PUPPETRY AS A MEDIUM OF COMMUNICATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN INDIA: A STUDY OF PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT

India is the home to puppetry. Traditional and folk media including puppetry have been used from the ancient times to till today. Since the people in India do not have wide accessibility to mass media channels and they are illiterates, puppetry has still opportunities to be instrumental for disseminating social messages for a cause. However, in the age of cyber expansion and technology-driven society, the role of puppetry medium raises debate among the puppeteers, change agents, researchers and academicians. The current study has made a thorough attempt to explore puppetry as means of communication and development in India. Here, the researcher has adopted qualitative research methods to understand the current and future position of puppetry as a medium of communication and development.

KEYWORDS: Puppetry, Social Messages, Mass Media, Rural Audience, Traditional Media.

INTRODUCTION

Needless to say, India is home to traditional and folk media forms. Traditional and folk media have been traditionally used in India for the dissemination of diverse information. From the ancient times, they have been used for moral, religious, and socio-political purposes. The media includes different combinations of drama, dance, song, mime, story-telling, puppetry and other similar forms. Broadly, the traditional media forms which are extensively used for communicating social messages, can be classified as folk theatre; folk songs; predominantly
narrative forms including ballads, folktales and other story-telling forms; religious discourses and puppet shows. Some categories overlap to other categories. Important to say, folk forms are based on religion, community, caste, culture and language (Kumar, 2010 & Malik, 1979).

Noted folk media expert Shyam Parmar (1994) observes, “The communication needs in India are much greater than the resources we have to meet them today. While the mass media have been constantly expanding, the traditional media have been playing an important role in this field due to our peculiar needs. Apart from these live programs with face-to-face communication the traditional folk forms have been used in programs over the electronic media. India’s role in identifying folk media for communication purposes has been quite positive. The experience can certainly be of comparative use of both the developing and under developed countries if proper results if these efforts became available through scientific surveys”.

PUPPET AS A MEDIUM OF COMMUNICATION

India is home to puppetry. In ancient times, Indian puppetry, particularly shadow puppetry did spread to South East Asian countries like Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia and subsequently their name changed, even though the form has remained the same (Assam Tribune, 2011). The Indian puppetry carries a high value, next to folk theatre in the domain of folk and traditional media. In some villages, it was believed that puppetry bring rains and helps in yielding a good crop (Khullar, 2009).

Puppetry, the popular folk form, attracts the audience irrespective of age or sex. In India, puppetry can be seen in four types or forms - Sutratharika, Rod Puppetry, Shadow puppetry and Hand Puppetry. It is being widely performed in the states of Orissa, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan and West Bengal (Hazra, 2010). Indian audiences are receptive to the medium of puppetry. It is serving as an ideal medium of communication in India (Sobel, 2004). Hence, in earlier times, priests found it to be an entertaining way of imparting long religious epics, such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata

According to Meher Contractor (1970), “Puppets have a subtle impact on simple audiences which no human actor can achieve.” Meher Contractor has used puppets to teach children physiology, hygiene, civics, history, geography and poetry for an effective way. Puppets are being used in physiotherapy, psychotherapy, education for children, promotion of latest farming tools and handling social issues. Song and Drama Division uses puppets extensively use puppet shows for the campaigns of various government programmes. Hence, this medium is apt for wide variety of communication.

PUPPETRY AS A CHANGE AGENT FOR DEVELOPMENT

Puppetry is playing a pivotal role in disseminating social messages for the development of nations in the world, especially in third world countries. The cost effective and illiteracy factors are prime reasons behind the success of this folk medium. The Bevnumeh and puppet were employed to encourage family planning in Iran. Karakhouz (shadow puppet) in Egypt was found adaptable for social message transmission (Lent, 1977 & Gillette, 1975).
Several instances have revealed that mixture of puppetry and mass media, particularly electronic media has done wonders for spreading social messages to audiences including economically disadvantaged. Basanter Tika Nin used West Bengal and Orissa’s the globe puppets to allay the fears of children regarding smallpox vaccinations in the year 1977. The programme was especially framed for the rural children within the broadcasting coverage of Calcutta Television Centre. Surprisingly but true, after making a success in electronic media, slowly puppetry is making a foray in new media (Khullar, 2009). Therefore, perfect blending of the puppetry with mass media is beneficial for effective transfer of technology and human resource development.

