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Promoting Community Participation, Hygiene Behaviour Change and Gender Development Through People's Art



Relevance of folk art in Dutch-assisted
rural development projects in India

A report written on request of RNE/ Gender and Development

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Contents

	Page
1. The Search for Communication Alternatives	1
2. New Functions for People's Performing Arts	2
3. Relevant Art Forms in States with NA-Projects	7
4. Development of People's Resources	9
5. The Gender Focus	11
6. Conclusions and Follow-Up	15

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1. The Search for Communication Alternatives

In rural development programmes for water supply and environmental sanitation, but also in other rural development sectors, two-way communication is essential. It is the prime condition for effective participation of the community and the improvement of hygiene behaviours.

But how can two-way communication be realized, when the number of project villages is large and the number of staff and the time available are limited? This was the question which the Programme Support Unit Foundation (PSU Foundation) faced in the Indo-Dutch rural water supply projects in Uttar Pradesh and the reason why they began to look for communication alternatives.

The social scientists involved in the projects realized that their major challenge was to ensure that the concept of community participation was understood and practised, not only by the communities, but also by the implementing partners. This challenge was increased by negative experiences with development projects in the past, the paucity of committed professionals and the far from conducive socio-cultural environment of the project area. Furthermore, the women needed to be brought into the mainstream of project implementation. Small and large group discussions and house to house contacts needed to be reinforced with alternative and innovative forms of communication that built on local culture and capacities.

The existing conventional mass media, such as films and videos, can reach many people, but they are usually made by external specialists for large, unsegmented audiences and cannot reflect local problems and needs of different community categories, such as men and women, rich and poor, Hindu and Muslim. Neither do mass media lead to behaviour change and the development of problem-solving skills.

The PSU Foundation therefore began to look in more detail at the opportunities offered by various forms of traditional and participatory folk art that are still alive in the villages, as well as more contemporary forms of people's art, such as popular theatre. Particular attention was paid to traditional sagas and stories, such as the epic poems of the Mahabharata (fig. 1) and the Ramayana, to dances and plays in which the people use local attributes and props, such as masks (fig. 2) and to local songs and music.



Fig. 1: Scene from village play based on the Mahabharata, but adjusted to communicate new messages on village action, handpump maintenance and gender (Photo: I.H. Rehman)



Fig. 2: Village play with actors wearing traditional masks (Photo: Nabarun Ray Chaudhuri)

2. New Functions for People's Performing Arts

India has an extremely rich culture in popular theatre, stories and music. In Uttar Pradesh alone, over 300 different types of drama, story telling, mime, puppetry and other forms of popular performance arts exist. Most of these art forms have started to decline as media of culture and entertainment due to the influence of film and television, the changed priorities of the villagers and the impossibility of making a living from these arts.

The work of the PSU Foundation is giving rural performing arts new life, by combining their original functions of entertainment and cultural expression with new functions of community mobilization, education and problem solving. The PSU Foundation is also helping the people to modernize these media by making them more participatory and bringing in new concepts, such as hygiene and gender.

In linking people's performance arts with improvement of rural water supply, sanitation, environmental protection, hygiene, health and the position of women, the PSU Foundation uses the following principles:

- The art forms are performed by local artists and groups in their own and neighbouring villages. Sometimes, local professionals, such as storytellers take part, but mostly the performers are a group of volunteers consisting of men and women, boys and girls from the community.
- The social scientists of the water and sanitation projects executed under Indo-Dutch cooperation assist each group to develop their art forms and include a relevant development theme with one or two key messages in their performance. The latter may be a play, a song and dance performance, a puppet show, or any other art form that is suitable and for which local resources are present.
- The groups choose their own themes and messages in consultation with the male or female social scientists stationed in the Indo-Dutch water and sanitation projects at the district level. Themes and messages concern local water and sanitation conditions and practices and the participation of the villagers in the projects. In some cases a play or song may be devoted to a particular problem in one village, but usually the themes also apply to conditions and practices in neighbouring communities.
- In the weeks following the performance, the themes become subject of discussions in the villages with the local water committee and in group meetings of men and women. An action plan may be drawn up to realize certain changes or solve certain problems in the village.

Themes and messages are not the same in all project districts. In each district the group will base its choices on local conditions and needs. This results in a wide range of district-specific plays, songs and other forms of performing art. However, through reviews between districts forms and messages that are found popular and relevant in one district are also taken up and adapted by groups in other districts.

