathe air that contains high levels of pollutants like sulfate nitrates and black carbon, and kills more than 8 million people every year in the world. The words of Dr Maria Neira, the Director of the Department of Public Health, Environmental and Social Determinants of Health, WHO is worth quoting here:

“No doubt that air pollution represents today not only the biggest environmental risk for health at the moment and probably one of the biggest ones we are contemplating” (WHO Report 2018).

It is our mouth-wide wondering that only air pollution caused about 4.2 million deaths in 2016 in the world (WHO Report 2018). According to the State of Global Air Report, 2024, only in 2021, more than 7 lakh deaths in children under 5 years were linked to air pollution globally; this represents 15% of all global deaths in children under five. So, to quote Dr T. A. Ghebreyesus, the Director General of WHO, “If we don't take urgent action on air pollution, we will never come close to achieving sustainable development” (Ibid). Therefore, it is needless to say that a mass awareness about the environmental issues and more specifically the issues related to climate change is the minimum desideratum (minimum requirement) of the day. The gradual degradation of our environment — the constant increasing of the levels of global warming

(increasing averagely 0.6°C in every 100 years), the depletion of the ozone layer and a serious loss of biodiversity have also made most of us aware of the growing environmental concerns. It is really undeniable that “no citizen of the earth can afford to be ignorant of environmental issues” (Erach Barucha 2005) or the issues related to climate change in particular. Though climate change, its impact on the global health are all very serious matters pertaining to great scientific relevance and to broad general interest, there are some problems related to the part of communication of this most serious affair of the world too. Language and communication do also have a huge role to play in the efforts aiming at the mitigation of the aftermath of climate change. This paper will outline some of the problems latent in the communication of climate change, as well as to find out some of the challenges ahead and to describe some of the action needed in order to communicate climate change issues more widely and effectively.

For a better discussion on and understanding of the matter, the whole paper has been divided into two parts. The First Part deals with a general discussion on language and communication as an important aspect that has to play much significant role in the communiqué of climate change, its impacts upon the world and its inmates, while the Second Part relates with a number of different problems connected to the communication of the climate change to the public as well as this section will also attempt to enlighten on the challenges to come and some of the action needed to minimize the gap between climate change and its proper communication to the public.

Part-I

Language:

Language has a very important social purpose, because it is mainly used for linguistic communication (communication done with language or, in other words, with words) (T. Balasubramanian 2006). What then is ‘linguistics’? Linguistics is a scientific/systematic study of any language. And language is ‘a tool of communication/human communication.’ People use language to give shape to their thoughts/ideas/expressions/experiences. So, how can we define it? It can be defined in many ways such as:

- Language is “the method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way.” (*Concise Oxford English Dictionary* 10th ed. 2012),
- “A system of communication used by human beings which has certain characteristics distinguishing it from forms of communication found elsewhere in the animal kingdom (most animals communicate, but only people communicate with *language*) (Michael Pearce 2007).
- It is “The system of communication used by a particular community or country” (Ibid)
- Or, it is “... a system of sounds, words, patterns etc., used by humans to communicate thoughts and feelings” (Advance Learners’ Dictionary 2015).

Language, therefore, is something that we use for our communication. It is, to repeat again, ‘a tool of communication’ — a means which helps us to achieve our communicative purposes. A language is basically used in two ways for the purposes of communication: *spoken* and *written*. A third way of using any language does also persist: *sign/body language*. However, the former mode of communication i.e. the medium of speech or the spoken language is more important than the latter i.e. the written language for several reasons (T. Balasubramanian 2006) such as:

- ✓ Speech came first in the history of any language community (e.g. oral tradition).
- ✓ Speech comes first in the history of the life of any individual; we start speaking long before we start writing.
- ✓ Speech, as a medium of communication is used much more than the medium of writing; we can take an example from our own life that we speak much more than we write a day (we speak 30% while we write only 9%, read 16% and listen 45% in a day as well as in a life).
- ✓ Written language is none other than an attempt to represent, using marks and symbols on paper, the sounds used in spoken language.

- ✓ One's speech and voice is his trade mark, and not writing, because writing does not have that immediacy as the words are static on a page. One's voice (its quality, loudness, pronunciation etc.) gives extra life and mobility to it.
- ✓ The scope of having desired feedback/ response in the case of oral communication is more immediate than written way of communication.

So, it is very much clear to us that the medium of speech is more important than the medium of writing to fulfill our communication purposes.

