

The Inverted “Red Triangle” and Communicating the Small Family Norm in the Developing World

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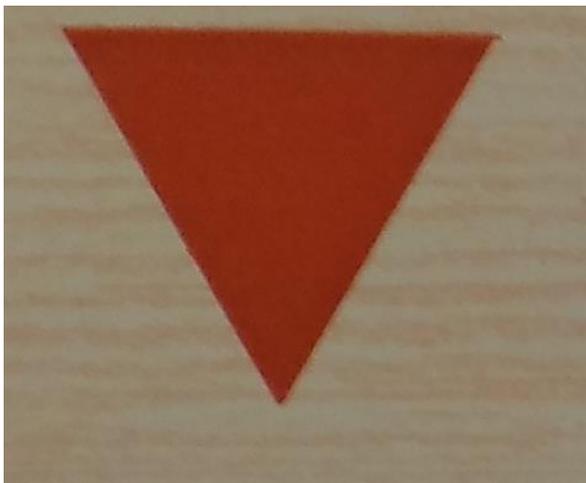
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In December 1968, Frank Wilder presented a paper in a Carolina-USAID Workshop on *'Mass Communications in Family Planning.'* This was, perhaps, the first time he presented the inverted "Red Triangle" to the developing world. As a consultant to the Ford Foundation's India Office focused on Mass Communications for Family Planning, he had been working on the symbol for the past three years. In his paper, he added a note that the symbol was now ready for circulation across the 'developing countries' or what we know as the Global South. He writes:



*"While we are primarily concerned with the development of a mass communications strategy at the national level, many of our conclusions will be applicable to family planning programs in smaller political and administrative subdivisions of the country, such as States, provinces, districts and cities."*¹

Figure 1 The Inverted Red Triangle¹

Contexts in which mass communications are practiced differ between nations. However, for Wilder, there is *"sufficient experience"*² for specialists in this field to work on several hypotheses and suggestions applicable to differing scenarios. Wilder's framework is very important for understanding a relatively understudied aspect of the Ford Foundation's population control programs: the role of media messaging in propagating the planned, small family. In his attempt to set up a model of messaging that can be applied to numerous developing contexts, we see how the *science* of population control constructs the Global South as it is operationalized in varied nations.

It is no surprise that India was the first site for experimentations within global programs. India's place in the international movement for population control has been crucial and well described in literature (Ledbetter 1984) (Rao 2004) (Connelly 2008). International philanthropic organizations, especially the Rockefeller Foundation and the Ford Foundation, have been crucial in shaping its national population policy, especially in the years after 1947. The Rockefeller Archive Center is therefore a pivotal archive to understand the statecraft of postcolonial India. Not only does the paper trail throw light on the kind of social experimentation that was part of the grants in India, but also provides thick descriptions of negotiations with the Indian bureaucrats, demographers, social scientists and political figures (Williams 2010) (Goswami Undated). It is within this context that Frank Wilder's expert comments should be situated.

This report describes the efforts of Frank Wilder and Dharmendra Kumar Tyagi to create an international symbol for family planning programs. This symbol circulated across the Global South in ways that could only be made possible through the Ford Foundation. The program, however, was short-lived. The report will outline the semiotic links of the symbol and the campaign around it to the idea of the city and provide possible responses to its cancellation. The period of my study is 1954-1978, and thereby, I mainly trace the Ford Foundation officers and the programs they supported within Family Planning. But there is immense overlap between the spheres of influence of the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations. However, the period and focus of my study, has been the '*Hum Do Hamare Do*' (We are two, we will bear two) and the inverted "Red Triangle" campaigns.