Some opinion that in the age of digital, audiences especially from metros and cities do not have interest for exposure to traditional media including puppetry shows. However, folk and traditional media perform production functions for urban and elite audiences. Kapil Vatsayan (1972) claims, “It has helped to bring before urban Indian audiences the rich multi-coloured fabric of the Indian folk and tribal tradition, which is vigorous, vibrant and continuously assimilating and growing. The government endeavours through the Song and Drama Division and the Sangeet Natak Academy to permit modern choreographers and students of the Indian dance and music academics to witness these authentic folk dances, so as to give them inspiration and an opportunity to draw upon original and authentic sources”.

Non-government organizations find puppet as an easy medium to spread information and educate on any social issues. The reaction is so instant that audiences immediately relate with that character. While placing favouritism statement for this folk form, Ramdas Padiyhe argues, “For that moment the audience forget that this is a puppet and relate to it like a human being. And that’s why when I talk with the puppet and it says something, it has a greater impact” (Khullar, 2009).

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Further, puppetry turns panacea for the students who has verbal difficulties. When children get exposure to puppets as a substitute for schoolwork, they became more involved and participatory in other class activities as well. That’s why, ‘puppet therapy’ being used for physical disabilities, people suffering from mental illnesses, and in rehabilitation from natural disasters. Puppets are a perfect way to turn off the TV or computer and turn on the mind for the children (Khullar, 2009 & Mendell, 2010). Therefore, this medium is useful to bring about changes in the society. It can be instrumental to break the barrier in the society for social causes. It is still being valued by various organisations to attain development in the age of the Internet.
GROWING CHALLENGES AHEAD FOR PUPPETRY

With the advent of new communication technologies like mobile and the Internet, we are coming under the speaking distance and the Canadian educator, philosopher, and scholar Herbert Marshall McLuhan’s reminding statement on ‘global village’ has come true. McLuhan believes that electronic media would permit ‘the human tribe’ to become “one family” (Baran, 1999). However, technology based mass media have their own flaws and here traditional media come for the rescue, especially in the developing countries like India. In India, mass media continue to be limited largely to the urban population. The traditional arts forms have survived for centuries and they will survive in future for their flexibility (Kumar, 2006). Hence, there is no doubt that tradition media including the form of puppetry shall live in the arena of communication.

Predominantly people do have interest on traditional folk media. And puppetry has become as source of infotainment - Information and Entertainment. As a result, on the way of giving pleasure and enjoyment, puppetry educates the rural illiterates by rendering useful information on healthcare programmes, awareness on child and women education and their employment (Hazra, 2010).

Marriage of traditional media to mass media is multiplying the impact of social message dissemination. It also applies to puppetry. However, Katz and Wedell (1977) cite it is not so easy that folk media and broadcasting media will blend well. Folk arts are being withering away in age of modernization. Sometimes folk media do not adapt well to the broadcast studio because of small in size comparison to open and bigger place where folk performances are made. Generally, traditional media run on festive and occasional days, not on any common days. In this context, integration of modern mass media and medium of puppetry should be handled with lot of care. The context, content, culture, target audience and desired goals have to be strictly kept in mind before the marriage of traditional and mass media.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For the collection of primary data, here the researcher has adopted the qualitative research methods in which personal interviews and focused group discussions employed to assess the impact of puppetry as a means of communication and development in India. The researcher has interviewed various puppeteers from Odisha, Delhi, Rajasthan; non-governmental organization personnel from Social Organization for Voluntary Action (SOVA), Odisha and Tara Projects Association, New Delhi and other change agents and academicians on traditional media. Focused group discussions have been made with various puppetry groups like Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathana, People’s Universal Popular Puppetry Educational Theatre, puppeteers involved with SOVA and Social Work and Research Centre (SWRC), Rajasthan. Broadly, there are three types of respondents – puppetry performing groups, corporate or private organisations and Social Action Groups (SAGs) – have been addressed in course research. Various sources from books, magazines, journals, the Internet have used for the collection of secondary data.
FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

If we analyze the media scenario in the Indian context, many would be convinced of puppetry medium or the traditional media. It is a trusted medium in which the characters are familiar and non-threatening. Hidden by a curtain, a puppeteer can make the puppet speak about social subjects like family planning, AIDS prevention and child education. However, this medium is confined to one specific region whereas mass media can cater to large number of people at a time.

Puppetry is instrumental in imparting education to the students with physical and mental illnesses. It acts as a therapy when they are exposed to puppetry shows, substitute for schoolwork. As a result, they become participatory in study activities. Such type of communication is also effective for adults besides children’s classes. Shankar Singh, founder member of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathana, an organisation have been making experiments with puppets, says it would be wrong if you take puppetry mainly for children. It is apt for spreading socially relevant messages and social movements in the countries like India. However, some communication practitioners claim that puppetry cannot deliver in comprehensive manner like mass media in all cases. Therefore, the flexibility nature of such media is questionable and debatable. In this context, social authenticity of such traditional forms should go for check up before used for dissemination of social messages to the public.