The question now arises: what is communication then? It will, therefore, be convenient for us for the need of the context that we have a clear concept about 'communication' too.

Communication:

- **Meaning and Definitions:**

Communication involves share or transfer of ideas, thoughts or feelings by the sender to receiver(s) via verbal or nonverbal means. The word communication has been originated from the Latin word '*communicare*' which means 'to share' and this sharing is of information, knowledge and thoughts or ideas (Meenakshi Raman and Sangeeta Sharma 2004). So, to speak precisely, communication is a process of sharing or exchange of information, ideas and knowledge between two parties: source/sender and recipient or receiver through an accepted code of symbols or signals making up a common language or channel.

It can also be defined as the sharing of information/ ideas between two or more individuals or groups to reach a common understanding of the message(s) being shared.

- **Process of Communication:**

Communication is the process that enables materialization and achievement of public relation goals. Communication process is vital since it is done to inform, convince, motivate and provide mutual understanding. In other words, we should know first what communication is, and then how to use communication tools effectively in disseminating knowledge/information:

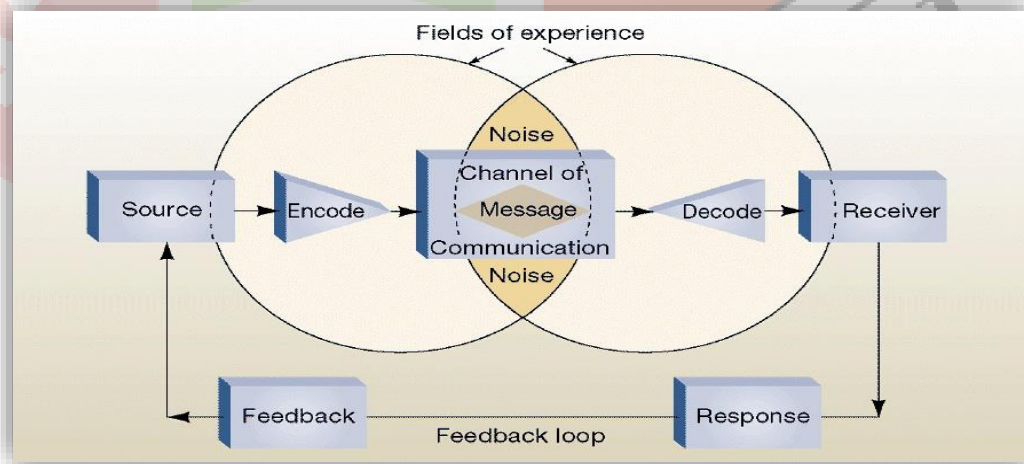


Fig.1: Communication Process in diagram

Source or sender after selecting a channel (a common language) encodes the message i.e. gives a proper shape of his/her thought/idea or emotion to a message and sends it to the Recipient/ Receiver. Receiver in his own turn, after receiving the message, decodes it i.e. opens or unwraps the message and understands it with the same perception as sent by the sender. Then he gives a response or feedback to the sender through the same channel, and thus the cycle of the process of communication completes.

- Major factors required for building any communication process:
 - Cooperation between the sender and receiver
 - A common environment for communication

- Selection of an appropriate Channel/Medium/language
- Proper Encoding & Decoding of the message
- Receipt of the desired Response and Feedback
- Awareness about possible Noise/Barriers
- Effective communication:

A communication is called effective only when the receiver receives the message intended by the sender in the same perspective. Otherwise, it is miscommunication (Meenakshi Raman and Sangeeta Sharma 2004).
- Reasons for miscommunication: There may be several reasons for any miscommunication such as noise (any disruption/ hindrance and not any unpleasant sound) or barrier or breakdown at the source, in the channel, in the encoding or decoding of the message or even in the sending of feedback etc.
- Types of Communication:
 - Verbal Communication: A communication that is built with the help of **words** such as a) oral communication, b) written communication, and c) electronic communication (e-mails etc.)
 - Nonverbal Communication: A communication that can be built with a person/party without using words/any form of speech but with the help of some nonverbal cues like gestures, postures, eye contact, bodily movement, haptics (touch) and a lot of other factors except words.

So, when we aim at to convey some messages to somebody, it is not only the message that is of sole importance but to communicate that message to the recipient/ recipients in a convenient and effective way has also an equal importance to achieve the desired goal successfully. Thus, we can say that communication both as verbal and nonverbal has a huge importance in order to convey and convince people the concerns related to climate change issues properly and methodically.

