

Relevance of Traditional Media in Awareness Campaign: A Case of Shumang Leela

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Abstract: Different media taste differently in differing situations or audience. Traditional or folk media is one such media which serves the function where modern mass media has no role to play. They play a pivotal role in filling the gap where the mainstream media are unable to do so. The Shumang Leela is a good example of performing art which has been used far and wide to disseminate awareness on different issues facing the state of Manipur. The role played by Shumang Leela in spreading the awareness of HIV/AIDS is worth noting. However, lack of support of the government is hurting the art of its growth. Realising the effectiveness of Shumang Leela will be of great advantage in a long run.

Keywords: Traditional media, Performing Art, Shumang Leela, Tribal Shumang Leela.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional folk media is a term used to denote 'performing arts' which can be described as the cultural symbols of the people. Folk dance, rural drama and musical variety of the village people, all come under traditional media. Traditional folk media is not just confined to dance and music alone, but also includes art and crafts. It originated as a consequence of people's need to express themselves of their own feelings and practices closely attached to them. It is a composite art created by the fusion of elements from music, dance, epic ballad recitation, religion and festival peasantry. It absorbs ceremonials, rituals, beliefs and of course the social system [1].

Folk media is an effective means of communication in today's world since it not only helps connect people with their cultures but also revives the lost culture of the society. Folk media forms the language of expression for the local populace and gives them a chance to voice out their opinions on various issues directly or indirectly affecting them. It depicts the constantly changing face of any society along with its virtues and vices. If observed closely, traditional folk media is an excellent tool to enhance communication and promote dialogue at the grass root level of any society [2].

ADVANTAGE OF FOLK MEDIA

Intimacy with the masses

Folk and traditional media are closely embedded in ones society and way of life. As it is considered as a part of one's culture and way of life the

acceptance of the medium is greater and does not demand serious decision to adapt with. As the media shares cultural intimacy with the community itself, the acceptance of the message communicated is also greater as emphasized by Marshall McLuhan in *medium is the message* [3] proposition.

Physical proximity

Physical proximity it shares with the community is another factor that adds advantage of the media. In this particular medium, artiste played the role of several characters in the story or message to be communicated. The physical or 'live' nature of the media enhances attraction. Unlike the modern complex media which is largely digitalized, the physical presence of artist can be felt in most traditional media. This adds value and weight of the message.

Cost effective

Traditional folk media is one of the best medium when it comes to the cost of operation. While the mainstream media operation requires a lot of technical expertise, mechanical gadgets and sophisticated technologies, the traditional folk media is free from those expenses. Artist with their intended message requires a simple platform to display their characters. Thus its cost least and at the same times is very effective for rural communication system.

Use of simple-intelligible medium

Traditional folk artistes largely use a language intelligible to the audience. As the medium is largely confined to a rural community, the people by and large

use common language intelligible to them. Therefore, it makes the artists communicate and perform the message with ease. On the other hand, the public attending does not require special knowledge to understand the message as it is communicated in the language known to them. This is not possible in mainstream media which always requires one to be educated on the subject and on the language to understand it.

Durability of message communicated

One of the most effective means of communication is interpersonal message. The communication that is experience from folk and traditional media are considered interpersonal. This is because the actor or the artiste himself is physically present and every word or act brings a lasting impression on the minds of the gathering audience. As the artiste /actors are in close proximity to the audience physically, the emotional association between them always leaves a lasting impression to the audience. This immensely increased communication.

The folk and traditional arts of India have from ancient times been used for moral, religious, and socio-political purposes. Rarely have they been resorted to for pure entertainment alone, though they are often packed with spontaneity, boisterousness and humour. In contrast to the modern mass media, the traditional media are personal, familiar and more credible forms, with the majority of literate and illiterate identifying with their formats, genres and contents. However, these forms need to be used with understanding and sensitivity. The folk media are close to our heart and mind. It hits directly to our sensitivity and final we feel the message. This is the reason why folk is still alive it is around two thousand years old [4].

Being ancient forms of art, the folk media is very close to the hearts of the people. Traditional media holds universal appeal. Its understanding is direct and at the personal level. Traditional folk performances are uniformly popular, irrespective of the educational, social and financial standing of any community. Various researchers have established the importance of traditional folk media in development communication. Traditionally, folk media were primarily used for entertainment, social communication and persuasive communication. Now, there are efforts to involve folk media for conveying development messages. In the past few decade traditional folk media have been increasingly recognized as viable tools to impart development messages, both as live performances and also in a form integrated with electronic mass media [5].

However, one major drawback in folk and traditional media is, its reach is limited to a certain locality for a certain period of time. Folk and traditional

media performance are usually is done for a group of a hundred or at the most few hundreds or thousands of people. So, to reach lakhs or millions of people their utility or capacity is not at all adequate. It is best as a localized medium. We can address the problems, issues or other aspects of a certain area in the locality's own language, culture, ethos etc [6].

SHUMANG LEELA

'Shumang Leela' is a courtyard performance of Manipuri theatrical art considered to have developed in the 19th and 20th century. It is a traditional theatre performed by a touring group of artistes on a very simple-open stage visible from all the direction. Normally, Shumang Leela is performed by a touring band of 12-13 professional artistes on an invitation basis. These troupes may be exclusively female (Nupi Shumang Leela) or exclusively male (Nupa Shumang Leela). There are nearly ten Nupa Shumang leela troupes with six to seven actors in each group. The Nupi Shumang Leela is not that popular though, only the Nupa Shumang Leela has managed to draw incrowds for their plays [7].