Going back to Wilder's paper, he suggested three forms in which the media messages around family planning could be designed. The vague message was "*Practice Family Planning.*" This was followed by a generalization: "*A Small Family is a Happy Family.*" Finally, there was the national appeal, "*For National*

Progress, Plan Your Family.” The last statement clearly links the population control programme to the national developmental goals. It is in this manner that propaganda on family planning makes explicit certain underlying assumptions of controlling numbers. He elaborates on the inverted “Red Triangle”:

A symbol like the Red Triangle, used wherever family planning is in evidence, acts so much as a reinforcement of the message that it must be considered a part of the message. Since the Red Triangle is the only such symbol in existence today, let us examine how it works as a communicating device...it has no prior meaning, good or bad. Thus, in the minds of the audience, it assumes only one meaning – Family Planning. Second, it is so simple in design that it can be quickly reproduced anywhere in the country without the need for artistic talent. It can indicate the location of family planning clinics, vehicles and other facilities of the program. Family Planning field personnel in the remotest areas can easily be distinguished when they wear this symbol. The Red Triangle is distinctive in shape, and because of its bright red color, it can be seen at great distances. It can also be used to mark contraceptive products. Most important of all for the developing countries, such a symbol can be verbalized – i.e., anyone can call it by name without the necessity for further communication about it.³

There is something interesting about the way he envisions the symbol. He accepts the challenges of framing the message of family planning in diverse ways by creating a symbol, which is, in essence, empty of meaning. This could perhaps be the first use of the concept of *branding* a governmental policy. His symbol is unique in the way the intended audience gave their own meanings to it; its connection to family planning does not take away the agency of the recipient of this message. In other words, the audience is not a passive acceptor who is internalizing the message. They have the space to *translate* the idea in their own words and *interpret* the planned family in their own ways.

As historians, we need to ‘read’ the messages and the media through which they circulated. This way, we can also revisit some of the conclusions that have been drawn around policies. Additionally, such a reading provides space for a secondary layer of analysis around the overpopulation logic and its insertions into other processes like modernisation and national economic developmentalism. This is important in order to address some ‘black holes’ of population control policies: questions like why did the policies lead to forced sterilizations to meet target demographic figures, concluding with the Emergency (1975-77) excesses. These excesses have been described extensively in existing scholarship. Emma Tarlo described the painful narratives of people who were forcefully taken to sterilization camps in different parts of Delhi (Tarlow 2003). Marika Vicziany and Matthew Connelly have shown the role that philanthropic organizations played in stressing demographic targets to be achieved by a certain cut-off date, which emboldened bureaucrats across the hierarchy to pursue these targets by coercion (Vicziany 1982-83) (Connelly 2006). However, these explanations provide half-hearted answers to the reasons for the extent and scale of coercion that characterised the vasectomy camps. Also, the literature fails to explain how complex relations were between the program officers and their respective Indian counterparts. A question that has received scant attention is whether such a target-driven population control programme could have been avoided. In a ‘what-if’ analysis, it is pertinent to ask whether the forced sterilizations were inevitable and whether there were competing, alternative visions of family planning that could have avoided the path of coercive vasectomies.

Seen this way, multiple questions arise from the organizational structures and priorities of the Ford Foundation in the decades after Independence. One key question is about the role of the consultants who visited the country for specific tasks and programs. Many times, they stayed for longer periods than originally intended. Often, they would bring their experiences from programs in other

developing countries and try to implement them in the immediate context. The consultants were very often doctors, epidemiologists, demographers and social scientists invited by the Foundation to address questions of design and distribution of grants that were suited to the aims of the project. I see these consultants and the reports they leave behind as artefacts of postcolonial history. To understand the modes of governance in the recently decolonized world, it is important to study the worldviews, stereotypes and assumptions that guided the consultants as they examined the problems at hand and provided solutions. In this sense, they were the documenters of history, who often juxtaposed their varied experiences in the developing world, thereby showing how ideas circulate and mutate in their journeys across different development paradigms. It also leads to a certain cross-fertilization of ideas that is unique to the post- '47 governance in India.