Part-II

Communicating Climate Change:

The role of Language and Communication in conveying the proper messages to the society in a more effective way regarding the meanings and reasons of climate change and the measures that can be taken to mitigate the impacts of climate change upon the world and global health is key of the discussion in this part.

A recent study undertaken in the UK by the Department for Education and Skills and disseminated by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has shown that climate change “worries children”. When a sample of young people in that study was asked about the world’s problems and climate change, the sample often referred to as young people’s biggest concern for the world’s future. According to that study, 24 per cent of the sample believed it is the greatest threat faced, while 19 per cent think it is crime and violence. Of the 1000, 10 to 18-year-olds questioned, 18 per cent nominated terrorism and 12 per cent said it was lack of housing around the globe which concerned them most. In this context, it is important to acknowledge that there are some factors that influence attitudes towards climate change and that, at the same time, there are some barriers seen when one tries to communicate climate change. One of such barriers is related to some misconceptions of what climate change in fact is about which we will discuss afterwards in details.

Finding the Problems and Bridging the Gap (Action Required):

- **Firstly**, there is the need of imparting proper information that clarifies practicability of modern environmental concepts such as ‘the need to conserve the biodiversity’, ‘the need to lead more sustainable life style,’ and ‘the need to use resources more equitably, economically and judiciously.’
- Imparting this information to the students of higher education at college or university level in the

country (as it is already in practice that UGC following the directives of the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India has already implemented a common basic course of Environmental Studies for the UG students of India years back) may have helped much in bridging the gap. But to achieve more appreciating result in this effort may be accomplished only when the knowledge and information regarding the environmental issues and the climate change concerns be passed in a more effective way to the school kids — the future care takers and stakeholders of the environment as mentioned above also.

- **Secondly**, there is a need to change our mind-set — the way we view, see and feel the environment. In this regard, we must leave all the myths and taboos about our environment. We must get rid of all the misconceptions that we have in our mind about climate change. Some of the most common misconceptions related to climate change are:
 - ✓ Climate change is too abstract an issue;
 - ✓ I do not have any role in this big matter;
 - ✓ Climate change is too broad a topic;
 - ✓ Climate change is mostly a technical matter where calculations and forecasts are made;
 - ✓ There are no trained people to handle the approach of climate change topics in an understandable way; and
 - ✓ Climate change has too wide a scientific basis.

We have to make first ourselves and then others clearly convinced about the uselessness of these misconceptions in order to communicate the real extents of climate change issues. Only then we can do something positive to save the degrading environment.

- **Thirdly**, going a bit far beyond the mere bookish knowledge about environment and climate change, we should usher in and concentrate more on the practical approaches to the mother environment basing on empirical or practical observations and self-learning process rather than being merely indifferent to whatever is happening or going on in the environment (Erach Bharucha 2005).
- **Fourthly**, affluent public awareness programmes related to climate change issues have to be promoted; encouraging the interest of common people to include climate change issues as much as possible in their daily interactions and socio-cultural and literary activities.
- **Fifthly**, Communication for sustainable development of the society and the world is another important issue in this regard. Sustainable development is the cry of the day. We all now rush after the absolute sustainable development of the society. But problem also lies with communicating the sustainable strategies. In fact, communication plays a crucial role in any sustainable strategy. Brundtland Commission in 1987 has defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987).
- **Finally**, the eight-step strategies/ elements of a successful communication process as mentioned by Jenni Parker in *Communicating Climate Change: What You Can Do* (2013) can be used in the effective communication of the climate change issues too:
 - Define Your Objectives
 - Know Your Audience
 - Craft Your Communication
 - Engage Partners
 - Choose Your Channel
 - Choose Your Format
 - Measure Impact and
 - Amplify Impact

Conclusion:

Thus, if we take care of all these issues as discussed above especially the issues related to the problems of communication of climate change — its impact, mitigation and adaptation concerns — we can at least help ourselves to come out of these shortcomings and achieve the greatest goal for the greatest number of people in the world. Government offices of distinct countries worldwide, of course, trying hard to meet the issues related to climate change and its impact by making various policies, passing laws, implementing various schemes and a lot of other measures at their end, but the major and more important part of these efforts goes to all of us, because it is we who can only at our own level, slowly but steadily, make the things different by heartily and earnestly trying to stop the nature from further degradation.

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Illustrations:

Figure 1: Communication Process. Source: MBA Knowledge Base.

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