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IT'S NOT WHAT YOU SAY, IT'S HOW YOU SAY IT

by T.E. Voigt and Rajive Jain

It is dark at the construction site near New Delhi. The air is heavy with smoke and spices as Rajasthani construction workers cook rice and lentils over open fires in front of tents supplied by the construction company. People squat around the fires, smoking and talking. Suddenly, the headlights of a van pierce the darkness. Half-naked children stream towards the swaying beams. As the vehicle bumps over the uneven ground, "Lok Doot! Lok Doot!" sounds excitedly into the Indian night.

Lok Doot, a mobile educational theatre unit, is just one of many groups in India that use theatre as a medium for development communication. Its repertoire includes humorous skits on the value of literacy, hygiene and balanced nutrition. The material is drawn from the lives of the audience. Thus "balanced nutrition" means supplementing the staple diet of lentils and rice with green, leafy vegetables known to cure night blindness, an ailment common among construction workers.

Lok Doot is financially better off than many other groups. Its parent company, Mobile Chreches, was founded 10 years ago by middle-class housewives to provide day-care and later educational facilities for children of New Delhi's predominantly female construction workers.

Now they try to educate parents as well as children. Lok Doot's van is a luxury beyond the scope of other street theatre groups, most of whom work on shoe-string budgets, without props, and often as volunteers.

Another Delhi group, Stree Sanghursh, uses theatre for its anti-dowry campaign. About 250 women die in Delhi each year from problems related to dowry issues. The group, composed of men and women, of teachers, students and housewives, performs wherever a dowry death has been reported. Its play shows two scenarios. In one, disgruntled in-laws murder the young bride when her parents refuse the ever-increasing demands for extra dowry. In the other, the potential victim is rescued at the last minute by sympathetic neighbours. After each performance, members of the audience are invited to discuss the dowry issue and its consequences.

Various such groups operate throughout India. They need few props, no technological training, and can arrange for instant feed-back or discussions around their performances. Moreover, they share many of the advantages attributed to the traditional media of India, some of which were used successfully for mass mobilization during India's struggle for independence.

At the other end of the communications scale is videotape recording. Video is the current darling of western community communications. With its flexibility in terms of programming, instant feedback, and mobility, it has fired the imagination and enthusiasm of development communicators.

Yet video is an expensive medium for citizens of a country like India. "If, to trigger a social process, I need 75,000 rupees worth of equipment and two or three highly paid workers then I am not a social worker," says the Director of Chitrabani, a Calcutta-based communications agency.

Chitrabani is one of the few private Indian organizations to have toyed with video. So expensive is the equipment, however, that it is kept under lock and key, except during film and script-writing classes for the students of social communications.

Some video experiments on development communication have been conducted in India, usually on an *ad hoc* and short-term basis. Ajmer, a town in Rajasthan, was the setting of one. Social workers borrowed equipment from American transients to record conversations with farmers about inadequate access to water. The resulting material, when shown to extension officers and block development officers, led to joint meetings to explore the practicalities of setting up a water development programme.

Although less expensive, even cassette recorders and slide projectors are costly items in a country where the average annual income is about Rs.1000. A cassette recorder costs at least Rs.800 and even a film projector light bulb can cost about Rs.150 to replace.

Added to the cost of the equipment and staff training, is a problem of appropriate audiovisual material. An Indian villager, unused to western art or photographs, may not receive the intended message of a slide show.

One health worker, for example, used slides to show villagers the link between the nearby swamps, the mosquitoes, and malaria. Several villagers reacted strongly to a close-up of a mosquito on the screen. "If we had mosquitoes that size in our village, of course we would worry."

Unicef has found in Nepal that two-dimensional traditional drawings can be more meaningful to remote Nepalis than photographs. Chitrabani is experimenting with hand-drawn glass slides to allow villagers to abstract messages into pictures more meaningful to them.

Low-cost slide projector kits are also being developed. Chitrabani is working with what it calls a Magic Lantern, that can be manufactured locally and inexpensively.

"We wish to give people a medium which can be under their total control," notes the director of Chitrabani, a Canadian Jesuit. "The Magic Lantern costs a mere Rs.200. It is build by an ordinary tinsmith, it is equipped with locally available lens and it uses an ordinary 100-watt household bulb." A petroleum-filled lamp can replace the bulb for areas which do not have electricity.

The government of India has long recognized the importance of mass communication. Radio has been considered a tool of national development since India drew up its first Five Year Plan in 1951. Like television, which was introduced in 1957, all India Radio (AIR) remains state controlled. The issues of centralization and decentralization of programming are perennially debated, as are the means of providing equal opportunity broadcasting for India's fragmented audience.

The resulting proportions of Indian broadcasting are impressive. In 1977, a total of 84 stations and 155 transmitters beamed out 1,045 hours of programming a day in 35 languages and 137 dialects. Ahmedabad City radio alone serves its residents in five mother tongues - Gujarati, Hindi, Marathi, Urdu and Sindhi - to take just one example.

Special audience programmes and public participation programmes are carried by some stations to try and involve the audience in programming content. Even so, only about one-third of India's population has access to radio, although almost 70 percent of India's geographical area could potentially be reached.

Television still reaches only a fraction of India's 670 million people. Its viewers are predominantly from the higher economic bracket. Only 470,026 television receivers were licenced in 1976, excluding school

sets, and including 4,341 community sets. Many community sets are kept under lock and key for fear of damage and resulting expenses.

The Working Group on Autonomy for Radio and Television was critical of India's programming to date, commenting in its final report: "There is little doubt that by opening up new worlds of knowledge and opportunity, broadcasting can be a powerful liberating force. Yet, the tragedy is that radio and TV have with rare exceptions tended to avoid programmes that specifically focus on poverty, exploitation and social justice even if these are limited to educating the illiterate and oppressed about their legal and social rights."

In the field of communications flexibility is particularly important in a country as complex as India - a country where two-thirds of the people are illiterate, and which is divided by 90 distinct ethno-linguistic regions, 17 official languages, 208 recognized dialects, six major religions, and over 3,000 distinct caste groups. In such a context, the purpose of the communication must take precedence over the nature of the medium, for each medium has something to offer - be it the immediacy of a street play, or the scope of a national radio programme.

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