



UNDERSTANDING THE IMPORTANCE OF TRADITIONAL
MEDIA IN DISSEMINATING DEVELOPMENTAL
COMMUNICATION FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

It is very important to understand the role of a well-designed communication system in the successful implementation of rural development programs. The government formulates policies, plans strategies, lays down programs and disseminates the funds necessary for such a program. However, all this has no significance if the beneficiaries are not aware of such steps taken by the government for their development. Modern media alone cannot penetrate into the rural areas due to various infrastructural and demographic problems. This is where traditional media plays a very significant role. This paper attempts to understand the importance of using traditional media along with modern media to disseminate information for development at the grass root level.

Keywords: Development Communication, Traditional Media, Rural Development

Introduction

The term "Development Communication" was first coined in 1972 by Nora C. Quebral, who defines the field as "the art and science of human communication linked to a society's planned transformation from a state of poverty to one of dynamic socio-economic growth that makes for greater equity and the larger unfolding of individual potential."¹ Development Communication can also be defined as a type of marketing and public opinion research that is used specifically to develop effective communication for bringing about a positive social change. "Communication for Development is defined as the planned and systematic use of communication, through inter-personal channels, ICTs, audio-visuals and mass media²:

- To collect and exchange information among all those concerned in planning a development initiative with the aim of reaching a consensus on the development problems being faced and the options for their solution.
- To mobilize people for development action and to assist in solving problems and misunderstandings that may arise during development plan implementation.
- To enhance the pedagogical and communication skills of development agents (at all levels) so that they may have a more effective dialogue with their audience.
- To apply communication technology to training and extension programmes, particularly at the grassroots level, in order to improve their quality and impact."



Development communication has been a recent phenomenon. Even though the functions that it carries out were done before the term was coined. Development communication simply means the use of mass media tools and techniques, both traditional and modern, for spreading and creating awareness amongst the beneficiaries about the various ways through which development can be made. The development here can be focusing on one aspect like education, healthcare, job-creation, or it can be focused on overall development which essentially means development of all aspects needed for a better standard of life. Rural Development communication is the use of communication as a tool to create awareness and disseminate information amongst the rural poor about the various plans, policies, schemes and programs that are launched by the Government for bringing about rural development. "Rural communication is an interactive process in which information, knowledge and skills, relevant for development are exchanged between farmers, extension/advisory services, information providers and research either personally or through media such as radio, print and more recently the new "Information and Communication Technologies" (ICTs)."³

In rural communication, the main focus is the rural poor. The aim is to make them aware of the latest advancements in technology and elsewhere so that they are empowered to carry out their business well. However, without proper management of the entire communication process, the goal for development cannot be achieved.

Communication Management

"Management is the art of directing and controlling a group of people for the purpose of coordinating and harmonizing the group towards accomplishing a goal beyond the scope of individual effort."⁴ Great social scientists have defined management as comprising of four main functions, namely, planning, organizing, leading and controlling. These four functions are present in all kinds of management and rural communication management is no different. Many developing countries have realized the importance of communication management in rural development and have designed suitable communication strategies, policies and programs in order to spread the developmental message. A very important observation about rural communication management is that it works with all methods of communication and not just the modern media. While designing a communication management system for rural development it must be bore in mind that modern means of mass media are not effective in spreading the developmental message at the grass root level. Hence, traditional forms of mass media need to be incorporated in the design. Traditional media or the Old media are the forms that were used for disseminating information before the advent of modern media. Television, radio, newspapers, internet are relatively new entrants in the human civilization. Before these, it was only traditional media that was the frontrunner in public information dissemination. History has thousands of traditional media forms. And the beauty of traditional media is the easy connectivity it has with its audience. Folk media doesn't necessarily need to use language as a mode of communication. It uses a number of techniques and ways to put the message across. In India, each state has its own list of folk media. There is a myriad of folk media that have played a great role in communicating with the masses. Therefore, while designing a communication management system, an appropriate balance of folk and modern media must be used to propagate the message of development. Various attempts have been made by the Indian Government ever since independence to establish a comprehensive communication management system for the purpose of rural development. For example, the SITE(Satellite Instructional Television