According to Seram Neken, the origin of Shumang Lila may be traced from as early as 400 BC or 2400 years back from toda. It is largely believed that it originated from the Laiharaoba festival, in which the tradition of 'Tangkhul Nurabi Loutaba' is performed on the night of the last day of the festival as an important part of ritual. In absence of any concrete historical support, this is a generally agreed notion among scholars. The art has all the elements of – humour, dialogues from the rites, traditional proverbs, riddles, singing and dancing [8].

Though the actual origin of the art has been a mystery, serious attention of the art has been given by Manipuri kings of the 19th century, particularly Maharaj Chandrakirti Singh (1850-86). It developed from a popular genre called Phagee Leela where comedians were invited to the palace and make to perform with the objective of entertaining the courtyard audience.

Then it was succeeded by such plays as Ramlila, Sabha parba, Kabul lila etc. However, the real Shumang Leela with various rasas (sentiments) was ushered in with the epic play Harishchandra (1918). Then it was followed by others such as Sabitri Satyavan, Meiraba charan, Thok lila etc. One of the most successful plays of this era was Moirang parba (an epic play based on the legendary lovers- Khamba and Thoibi of Moirang).

The big leap came in 1950 when scripts were introduced with the plays like Puranmeithaba and B.A. Mapa Lamboiba. It was a boost for literature loving people of Manipur and also it brought in

professionalism in Manipuri theatre. Second major change came in 1970s with the introduction of Eshei lila with its background music and playback singing. Some of them were Krishna bal Leela (1975), Thadoi (1976) and Chakthekpi (1977). It was degeneration for some and a refreshing change for many. Today we have only Eshei Leela genre with its ever expanding wings. The competitive zeal of the troupes is kept burning by the annual Shumang Leela festival which started in 1972. Today, there are dozens of Shumang Leela professional groups in Manipur.

TRIBAL SHUMANG LEELA

Theatre art among the tribes of Manipur is almost non-existent. Its art form is largely folk songs and stories of the ancient past performed and enacted from time to time. The incorporation of social or political messages in the art is slim. However, an attempt to bring theatre art to the tribal masses was sounded with the intention of spreading the message against AIDS in the early 2000s. In an attempt of spread awareness of HIV/AIDS in the hill areas, a special workshop was organized with the initiative of the then Project Director of MACS [9] Dr Khomdon Singh Lisam. The workshop was responded with huge turn up from different communities which include artistes, script writers, singers, composers, musicians, etc. After the workshop, an experiment project using Shumang Leela to spread awareness on HIV/AIDS was held in different tribal-dominated districts of the state.

The first premier show of Tangkhul Shumang Leela "Ajawui Tuishot" was displayed at Dewland sometime in 2002 which got an interesting response of 1000-packed audience enthralled by the artistes of C.R Film Industry based in Phungreithang, Ukhrul. Sensing the success, the play was shown in different villages of Ukhrul district on demand by the public. The experiment was successful indeed.

Likewise, the Paites also developed their Shumang Leela "Khangban Sham Doh Ei" and performed for the first time at Paite Veng Imphal in the same year. The Thadous under the banner of United Rural Youth Artistes Manipur produced and played "Heo, Neingai Dam In" and the All Zeliangrong Art and Cultural Organisation of Kubuis performed "Phaikan Kathan". The Thadou play was displayed at Tuibong for the first time and Kabui play was shown at Pandon, North AOC. All these plays were the same as the 'Shumang Leela' performed by the Meiteis. The only differences were – it was in their own dialects and the females played female roles and males as males. There was no tradition of "Nupi Sabi" among them. A short span after production and display in remote villages of hill districts of the state, the Tribal Shumang Leelas unfortunately discontinued for there was none to encourage and support.

CONCLUSION

In olden days, elders of the family used to enlighten the children with the folk-tales almost on regular basis. One beautiful aspect of it is the intellect and knowledge imbibed in the children of the past. This useful oral medium served as a means to communicate the thoughts and perception of the elders to the younger generation directly. Now, this convention is hardly seen in the society. Today's children have less time to devote to such things, as they have to do a list of home tasks, a series of private tuitions and video games. Generation gap becomes wider day-by-day in modern society. Not all the traditions of olden times are good to follow, but there are certain values that are essential in maintaining a social identity of the people. Today, we witness the widening generation gap where youths do not pay attention to the words of the elders. At the same time, young people are negatively influenced by the alien cultural invasion through various new media like satellite channels, bollywood commercial films, advertisements portraying sex for sales, internet blitzkrieg and mobile telephony. These media onslaught on the immature tender minds create delinquent behaviour, easy lifestyles, careless habits, blind aping of the western costumes and dresses, neglect of the past and consequent identity crisis degrading the moral values in society.

In such emergent crises, Shumang Leela as a unique traditional media may be the best tool to effectively counter the negative influences of the new media on the youths of today. This particular medium can unleash tremendous support in the fight against corruption, illiteracy, underdevelopment, anti-social behaviours, drug abuse, etc. Moreover, it can also be used to spread the ideas of freedom, love, cooperation, tolerance, discipline, ethics and plurality of the society. Thus, traditional media can be employed to spread awareness on various social, political, economic and religious issues affecting the society. It not only spread awareness but also delivers message and ideas for the betterment of the community.

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