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<th>Recent perspectives in using traditional or folk media in development communication</th>
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<tbody>
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Recent Perspectives in Using Traditional / Folk Media in Development Communication

By

H K Ranganath
RECENT PERSPECTIVES IN USING TRADITIONAL/FOLK MEDIA IN DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION.

- Dr. H.K. Ranganath

1. When the world found itself in the last decade of an eventful century, waiting to be ushered into the next, it was time to take a look in retrospect. And it reckoned with wonder, that Communication in its many perceptions, levels and dimensions was the motivating force to progressive development in the Third World. Communication by any means was considered most urgent to change the mass mind for development. And a meaningful component of communication was the seemingly simple performances of the people themselves. As live performances and also as mass media integrated, the message bearing traditional folk media had became popular with their colour and costume, dance and music, story telling and puppetry. The 'country-cousin' had adventured to the central stage of modern communication by the middle of the 20th century.

2. Three decades of trial and error from the Fifties of this century, through the UNESCO sponsored seminars and workshops in London, Delhi and Lagos as also the world meets of mediamen in Honolulu, Nairobi and Singapore, indicated in definite terms, the changed role of traditional folk media from entertainment to communication (or rather, entertainment oriented communication), set to change the life-style and value system of the rural masses in the Third World.

3. Through the past decades a mass of researched and documented material had come to be piled up on the 'dōs' and 'don'ts' with the time honoured traditional arts of the rural people, a people illiterate and superstitious, but wise enough to preserve their arts - which truly, were the symbols of their valued culture. It was also found that these arts were by nature theme-carriers - mostly morality themes. They were in fact, varieties of 'sung communication' and 'enacted...
information'. Researches had reaffirmed the changed status and significant role of the many types of traditional performances as the meat provider for mass media in developing countries.

4. Researchers worked on the nature of the many varieties of peoples' performances, and categorised them broadly as rigid (ritual) semi-flexible (traditional) and totally flexible (folk) ones, considering the hardcore culture of a medium, and the extent of its flexibility vis-a-vis a new message which was foreign to its ethos. Needed messages on vital social themes also came to be examined, categorised and treated as to become absorbable to the selected medium, in relation to an identified field. In order to meet the challenges of programme multiplication to cover larger areas and multiple peoples of different levels of understanding, media-men had to consider the questions connected with the integration of folk media with mass media. The early experiments were rewarding, as the traditional folk media gained glamour in the process and the mass media channels earned a rich variety of themes, song styles, dialogue in dialects, dance steps, colour and costume, all leading to the hither to unseen involvement of the rural people in the communication game.

5. India had become a testing ground for the pioneering experiments in communication because of several advantages. A hither-to unexploited wealth and variety of people's performances were found available. They could be availed to inform, educate and even motivate the rural masses for change......

"Extensive experience showed that traditional forms of communication could be effective in dispelling the superstition, archaic perceptions and unscientific attitudes that people had inherited as part of tradition. Practitioners of traditional media used a subtle form of persuasion by presenting the required message in locally popular artistic forms. This could not be rivalled by any other form of communication...... Examples abound when song, drama, dance groups and the like were used to promote
campaigns against social evils (such as alcoholism, burdensome dowries, discrimination against women, archaic taboos) or for advances in forming health, nutrition and family welfare agricultural reforms, national integration and similar national goals. (Mac Bride P 61) It was exciting to note that the folk performer did not merely present a message or an idea but life itself. It was a case of a performer becoming the performance.

6. As LIVE media, the 'message charged' folk medium augmented a horizontal communication, with a face to face situation, in the field. When imaginatively integrated with the sound and sight channels, the communication strategy worked effectively. The people's performances presented through modern media were found to cover even the middle step of EDUCATION towards motivation. People, in this exhilarating exercise of personal and convincing communication told the people to tell themselves through their own song and drama, dance, story and the puppet.

7. Communicators further researched on the possibilities of cross culture fertilisation of popular and flexible performances from media rich areas to other parts of a country or from one country to another, which were media-barren. The results were gratifying. (The Philippine Balagtasan and the Indian Lavani).

1. The last decade of the present century, however, found wanting in several areas of communication strategies and their application. It seemed that only the rural man came to be covered by media, rather than the woman and the growing child. Decision making was difficult in such a situation (Resistance factors at play).

2. The traditional folk media were slowly but surely gaining credibility as convincing tools of communication, but in many cases, there was counter production of results because of indiscrimination in
identifying non ritualistic medium to convey social messages (The coastal 'Bhootasthana' and 'Yellamma song')

3. It was also found that while there was nothing wrong with a medium, there was nothing always right with the media-man. When he suddenly found money in the folk art, he often became unscrupulous and harsh in handling the sensitive and temperamental medium. The result, therefore, was either passive or counter productive.

('Siri' of the coastal Karnataka)

4. Even when the communicator was successful in his identification of a suitable folk medium and imaginative in the selection of the needed message for integration with mass media, his strategy failed as there was no intimate knowledge of the field for which his communication capsule was meant. That was a case of not paying the most essential attention to "The pre-media field survey". Sometimes, even after the needed survey was made, the field behavior was strange.

(The Madras slum experiment)

5. Absence or lack of feed back of authentic information after pressing the 'message charged medium' into the field was found to be a serious handicap in the communication strategy. Such a situation negated the possibility of altering the form or content of the live medium for further application. Inspite of dependable feed back of data, result oriented communication sometimes collapsed because of peculiar factors.

(The Ennakulam achievement)

6. The issue of integration of traditional folk media with electronic media also presented problems. One of them was the inevitable clash between the horizontal and vertical tools of communication. When technology had harshly subordinated tradition and culture, the charm of the rustic ruggedness and
and delightful angularities of the rural art were ironed out to make the end product tame and tailor made. The truly traditional performer often rejected such a situation. (Balappa Hukkeri).

7. A few other factors contributed to the collapse of the 'result oriented' communication strategy. One of them was the woeful neglect of the inbuilt rural structures and village functionaries in the context of interpersonal communication.

8. Yet another factor for the failure of rural communication with folk media was the over-enthusiastic urban communicator's interference with the rural medium. The best results were obtained only when an idea was left with the rural performer who would slowly work on a suitable message which his medium would not reject.

9. A multi-media approach through the tested 'package plan' which would eliminate the time-lag between communication, extension and service had paid rich dividends in India. This of course called for meticulous planning and pre-media field study. Only then, the benefits were multiple, for, each medium made up the deficiency of the other, and all together, went to make rural communication meaningful and productive.

The lot of the folk artist in economic terms is still diplomable. He is exploited by the communicator, the middleman and the media man in a bid to draw the best out of him. He often finds himself in a state of confusion between tradition and modernity, culture and nonculture. He looks left alone at the crossroads, without economic viability and intensive training, for the task entrusted.

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