Experiment) program was launched in 1975 to broadcast informational programs to the rural areas. This project brought about a positive change in the thinking and beliefs of the rural people and hence was a successful attempt toward rural development communication. Development Communication can be seen as a very powerful catalyst in the process of rural development. Its use of folk media reduces the dependence on modern media which require electricity to function thereby increasing the geographical span of beneficiaries. An important point to be noted is that developmental communication system is not a “system’ in the true sense of the word; It is a process that assists the process of rural development changing itself according to the requirements of the target area. It is a powerful tool that can increase the probability of the successful implementation of the various developmental programs of the Government.

However, developing such a communication system is not an easy task. Meaningful and effective communication is about determining which information is to be disseminating, how it should be disseminated and it does not end there. Any communication process is incomplete without feedback. Therefore, even in the case of developmental communication, unless the feedback of the target population is taken and acted upon, the purpose is defeated. Well planned and well implemented communication strategies can bring about the much required impetus required for successful rural development.

Traditional Media – An important medium

The fact that a proper communication system for development of the rural areas needs no more justification. It is the only way to bring about the positive change called rural development by spreading the much needed awareness and information amongst the beneficiaries. The next point of focus comes to the tools and methods that can be used for successful communication dissemination. For urban development, communication can be easily disseminated through the modern mass media tools like television, print, internet, radio, Facebook, twitter, mobiles, etc.

“In a country like India, mass communication plays an important role in creating people’s awareness about national policies and programs by providing information and education, besides healthy entertainment. It helps people to be active partners in the nation-building endeavor.”⁵ Today, there are a number of organized media like the television, radio, newspapers and magazines and more recently, the internet. These media have definitely changed the face of mass communication in India in the recent times. However, their effect is not all-pervasive. They have not been able to reach the grass root levels and the reason is not their incompetency in performance, but the unavailability of electricity and basic resources required for the propagation of these media. Like pointed out by Wilbur Schramm, “A mass medium is essentially a working group organized round some device for circulating the same message, at about the same time, to a large number of people.”⁶ For the above to happen, there must be a common level of thinking and literacy level amongst the target audience. Also, a common language is required for the same. This is however not possible in a country like India where there are a myriad of languages and very low literacy level. Modern media cannot cater to the communication needs of the masses of such heterogeneity in a developing country. In a country like USA modern media is the frontrunner of bridging the communication gap between the government and the people, however, in a developing country where more than half of its people are poor, illiterate and



deprived of basic necessities, mass media does not have a 100 percent penetration. This is where traditional media comes as a very major tool in spreading awareness amongst masses. As rightly pointed out by Dr. Harish Kumar, "Tradition plays an important role in a creative artistic process particularly in the field of folk performing arts. Folk art is a functional and spontaneous. Every village has its relevant music, dance or theatre. The folk performing art is changing its structure continuously over centuries modifying itself to the needs of the changing situation making it functionally relevant to the society. Tradition is the process of the transmission of age - values and the contextual manifestation and interpretation of the universal."⁷