When Reuben Hill visited the India office in 1965, he described a rather confusing scenario. He states, “...both Indian and American professionals are discouraged and disenchanted with the progress of family planning in India.” And yet his impressions were optimistic:

Population issues are now everywhere discussable and they are salient for many people in and out of government. Editorials, advertisements, debates in the state and central legislatures, and counter propaganda are observable. Posters about family planning adorn the walls in medical centers. Family Planning has sufficient priority to be allotted several million rupees from the central government and is beginning to get some state support. Even the Chinese invasion and the Pakistan war hasn't held up the budget allocations. More serious is the failure to appoint personnel and the shortage of transports and supplies resulting in under-spending budgets.⁴

This forms the first page of Reuben Hill's report. Several other reports reinforce his observations of lack of hands "on ground." As N.J Demerath states, *"There is a surfeit of organization blueprints, formalistic "chalking out," funds "bodies" in place. Only by a practical management and leadership input on a large scale, can chaos and failure be avoided and a critical national goal be achieved."*⁵ Calling for better relations between Ford consultants and Indian officials, Dr. David E. Price writes in 1967, *"Many consultants had no Indian with whom to work in a collegial way; some were for this reason expected to play a managerial rather than a consultant role in creating a program...Several of the consultants had been recruited without precise knowledge of the nature of their assignments... recruitment had been completed before any agreement had been reached with Indian officials as to the nature of assignment."*⁶ Simultaneously, like Hill, there is immense appreciation of the propaganda efforts as he states, *"Many new uses of mass communication have been introduced. Billboards and posters are commonplace. The national family planning symbol, the apex-down red equilateral triangle, is becoming almost as ubiquitous as the fading signature of National Malaria Eradication Program Spray teams!"*⁷

Price goes on to describe that the All India Radio was also becoming part of the innovations of the mass communication efforts.

*"A recent innovation uses the family planning budget to add a team of three to the staff of each of the twenty-two regional stations of All India Radio. Each team consists of an extension worker, a script-writer, and a reporter. Its purpose is to obtain the maximum impact for family planning in the station's programming. Almost all the team members have recently attended a ten day workshop and are now assuming their duties."*⁸

Simultaneously, there runs a thread of distrust towards the operational capabilities of the Indian counterparts, as is evidenced in this letter:

“We now have a reasonably well balanced set of equipment such as motion picture projectors, slide projectors, tape recorder, specialised projectors, portable loud speaker, screens etc. As you can appreciate, this equipment is delicate and requires careful handling and regular maintenance. I have kept a tight hand on it because when I came I observed a propensity, particularly on the part of the local staff, to throw the equipment about as if it were bags of wheat and to use it for private purposes. My secretary has carefully checked each item in and out as it has been used by our various staff members.”⁹

Clearly, there runs a conceptual divide in the way the Ford Foundation functions vis-à-vis “local” population. Indians, be it staff or bureaucrat, were set to receive not only the skillsets, knowledge and machinery from the Foundation, but also a certain work ethic when they come onboard the Ford agenda. The consensus one can draw from the quotes cited above is an ambiguity in the way officials and staffs of two very different organizational structures were working within strict time and resource constraints. What brought them together was an overlap of concern and worry about population control and its implications for the national programme.

Frank Wilder repeatedly complains about his Indian counterparts: *“Our good mass communications talent, knowledge and experience alone will not break through the monstrous impediment of deep rooted, evil governmental practices in administration, finance and personnel selection and promotion.”¹⁰* Similarly, Douglas Ensminger, the Ford representative in India, and his family planning team in India said:

“India’s bureaucracy is filled with officers in an attitude of conformity and passive self-protection. (Emphasis in original) At all levels, Government officers are obsequious to superiors and imperious to subordinates. Their attitude combines a kind of Maharajah Syndrome and the professional

equivalent of the caste system. Nobody makes waves. This attitude works constantly and effectively against expressions of dynamism beyond the call of that sluggish bureaucracy. It shuts off the possibility of teamwork, for departures from the routine, for deserved praise. Above all it throttles ideas and actions. Government operations in India are a disastrous parody of efficient British bureaucracy...”¹¹

There are several reasons that India’s efforts at mass communication were unique. Several innovations could be ascribed only to quick thinking on part of the programme officers and bureaucrats.

