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Issues In Development Message Transfer Through Popular Culture and Media

By

Md Tawhidul Anwar
Development cannotes a wide spectrum of physical and human changes and the interaction between these changes to ensure that whatever positive is gained is sustained making rooms for more things for the posterity. Development this way is here, now and tommorrow. The spatial dimension of development here surely presupposes an extension of the dimension to THERE. Likewise the temporal dimensions of NOW and TOMMORROW refer to YESTERDAY. In communication parlance the extension of spatial dimension is but the correlation of the society with the environment while that of temporal dimension is the transmission of social heritage. Any development message flow therefore should accommodate both these dimensions. Media which smacks of modernization of the day and the morrow should function by incorporating the rich heritage of the past while making any message meaningful.

Erskine B. Childers observed "Development, democracy, the preservation of cultural diversity and identity, and devolution, are all inseparably interconnected; and communication is their common nutriment". Johan Galtung found that the causes of development, underdevelopment or overdevelopment lay in our structures and cultures and it is the task of the media to
mediate between the two.

If this be the premise an effective role of communication will be in absorbing the concerns and issues arising out of seemingly divergent trends of modernity and heritage. In fact development planners must carve out a convergent trend instead by meeting the hunger of modernity with the nourishment taken from heritage. It is here that media and popular culture should be allowed to work in harmony in any development message transfer to those who need most.

Before the Bangladesh scenario is presented some common concerns need be mentioned as limitations to the propositions to follow.

1. Modernization in the name of speedy economic development proposes a cultural surge of information society into the information poor society. It is feared that such a surge in reality serves the business interest of multinationals at the cost of cultural fabrics of nations.

2. In view of fast changing ecological imbalance the future of development of the third worlders has become more uncertain than it is to the advanced countries.

These common concerns have the potentials to negate any successful work of development message transfer with a happy blending of media and culture. Accepting these limitations issues in development message transfer through popular culture and media in a Bangladesh society is here discussed.
Bangladesh has a rich cultural heritage as a confluence of religions, races, topography and above all a turbulent past. Hinduism offered us rituals of rhyme and rhythm. Buddhism taught us tolerance and Islam provided us elements of brotherhood and protest. The social diversity in the sub-continent left adequate socio-cultural elements for the people on the eastern region. Topography dictated structure of a number of dialects under the same linguistic umbrella. Ruled by conquerors for centuries and defining the nation first by religion and then redefining it by language, the people every time went close to their cultural heritage.

This quick glance of the nation has only this to say that the people of Bangladesh take everything in terms of their heritage.

Jari, Gombhira, Jatra, rural theatre, Urs and religious festival, Kabigan and folk music are some identifiable formats of popular culture in Bangladesh. Efforts would be to see how these cultural traits find place in the media in development message transfer.

JARI is a form of group-singing. It is a popular cultural format now being extensively used in the transfer of messages on population control and family planning in Bangladesh. The information, education and motivation unit of the ministry of family planning has been employing 130 local folk singing teams throughout the country. Each team conducts approximately ten performances a month in a village. Of late, a programme on
prevention of child blindness using the format of Jari song has earned the attention of TV viewers. Radio has also made good use of this cultural format for the transmission of a variety of development messages. The 'Dhua' (the words repeated in chorus after every couplet) serves as a reminder of the message to the receivers. Different NGOs also found Jari songs to be useful in the transfer of development messages relating to literacy, grow-more-food, change of food habit and the like.

GOMBHIRA (a fast beat satirical song between a bigamist grandfather and a bachelor grandson) has come to be used by both radio and television since the early seventies. Although the dialect used is very much local to a particular region, the format is entertaining and thus acceptable nationally as a very effective mode of development communication. Gombhira has changed its contents from a humble beginning with grow-more-food to family planning, EPI, afforestation and adult literacy. This popular song has introduced into its development messages elements of pointed criticism of local and national administration in matters of misuse of pelf and power. The content have made Gombhira very popular as a format with a tremendous potential in internalising any development message among the beneficiaries.

KABIGAN (debating songs sung by bards) is yet another form of folk culture extensively used by development agencies in Bangladesh. It has an edge over other formats as it has two sides of opposing views arguing and counter-arguing through couplets instantaneously composed by the debating bards. Each of
two poets has a number of supporting vocal participants who echo the couplet just created allowing the poet to think of possible replies as well as the newer arguments to put forward. This form of folk culture has high participation of both the performer and the audience resulting in a lot of tension, excitement and entertainment. The format is very ancient and historically it has produced some mystic poets of the land. Thus the format commands respect and popularity. A number of NGOs have chosen this mode of communication to educate the development participants regarding the essence of a small family norm against a big family or of HYV against the traditional variety. Radio and TV occasionally make use of Kabigan for development message transfer.