In the case of India as a country, mass media does not seem to connect with the rural population as well as the traditional media does. This is because, since there is a high illiteracy rate and a high disparity in caste, creed and standards of living, and so striking a personal chord becomes very important. Traditional media does exactly that and hence, has a greater influence on the people's minds. "Traditional tools of communication are developed from the beliefs, customs, and rituals practiced by the people. These are very old and deep-rooted. Traditional media thus represents a form of communication employing vocal, verbal, musical and visual folk art forms, transmitted to a society or group of societies from one generation to another. They are indigenous modes and have served the society as tools/medium of communication for ages."⁸ For generations, different forms of folk media have been passed over and these have continuously evolved and developed along with the changing times. As rightly pointed out by Keval J Kumar, "The folk media allow for such interactions, for they are essentially participatory, flexible and familiar. Since they are not usually art forms, developmental messages can be introduced through them."⁹ In India, there are various forms of folk media. Folk Theatre, Tamasha, Powada, Jatra, Keertana/Harikeertan, Ramlila and Raslila, Bhavai, Puppetry Nautanki are some of the most effective traditional mediums for disseminating development communication. Apart from these forms of folk media, there are a myriad of other forms that exist in India. Each form has its own advantages and ability to connect with its audience. Folk or traditional media have a vast reach and can be used very favorably in disseminating the message for development among the rural population.

Case Study

Maharashtra has been a land of saints using traditional media such as bhajans, kirtanas, natyas, pravachans, abhangas as a tool of communication, particularly focusing inhabitants of rural areas. Communicating in the language, dialect and attire of the masses which they understand have always been more effective. It will be an appropriate example to quote that Mr. Vijaykumar Phad, deputy divisional commissioner (general administration) posted in Aurangabad, is doing a remarkable job by persuading drought-prone farmers of Aurangabad division not to commit suicide. "Mr. Phad, a 1995 batch officer of Maharashtra cadre, has been narrating stories with a moral lesson in the form of kirtanas (devotional songs) to wean away farmers from suicidal thoughts. His songs celebrate life and encourage people to face every situation as a challenge."¹⁰ Mr. Phad who hails from Kuntha Khurd village in Latur district of Maharashtra says that he understands ground realities and farmer related issues closely as his parents are also engaged in farming. "My effort is to make them understand how important life is and committing suicide will not solve any problem but will worsen the situation for the families they leave behind."¹¹ So far he has covered 25



villages of Marathwada region where 850 farmers have committed suicide during 2015 alone.

Another example to prevent suicidal tendencies of farmers from Marathwada is a play dissuading the farmers from committing suicide. Fourteen children aged between 4 to 14 of farmers who have committed suicide narrate the stories of their parents who committed suicide in recent time. Nashik-based Adhartirth Adharshram orphanage, which is home for 115 such children, intend to create state-wide awareness drive to visit 55 suicide-prone talukas covering 15 districts to tell farmers how suicides are not the answer to their problems they face but complicates matters further for their family members they leave behind. "Jahar Khau Naka is a minimalistic play, with no major props or design or stage demands. Armed with traditional musical instruments such as the mrudung, veena and taal, and a megaphone, the actors (dressed as dhoti-clad Varkaris) appeal to a farmer not to think about the suicide option. A saree-clad five-year-old girl tells her father that she doesn't want any gifts for Diwali but merely wants him to live."¹² Such emotional acts by the orphans are more effective in rural areas than modern mass media. The results of the efforts of Mr. Vijaykumar Phad, a senior government officer and orphaned children are to be studied but it is proved beyond doubt that such platforms of traditional communication are going to be the best answers of such complicated issues.

Conclusion

Rural Development is a complex process. It can be successful only if all the major factors involved are implemented properly. It's rightly said, "It seems that the major weak links in rural development planning are absence of total approach at the strategy level, lack of co-ordinated planning at the program level and weak planning component of individual programmes."¹³ Even well-conceived rural development schemes have run into rough weather because of inefficiency and corruption at various levels which are again attributed to "the absence of proper accountability and deterring punishment for failures."¹⁴

Rural communication was studied and the importance of communication management was emphasized. The role of traditional media in spreading the developmental message was examined. "Traditional folk forms in India can be effectively utilized for social developmental communication. The communication potential of India traditional performing art has been proved time and again by many instances of national importance."¹⁵ As said before, in a developing country like India, traditional media cannot be ignored. Modern media alone cannot succeed in bridging the communication gap between the rural and urban India. A healthy balance is required between the traditional and the modern media for achieving this goal.

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