“India’s brave radical departures in mass motivation techniques are worth study because they hold promise of unprecedented pay-offs at reasonable cost, within the pressing limits of national fertility control programs in the crucial developing countries. There may also be lessons, both for foreign aid agencies and host governments, in any development effort where success depends on wide public understanding and participation.” (Wilder and Tyagi 1968, 773)

There are several reasons that Wilder was enthusiastic about India spearheading a unique effort in using mass media to propagate the values of population control. In a detailed article that he co-wrote with D K Tyagi, he recounts that the government by 1966 was leaning towards spending on combining “*standard media (press, radio, motion pictures and printed materials) and any ‘outdoor’ visual medium they could lay their message on.*” (Wilder and Tyagi 1968, 775) This meant the use of unconventional surfaces like “*billboards, buses, matchboxes, rikshas, pocket calendars, newspaper and magazine advertisements, carnival banners, shopping bags, official village civic registers, telephone directories and... the exterior walls of buildings for huge lasting*

paintings of the basic design. (Wilder and Tyagi 1968, 177) These statements show that Wilder's efforts at creating a symbol were synchronous with the Indian government's internal effort at creating a national programme that could transgress literacy and language barriers:

“The Indian program must reach out to the minds of some 400 million persons. Illiteracy is widespread, incomes are low, and there is little built-in motivation toward family planning. Effective mass media in the vast rural areas, are insufficient. Under those conditions, the special characteristics of the Red Triangle seem to help advance the program insignificantly. First, it is distinctive. This means it will be identified in people's minds only with family planning and with family planning services and products... In India, the Red Triangle always appears with the 2-or-3 children message and the four faces design.” (Wilder and Tyagi 1968, 778)

In all, Wilder and Tyagi had proposed a concrete answer to the question, *“Within limits of what is politically and practically possible, how can communication methods and media be used most effectively to help bring married couples in specific Asian countries to the regular, continued, and effective use of contraceptives, in order to space or limit births?”*¹² This question is of vital importance to the story of the population control programme in India, and the place of mass communications in it. The campaign of the “Red Triangle” was a uniquely Indian invention as opposed to an import from the West. Even as a Ford consultant helped build and create it, the Foundation did not seek to own the creative license of the project. As Frank Wilder states:

“The difference between the family size desired by parents and the size desired by us (emphasis in original) has obvious vital meaning in shaping the approach and content of the mass, community and personal persuasion that will have to take place. As far as I know, only India has

mounted a mass communications effort that is centered totally on the direct appeal (or exhortation): “Two or Three Children; then Stop!” As and if traditional and political resistance melt, the Indians hope to move to a message even more powerful: “If You Have Two, That will Do!”¹³

It can be gleaned from the paper trail that the campaign and distribution of contraceptives and knowledge about them were going hand in hand, namely, the condom, IUD and sterilization. Nirodh was the state-sponsored condom that was distributed for free in hospitals and Primary Health Centres and was as well publicised as the “Red Triangle” in the country. Thus a memo written in December 1970 states the following figures and prerogatives for such a campaign:

“The extent of communication inputs in India’s Family Planning program is considerable. The 1969-74 Five Year Plan allocates about 8.3 percent of the total family planning budget for mass communication, and an additional 21.7 percent of incentives to adopters, motivators and family planning staff. The Plan allocates 156,000 positions to family planning, which are supplemented by about 300,000 piece-rate aides; each of these individuals is a producer of interpersonal communication messages aimed at the receiving audience.