Some of the puppeteers’ arguments pose counter view against the short-comings of puppetry shows meant for disseminating social messages. Puppeteer Ratan Muduli working for voluntary organization Social Organization for Voluntary Action (SOVA) at Odisha asserts that the people enjoy the every moment of puppetry show. Through their entertainment, social messages can easily be disseminated.

Puppetry and mass media have their own advantages and disadvantages. Arguments often mount which is stronger between the two. It has created a debate in which some praise puppetry having roots to ancient roots and some to mass media having technology implications.

Puppetry, as a medium for communication plays a vital role in India because of numerous reasons. Over technology-based mass media, this form of traditional media possesses superior qualities - People’s medium; familiar and simple content format; live performance, instant feedback and negligible communication barrier; cost-effectiveness, flexible in nature and audience participation. However, this form of communication is being marred by number of factors – declining interest among audiences; today’s less puppetry shows; inappropriate to some contents and issues; political and propaganda motivated and lack of professionalism in the shows. On the contrary, in India mass communication channels like newspaper, magazine, radio, television, film and the Internet and mobile (known as New Media) are best suited for dissemination of information to large number of people at a greater speed with a lesser cost per unit. Without media, a single day is not possible for a man in this cyber era. It’s like day without media, is a day wasted. However, the Indian media is flawed with various elements like media biasness, propaganda, concentration of media ownership, paid news syndrome and page 3 reporting. However, India lives in villages where accessibility to media channels is low, causing information-gap in the society. The low level of literacy and poor electrical system can be
contributed to the dysfunction of print and electronic media respectively. Therefore, mass media is often criticized as ‘class media’ in India.

The future of the puppetry as a means of communication and development, is vivid and its use will increase in India as communicators from government, corporate and non-governmental organizations are being inclusively involved. It is glaring from all the quarters of developmental and change agencies. It is being as a means of communication throughout the world based on its suitability to the issue. Moreover, it is more appropriate to the developing countries like India where it is being used with modern mass media tools in an integrated approach for greater impact on the audience. Initiatives like growing awareness on puppets through seminar, workshops and introduction of puppetry in academic courses in colleges and universities are major indications for the revival of this medium.

In this context, Ranjana Kanitkar running the People’s Universal Popular Puppetry Educational Theatre (PUPPET) confirms that puppetry shows are pragmatic in approach. So the PUPPET has been staging puppet shows in practically every corner of the country. It is noted here that the organisation has already trained above 55,000 people in some forms of puppetry through conducting above 850 workshops.

Dr. Susmita Poddar, an expert in traditional media and post-doctoral fellow claims, “Traditional puppetry is one of the most powerful folk media of conveying social messages to a large rural mass of our country. Creators, conveyors, performances, stylistics, discourse pattern, language and all other aspects of puppetry express indigenous characteristics in such a way that a true bonding could easily be made between performers and audiences through this performance. Now non-traditional puppetry also allegorically presents even contemporary political leaders and issues. Considering its importance, West Bengal government is regularly conducting Puppetry Workshop, Training Camp and Puppetry Festivals with the selective puppet-performers of Bengal.”

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Puppetry remains a means of communication and development in the age of television and the Internet. However, owing to make this medium more effective, certain measures can be taken on a war footing. Inspiring this medium alone and not doing any visible action can extinguish such type of communication. Therefore, there should financial encouragements to the puppeteers and organisations using this medium for social change. In this context, revenue collected as entertainment tax should be allocated for the development of puppetry.

Since, puppetry is a people’s medium, there should be people’s movement to revive and strengthen this means of communication. Course curriculum on puppetry should be incorporated from school level and be given due weightage in Communication Studies and other Social Sciences disciplines.

The content of puppetry show should be tailor-made. It should be concise, specific and understandable to the common audiences. It should strictly demarcate the lines of propaganda and adheres to the norms of generating public opinion while staging the shows.
In order to improve in the presentation of puppetry shows for disseminating social message, government organisations like National School of Drama (NSD) should come forward. Puppeteers can be imparted professional skills to enhance their show skills.

In a view to multiply the message through puppetry medium, it can be integrated with modern and technology-based mass media. Since mass media have greater impact, integration of puppetry to these modern channels shall have amplified impact on the audience and shall reach out to the unreached.

The puppeteers disseminating social message should strike a proper balance between information and entertainment. If the shows function on the lines of entertainment only, the very cause of the shows for informative motive can be shattered. The show should not mere reduce down to the entertainment only.

REFERENCES