JATRA is a rural theatre mostly organized by groups of theatrical performers in rural areas. The attraction in the Jatra is the Dance of the Princess. Of late, Jatra has become an important component of industrial and agricultural exhibition arranged by local administrations. Mostly historical plays are staged with the viewers on three sides of the stage. Development messages are discussed in between the scenes. Enthusiasts are making efforts to use Jatra for building social and political awareness among the people.

THEATRE, mostly city centered, has turned into a movement by the cultural groups whose activities got a boost since 1970. The overtone of political motivation in the content of the dramas has made this medium of communication popular to the urban middle class. Theatre has not yet been used for crude development
message transfer. Only the renowned performers at times offer testimonial copy to mass media on development issues. Theatre thus remained a class medium. In an effort to bring this medium to the mass, young cultural groups have, of late, been staging dramas at street corners for political message transfer, in most cases to ridicule the leaders of both position and opposition. The performing skill appears to be spontaneous, the content popular and the audience are but a part of the theatre itself. This new format of communication has not yet been used for development message transfer but has the potential to communicate effectively serious messages of all kinds.

PUPPETRY whose origin dates back to a very distant past in this society has re-emerged as a very effective medium of development communication. The EPI, the FP-MCH and health education programmes are increasingly using this format so as to derive maximum exposure, perception, retension, and even recall of development messages. Television is putting up special development programmes using puppetry.

FOLK SONGS: Though most of the formats discussed take a blending of folk tunes in a manner that gives them their individual identity, there are some very popular and traditional folk musical forms which carry our heritage through ages. They are Baul, Murshed, Maizbhandari, Hasan Razar gaan, Lalon geeti, Jalal geeti, Bhawaiya, Bhatyali and such some others. The mystic poets like Lalon Shah, Duddu Shah, Baul Jalal, Monomohan Dutt, Mawlana Abdul Hadi, Karim Baksha, Hasan Raza and Kabial Ramesh Sheel are some of the revered mystic poets of the land whose
composition both in tune and text have been apart of Bengali literature and culture. These folk songs have taken a place at a high altar of reverence. The media or any other agencies can use them only for transmission of social heritage, but they dare not use them for any mundane message transfer. In fact, these songs are kept sacred for the nourishment of human minds to take them to a spiritual environment. In the same vein, classical music of the land has been kept unalloyed for the nourishment and human development of the people and the posterity.

With this illustration of different forms of popular culture and their selective use by media or agencies for development message transfer, some common concerns may be enumerated as under:

1. In the advent of urban theatre as a movement, Jatra (rural theatre) is fast disappearing as groups. Since seventies it did not receive public or private patronage of any sort for which the number of Jatra groups got liquidated leaving only a few to function at local levels. Different development agencies can take up a programme to reorganise the old groups and allowing newer ones to emerge. These groups can engage themselves in the task of development message flow pertinent to a locality. Beyond providing entertainment, this added role of Jatra may fetch them earnings toward their economic viability and in the same token their very existence.

2. Gombhira is sung by one Mr. Kutubuddin and one his associate. No efforts has yet been taken by performing institutes of the
country to see that the performing skill of Gombhira is transferred to newer pairs. It is feared that this popular form of folk culture may die with the aging incapability or absence of Kutub or his partner. The only safety valve is the audio and video recordings of their performance in the transmission services of the broadcasting authorities.

3. Kabigan, a medium of high participation, now being extensively used for development message transfer should receive adequate caution in projecting the positive side of an issue. This is because if the strength of argument in the process of singing debate goes to the group projecting the negative side of the issue that would be disastrous. This cultural form depends on spontaneous ingenuity of bards, but even then any performance for development message transfer may be allowed to be prestructured in consonance with the objectives of the programme.

4. Care has to be taken to see that the traditional folk forms are not used indiscriminately, always to preserve the originality of folk forms from the ingress of manipulation of tunes and texts.

5. Use of popular cultural formats by mass media for development communication and use of folk environment by different development agencies currently lack coordination. Field level folk performance and mass media programmes using popular cultural formats operate in a participatory model and a diffusion model respectively creating two streams of
information flows in the same social setting. This divergence in the mode of communication of same development message may be allowed but in that event the opinion leaders and the indigenous facilitators of the locality should take up the role of the interpreter between the mass media and the folk environment.

Thus from the choice of folk formats, use of environment and keeping the heritage unalloyed to the mix of media and a mix of models there are a lot more concerns in the use of popular culture and the media for development message flow. But the objective should remain the same and that is to bring about an interactive atmosphere of popular sharing of development ideas and information by simultaneous use of modern media and popular culture - media for speedy spread of innovations and culture for their internalisation among the mass.
References