India’s family planning communication program has largely accomplished one very important goal, but is yet faced with a much more difficult objective. The successful accomplishment is represented by the rather high percentage of the Indian population that is aware (1) of the family planning program (2) of the small family norm of two or three children, and (3) of such specific family planning innovations as Nirodh, IUD, and sterilization... However, the adoption (or Practice) effect of the family planning communication program in India has been relatively disappointing to date. While 75-90 percent of the target audience possess awareness knowledge, and most of these have favourable attitudes, adoption of the family planning methods is only

around 10-15 percent. Closing this so-called KAP-gap is the major communication task facing India's family planning program today."¹⁴
(Emphasis in original).

From the quote cited above, the significance that the “Red Triangle” campaign enjoyed in policy circles can be gleaned. The KAP studies could have been the reason, however, for the eventual decision to move away from mass communications-based programs to more medicalized, doctor-centric and sterilization-centric policies. This turn happened with the 1971 census, which showed that overall fertility rates had still not shown a significant decline. By this time the “Red Triangle” campaign was aborted. The reasons for doing so will be a focus of my doctoral research.

Several sub-disciplines of demography emerged from the mass-communication propaganda efforts that have been described here. For instance, ‘Population Socialization,’ which is *“the process through which culture (values, norms, roles) is transmitted and by which people learn all attitudes, facts, and behaviour related directly or indirectly to fertility, mortality and migration. It includes but is not limited to specific population education and communication efforts. It involves cognitive (beliefs, perceptions, knowledge) and affective learning within the family and outside it relevant to present and anticipated conditions; it is a sub-component of broader socialization processes.”*¹⁵ This discipline in particular was interested in studying the afterlife of propaganda campaigns.

“... these programs have not been adequately evaluated and have been based on assumptions that a) there is necessarily a direct relationship between knowledge and behaviour... b) knowledge can help override the influences of other sociocultural factors as well as personality characteristics. Much more should be learned about ‘folk demography,’ its contents and importance to the individual, in order to design better I E & C programs... (so that it does not appear that)

population education programs do not encourage active decision making based on evaluation of facts, but rather passive receptivity of alien norms and practices.”¹⁶

Simultaneously, the idea that ‘information’ about family planning was crucial to its acceptance was beginning to percolate in governance circles, too. The analysis by the Planning Commission of the Family Planning Program in 1970 states:

“People are likely to have feelings of ambivalence about family planning. Therefore, the programme of education and communication should be carried out on a continuous basis in order to overcome this tendency. This is supported from the fact that some of the adopters had postponed the operations/IUCD insertions for some reason or the other. Also, it was noted that the villagers were exposed to both negative and positive information regarding the different family planning methods. One of the important reasons given by the adopters for others not following their advice was said to be apprehensions and fear of consequences. Therefore, it is not surprising that analysis of achievement over a three year period at the village or block levels showed significant rise and fall.”¹⁷

From these excerpts, we can glean that the Ford officials were negotiating a chain of command which was spread across bureaucrats, scientists, demographers and social scientists. The hierarchical mode of governance was creating frictions in the way the Ford officials could contribute their ideas to a programme. The “Red Triangle” was an instance where such barriers were removed, and the ideation was synchronised between an official and his Indian counterpart.

The journey of the “Red Triangle” was far from being limited to India. Wilder was successful in making it the international symbol for the family planning movement. It has become the symbol of the Family Planning Association of India

in recent years. The paper trail from the Rockefeller Archive Center indicates that the symbol crossed continents to be used in Nigeria. Under the section titled “*Symbol for the Family Planning Council of Nigeria*” a survey report states:

“Respondents were presented with the Red Triangle symbol and were asked whether they knew what it represents. Approximately 20% of the national sample admitted they knew. Of this 20%, 34% could correctly identify it as the symbol of the Family Planning Council of Nigeria. Approximately 77% had not seen it before. Of the 23 % that claimed to have seen it before, 22% saw it on a road hoarding, 18% on a poster, and 17% on a FPCN clinic. The duration of this recall ranged from “during this month” (30%), to “last month” (19%), and “3 to 6 months ago (13%).”¹⁸

In conclusion, I reiterate that the inverted “Red Triangle” was an Indian effort towards creating an international symbol for the family planning movement. This story has been largely overlooked in histories of medicine, medical propaganda and studies on the Emergency (1975-77). This symbol has travelled far and wide, and the Rockefeller Archive Center has been a crucial site to discover its creation and rather unique journey across the Global South.