Examples of village scenarios:

- * As part of a drama about a local marriage, the men and women in the play all join hands to improve the village environment (waste disposal, drainage), so that bad conditions no longer form the reason why a girl from another village cannot marry a local boy (fig. 3).
- * In a modern version of the Mahabharata saga, the five brothers almost die from thirst and complain that their common wife, Panchali, is not providing them with water. Panchali appears and explains she has gone for handpump repair training. She effectively repairs the pump. Meanwhile she gives technical explanations on her work and enfeebles male criticism about why repairs are not a women's job. The end of the play shows Panchali as effective water manager given water to the five satisfied brothers and the other villagers.
- * A local girl gives a human puppet show on an imitation television for local children. Her messages are: wash your hands with soap or ash, not soil, before touching any food (In villages, this soil is often contaminated from human and animal waste). She involves the children in shouting her messages and learning a song on the new practice.
- * Male and female actors play trees and animals in the catchment area of a water supply. Some male villagers come and cut down the trees. The animals find their water gone and cry out their thirst (fig. 4). The village women come and find their well dried up. The play is used to start off discussions on the relationship between water resources and environmental management and to plan corrective and preventive actions.

In the above manner, the PSU Foundation has given new life to age-old forms of popular theatre, storytelling and music. The Foundation has made these art forms more participatory, since local people, male and female, make the scripts and songs, prepare the costumes and props from local materials and give performances in their own and neighbouring communities.

A second aspect is that the performances do not stand on their own, but are followed by discussion and village action planning and implementation. This follow-up is organized by the local water committees and other village functionaries and leaders. Thus, popular theatre contributes to the development of local problem solving skills. The performances also have a strong gender aspect. This is discussed in more detail in chapter 5.

Summarizing, the participatory communication art developed by the PSU Foundation on the basis of traditional art forms has the following functions:

- to entertain the people
- to raise awareness on particular issues
- to identify specific problems

- to give information
- to initiate dialogue
- to change attitudes
- to change practices
- to mobilize villagers for local action
- to motivate village self-reliance and problem solving
- to build skills for identifying local problems and finding local solutions
- to give new life to revered traditional art forms
- to give local boys and girls the opportunity to fill their leisure hours in a creative manner and meet their need for positive change in their community



Fig. 3: Gramin Lokya Natya. Romantic play with village action for environmental cleanliness as its main theme. Scene shows men and women taking action for a cleaner environment (Photo: Nabarun Ray Chaudhuri)



Fig. 4: An adaptation of Panchatantra. Scene shows animals searching for water after village men have cut down the trees. (Photo: I.H. Rehman)

3. Relevant Art Forms in Other States

Traditional theatre and music that can be transformed into participatory forms of development communication exist also in other states with Netherlands-Assisted projects for rural water supply, sanitation, hygiene and environmental protection. During the workshop, the participants identified the following forms:

Andhra Pradesh: Small skits (sketches) and street plays, day drama (plays which last the whole day), Chekka Bajane (10-12 people sing in a circle, using large sticks), Kollatam (the same, but with small sticks), Burrakatha (a play by three professionals, usually male, who mix a mythological theme with funny references to current events), Harikatha (a professional narrator/singer, sometimes with a musician), Katha Parayanam (a group of professional beggars/actors who ask for a contribution going from door to door during the day then perform during the night), action songs (sung during work), women's songs (on women's life cycle, work, roles and relations), peacock dance.

Gujarat: Ramlila (staged drama by male actors, using a combination of mythological and actual themes), Bharai (a combination of drama and music, of parody and tragedy on the problems of rural people), Mankatha (storytelling by a professional narrator accompanied by ringclicking), Garbas (circular dance, now also brought out on video and purchased also by rural people), diaro (folk songs by professional singer, criticizing socially undesirable behaviour), women's songs (on life cycle, work, gender roles and relations).

Karnataka: Bayalata, Doddata, Sannata, Yakshgana, Kamsalekunitha, Karadi Majalu, Dollu Kunitha, Koiata, Bhajana, Harikathe, Keelukudare, Hejjekunitha, Geegee Pada, Chowdki Pada, Hagaluvesha, Karavanji, Kelike, Veenagase, and various folk songs. Karnataka has a Movement for Street Theatre, established in the 1980s. Each district has street theatre groups for literacy promotion.

Kerala: Ottamthulal (dance), Thiruvathira, Oppana, Vilpathu, Kaikoltikali (dance with clapping), Kollatam (dance with small sticks), Kathaprasangam (storytelling), Margamkali, Therunatakam (drama). The Movement for Street Theatre in Kerala, with performances staged by itinerant youth groups, and links to adult education classes, has been very instrumental in helping to achieve the state's high literacy rate of women and men.

