Let's Use Folk Arts and Traditional Media for Development

The urge to express, communicate, and share something beautiful gave birth to performing arts such as folk and traditional media. In the process, the living progressive impulse to the timeless universal got a coherent shape in creative designs. Folk performing arts have changed structure continuously over centuries, modifying to the needs of changing situations, yet continuing to be functionally relevant to society. "Tradition" suggests a process of the transmission of age-old values and the contextual manifestation and interpretation of the universal. Tradition is not only a repetitive behavioural pattern or some persistent symbol or motif in community culture; it is also an assertion of an identity, a revival and regeneration of the life-force of the community. Traditional media rely on this cultural support and context.

90% of the world's population lives in developing countries and 70% of them live in rural areas. Mass media such as newspapers, television, and the internet do not effectively reach these people, or as many research studies show, these media do not have the required impact in terms of motivating change and development. The high rate of illiteracy added to the inadequate reach of mass media impede almost 80% of India's population who reside in the rural areas. Folk arts and traditional media are the aesthetic components of the concepts of belonging and affinity in a cultural context. In traditional societies, art is an integral part of the process of living in the community. For social change and development, what is required is a change in the beliefs and the value systems of individuals, thus making them more adaptive and responsive to organic evolution and growth. The role of the development communicator is to find communicative ways to influence these beliefs and value systems. The communication potential of Indian traditional performing arts has been proven time and again throughout history: Alha, the popular ballad of Uttar Pradesh, and its counterparts like Laavani of Maharashtra, Gee-gee of Karnataka, Villupaattu of Tamil Nadu, and Kabigan of Bengal (which changed their content and focus depending on the contemporary need), were effective in arousing the conscience of the people against the colonial rule of the British; traditional media became effective in the many political and social campaigns launched by Mahatma Gandhi; and, after independence, the Union government continued to utilise these traditional performing arts to convey messages and generate awareness of development programmes in the rural areas.

Unlike Western theatre, folk performance is a composite art in India; it is a fusion of elements from music, dance, pantomimes, versification, spic and ballad recitation, graphic and plastic arts, and religious and festival pageantry. It encompasses ceremonial rituals, beliefs and social value systems. It has deep religious and ritualistic overtones and it can project social life, secular themes, and universal values. One type of folk art, puppetry, is indigenous to India; from time immemorial, it has been a popular and appreciated form of entertainment throughout India. The stylised vocabulary of puppet theatre in India carries relevant messages of social awareness, historical and traditional identity, and moral value systems. Puppet theatre is fully integrated in the ritual observances and the social milieu of the rural people in India. Puppet theatre has shown remarkable staying power as societies have changed.
The 1974 New Delhi seminar of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (see http://www.comminit.com/redirect.cgi?r=http://www.eric.ed.gov/sitemap/html_090000b8011251.html) focused specifically on the potential of the various forms of traditional media and the technique of their production as well as their integration with mass media for motivational purposes. This particular seminar was notable because it generated a number of guiding principles on how to use traditional or folk media for motivational purposes and for promoting development programmes.

Folk media should be an integral part of any communication programme for rural development. Wherever possible, these should be integrated with mass media but in all cases, integration with ongoing extension work is vital. The prerequisites to the use of folk media are:

i) an understanding of the rural audience; and
ii) the use of these media to provide rural people with entertainment in order to attract their attention and to ensure their participation in developmental activities.

The significance of folk arts in social and political communication was felt and recognised by Jawaharlal Nehru who once said, "I am greatly interested in the development of a people's theatre in India. I think there is a great room for it, provided it is based on the people and their traditions. Otherwise it is likely to function in the air. It is a people's approach. Nevertheless, I think an effort should be made in the direction." (IPTA bulletin, 1943).

For example, in the 1940s, the traditional theatre of Bengal became a symbol for the anti-colonial struggle, and the Bengali elite who had previously ignored or denigrated traditional theatre began to give importance to these performing arts. Rabindranath Tagore and others advocated the use of traditional theatre in programmes of cultural revival and anti-colonial protest in the context of rural fairs and festivals. In the 1920s the playwright Mukunda Das transformed the rural folk form of Jatra, which had earlier dealt with historical or mythological themes, and created a new form of Swadeshi or Nationalist Jatra which dealt with contemporary themes of colonial injustice, caste oppression and feudal exploitation. The colonial government sent him to prison. The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) was formed at this same time. This operated all over India but its strongest contingent was in Bengal. In 1943, during the Bengal famine in which five million people starved to death, the Bengal IPTA troupe traveled all over India performing a play exposing hoarders and black-marketeers and launching a campaign to save food.

The Ramalila of Ramnagar near Varanasi is one theatrical genre which currently provides an opportunity for the young and old, rich and poor to come together for 16 to 20 days preceding the Dussehra to witness a vast pageant of human life. Each section of the city constructs raised platforms or transforms streets, terraces, or gardens into palaces, woods, and streams. The whole city is the stage, the arena, of the performance. The play moves sequentially day after day and the audience moves with it from locale to locale.
Puppets are increasingly being used as a strategy for addressing varied development issues such as educating children, encouraging scientific methods of farming, promoting the use of fertilizers, etc. The Song and Drama Division of the Government of India makes wide use of puppets in its campaigns to promote various government projects, and Life Insurance Corporation of India used puppets to educate the rural masses about life insurance, enlisting the help of the Literacy House in Lucknow.

During the general elections, members of the various political parties used folk songs for campaigning and presented humorous skits to ridicule the opposition's candidates and win support for their own candidates. Swang and Ragini have been effectively utilised by political parties in Haryana. Kabigaan and Tarza have been used by IPTA groups to support candidates of the communist parties in Bengal. Tamasha and Lavani in Maharashtra have been extensively used for political propaganda in the State.

The utilisation of folk media in communication programmes should be viewed not only from the perspectives of political and socio-economic development but also from that of cultural development. Folklore needs to retain social authenticity. The folk forms have evolved gradually, and wherever they are flexible they retain their appeal to the rural people. Not all folk forms can be used for development communication purposes; thus, they should be carefully studied from the points of view of content and characterisation for their possible adaptation for development purposes. Folk media productions should be consistent with the needs of the social context and related to the customs and beliefs of the local communities. Since folk media have sociological roots, their utilisation should be related to local events and their function in the local communication strategy should be properly assigned.

Efforts should be made to preserve the originality of each folk form; adaptation need not alter nor destroy the form. For effective community-level communication strategies, the integrated and planned use of both folk and mass media is necessary for achieving optimum impact and for obtaining desired feedback. Collaboration between the folk artistes and the media producers is absolutely essential for the successful integration of folk media and mass media communication strategies for development purposes. Peasants, agricultural labourers, bonded labourers, women, tribals, and other oppressed groups are rediscovering the potential of folk and traditional performing arts as a weapon in their struggle for land, better health status, better working and living conditions, and human rights. Many development planners in the Third World are beginning to appreciate the use of folk media as a mode of communication to explain development programmes. Government agencies, international organisations, and donor agencies should progressively use this important and powerful communication tool as a means for mobilising people for economic and social development.

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Source: The Drum Beat - Issue 393 - Let's Use Folk Arts and Traditional Media for Development, May 7 2007