¹ Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), Ford Foundation (FF) Catalogued Reports, FA739B, S 3255-6261, B 166, F 003678, “Suggestions for Finding the Best Media and Messages in Family Planning Mass Communications,” pp. 2.

² RAC, FF Catalogued Reports, FA739B, S 3255-6261, B 166, F 003678, “Suggestions for Finding the Best Media and Messages in Family Planning Mass Communications,” pp. 2.

³ RAC, FF Catalogued Reports, FA739B, S 3255-6261, B 166, F 003678, “Suggestions for Finding the Best Media and Messages in Family Planning Mass Communications,” pp.11.

⁴ RAC, FF Catalogued Reports, FA739B, S 3255-6261, B 166, F 003684, “Comments on Programs in India,” dated 18 October 1965, pp. 1.

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- ⁵ RAC, FF Catalogued Reports, FA739B, S 3255-6261, B 166, F 003685, "Some Problems and Needs of Family Planning," dated 14 September 1965, pp. 1.
- ⁶ RAC, FF Catalogued Reports, FA739B, S 3255-6261, B 166, F 003686, "In Search of Influence," dated August 1967, pp. 15-16.
- ⁷ RAC, FF Catalogued Reports, FA739B, S 3255-6261, B 166, F 003686, "In Search of Influence," dated August 1967, pp. 10.
- ⁸ RAC, FF Catalogued Reports, FA739B, S 3255-6261, B 166, F 003686, "In Search of Influence," dated August 1967, pp. 10-11.
- ⁹ RAC, FF Catalogued Reports, FA739B, S 3255-6261, B 206, F 004573, Letter dated July 1, 1970 from Robert P Worrall to Douglas Ensminger, in "Communications and the India Field Office, End of Tour Report," Appendix No. 3.
- ¹⁰ RAC, FF Catalogued Reports, FA739C, S 6262-9286, B 310, F 006951, "Mass Communications: Easier Said Than Done—But Doable," dated March 1968, pp.13.
- ¹¹ Douglas Ensminger and his family planning team in India said in a paper for Dave Bell as quoted in RAC, FF Catalogued Reports, FA739C, S 6262-9286, B 310, F 006951, "Mass Communications: Easier Said Than Done—But Doable," dated March 1968, 13-14.
- ¹² RAC, FF Catalogued Reports, FA739C, S 6262-9286, B 310, F 006947, "How do People Adopt New Practices?" dated December 1968, pp. 3.
- ¹³ RAC, FF Catalogued Reports, FA739C, S 6262-9286, B 310, F 006951, "Mass Communications: Easier Said Than Done—But Doable," dated March 1968, 12.
- ¹⁴ RAC, FF Catalogued Reports, FA739C, S 6262-9286, B 310, F 006949, "Communication Research and Family Planning in India," dated 16 December 1970, pp. 4.
- ¹⁵ RAC, FF Catalogued Reports, FA739C, S 6262-9286, B 282, F 006298, "Conference on Population Socialization, East-West Population Institute, December 15-21, 1974," dated 7 January 1975, pp. 1.
- ¹⁶ RAC, FF Catalogued Reports, FA739C, S 6262-9286, B 282, F 006298, "Conference on Population Socialization, East-West Population Institute, December 15-21, 1974," dated 7 January 1975, pp. 5.
- ¹⁷ RAC, FF Catalogued Reports, FA739A, S 1-3254, B 63, F 1608, "Evaluation Report of the Family Planning Program," dated April 1970, pp. 24.
- ¹⁸ RAC, FF Catalogued Report, FA739C, S 6262-9286, B 310, F 6962, "Family Life Survey," dated January 19, 1973, V-1.

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