Uttar Pradesh: Puppetshow, Moppets (actors with large, locally made masks), Gramin Lok Natya (traditional tug of war, here set against the background of a village market and centered around health and hygiene as its themes), Nautanki (romantic play), Kathavachan (traditional storyteller), Birha (folksong on anguish and concerns), Quawwali (group song with clapping, originally with religious theme), Look Roop Natya (folkplay using masks), Alha (epic poem/ballad on heroes), Mahabharat (a famous epic), Kavalli (traditional song with a religious theme, now adapted to no cattlewatering at handpump), Lilli Ghori (dance with horse mask), Rama play (play around statue adjusted to represent good water use), group songs (sung in group), alternate singing (each group sings in turn), improvisation/mime (by the social scientists to symbolize cooperation to solve a problem: a beggar leader has tied the hands of the members of the troupe, so that they cannot eat what they hold in their hand. They find out that by teaming up they can eat each others food

without needing hands. This breaks the power of the beggar leader and they chase him away).

During the workshop it was noted that not all forms of traditional art are suitable for transfer into participatory performance art with development themes. Particular attention is needed to ensure that the chosen art communications do not reconfirm inequities of particular socio-economic and ethnic groups and reinforce gender limitations. The challenge is to find and use those artforms that are already suitable for bringing new ideas and transform those that in their original form prohibit change.

4. Development of People's Resources

In the PSU Foundation's programme in Uttar Pradesh, the performing arts are used as a method for development communication which is supplementary to interpersonal communication. In each district with Indo-Dutch rural water supply and sanitation projects, one male or female social scientist is attached to the project with financial support from the Dutch Government. Besides organizing an interpersonal communication programme for community participation, hygiene education and women's involvement, he or she will start a programme for communication through people's performing arts. The latter is done by helping a group of interested villagers to form a voluntary group for communication arts. This group becomes the 'core communication group' in the district. Forty percent of the participants are youngsters, male as well as female.

The social scientists help the core groups to choose the various artforms, identify themes and messages, develop scripts and organize performances. For training on performance skills and script development, the core groups can call upon the services of a communication specialist, who is specialized in popular theatre and music and is employed by the PSU Foundation in Lucknow.

Each core group starts to perform in the villages of its members. Subsequently, performances are given in other villages. The only help given by the district staff at this stage is logistic (provision of transport). Costumes, instruments and props are made with local materials which do not require monetary investments.

As a next step the groups train similar voluntary groups in other villages. Gradually, single village groups are formed which work in their own and neighbouring villages. Occasionally, exchange visits are organized with groups in other districts.

To identify local resources for popular theatre in the villages the PSU Foundation has developed the following steps:

1. Social scientists with training in communication and a basic knowledge of traditional performance arts identify local arts through discussions with the village leader and the community, especially the women.
2. The staff identify local resource persons, both traditional performers willing to take part and interested volunteers, female and male.
3. These resource persons form a team. They learn about the need for safe water and sanitation and better hygiene. They then analyse the situation and dynamics in the village concerning water supply, environmental sanitation, hygiene and gender together with the social scientist. This forms the basis for the teams' choice of local themes and development of local scripts.
4. The teams are put through a formative stage of physical exercises and games developed by a theatre specialist. Aims are confidence and team building and development of individual and group skills.

5. Theatrical skills are developed likewise, with emphasis on voice modulation, facial expression, body movement and identification with the characters.
6. The teams identify local materials which they can use for staging their performance. They build their own sets, make costumes etc., using only local resources. Sticks, plates, stones, etc. replace costly musical instruments.
7. After the performances, the teams evaluate their experiences and write down the script. Exchange of themes and scripts between teams has started to take place. Self-review of each performance is encouraged, using group discussion and sometimes video. The Foundation also uses video to document each new artform and script.

5. The Gender Focus

The use of popular art and people's theatre for rural development is not new. Many books and articles have been written in English on popular theatre and music for development in sub-Saharan Africa and in Asia, notably Indonesia and The Philippines. In Latin America, the popular media also are widespread, but most accounts are in Spanish and therefore not widely known.

A review of English language literature¹ showed that almost all reports on village performance are gender-neutral. They state that village groups are formed and trained, but do not state whether these groups consist of men, women, or both. Villagers develop scripts based on their own needs and problems and give performances, but on whose problems, men's or women's or both, and who performs is not mentioned. The same applies to the attendance of the performances and the later follow-up.

The work in Uttar Pradesh and to some extent also in Karnataka has an explicit gender focus. This gender focus is important because improvement of water supply, sanitation and hygiene can only be optimal if both men and women participate in the planning, design and execution of the projects and if information, decision making, functions and trainings are divided more equitably between them.

Too often it still occurs that information only reaches men, because the women are not allowed to attend meetings and cannot read written information. Or that the men are left out in hygiene education, so that the women have to carry the burden of improving hygiene alone and the practices of the men do not change, because culturally they can easily resist any attempts made by their wives and daughters to introduce better practices by all members of the family.

In the approach developed by the PSU Foundation the gender aspect is present in the following ways:

- Women can more easily attend art performances based on traditional culture than formal village meetings. Therefore, and because the language and themes are easily understood, the messages given reach women and girls as well as men and boys. Conditions are that performances are held in sites and at times suitable for women, that information on them reaches also women and that the seating is arranged in such a way that women do not all sit at the back.
- Plots, themes and messages are developed by men and women. Where women actively take part in preparation, the contents reflect men's as well as women's needs, interests and viewpoints. An example is a play about a girl bride who is cheated by her father in law who lets her sign a legal document she cannot read. Her life changes when she becomes literate. The script is based on a real life story and the girl was acting her own part.

¹ Folkart and development communication: a bibliography. The Hague, IRC, December 1994. Unpublished paper.

- The performers are boys and girls and men and women from the community. Women act female parts that were formerly acted by young men only. Moreover, roles which traditionally are only played by men (narrator, musician) are now played also by women.
- Training on performing in public is given to women and men. This helps especially the women and girls to get confidence and become used to and get accepted when speaking up in public.
- Several songs and plays depict women and men in new roles. For example, women play waterpoint managers and handpump mechanics, men take part in environmental cleaning and care. This contributes to attitude change concerning a more equal distribution of labour, functions and training between men and women.
- Several plays and songs also explain and justify why new roles for men and women are needed.
- New gender concepts are integrated in traditionally revered religious and mythological songs and dramas and recited by locally respected traditional narrators². This makes new gender attitudes and practices more acceptable in a traditional rural society.
- Most plays and song sessions are followed by discussion. Speaking up is easier for women after a performance on a local problem enacted by local women and showing also female aspects than during more formal meetings and assemblies.
- Very important: new gender roles in performances are followed by new gender roles in practice. Singing and acting on women mechanics and water committee members is followed by actual training of women handpump mechanics and formation of water committees with men and women.

The conclusion from the above is that the approach developed by PSU Foundation helps to create gender awareness, break through social stereotypes and build new attitudes and practices in the villages.

Whether changed attitudes are actually established deserves specific field investigation, which goes beyond individual case studies to more systematic interviews of men and women performers and audiences in the villages with active theatre groups.

A further subject for field assessment is the extent to which active participation of women in decisions, trainings and functions is helped by these new ways of communication.

² E.g. during the workshop one of the girls mentioned how her father had objected to her taking part in acting. Immediately the traditional singer from her area took up a message in his song encouraging her to continue, as her father would be proud of her when he saw how her action contributed to village development.

An issue for caution and field review is further whether the greater participation of women as female caretakers and mechanics and in all-women committees is not placing especially the physical burden in labour and time only on women, with men not taking up their own responsibilities in changing hygiene behaviour and in installing, maintaining and financing improved community and household facilities.

6. Conclusions and Follow-up

Popular performance arts with a gender focus are a useful tool to enhance community participation, village action and behaviour change in rural development projects with a limited number of externally financed staff. The method appears to be quite effective, although this requires assessment in the field. Popular performance art methods are thus a valuable extension to the tools which help create two-way communication and problem solving skills, such as participatory games and exercises and participatory rural appraisal and planning.

To develop popular performance arts for rural development, not only in the water supply and sanitation sector, but also in other sectors, six recommendations are given for financing by RNE based on specific proposals from the states.

Concerning the work in Uttar Pradesh:

- Review and further strengthening of the gender elements in existing and new scripts and in implementation of plays, shows, songs and dramas, by social scientists and the communication advisor;
- Enablement of selected social scientists and especially the communication advisor from Uttar Pradesh to take part in the RNE-sponsored gender course in Gujarat;
- Assessment and documentation of the gender impact of performance arts on attendance, information, attitudes and actions in communities with active voluntary theatre groups, by the social scientists or an Indian consultant.

Concerning capacity building in other states:

- Visits of interested trainers and social staff, including selected district staff from health and social departments, to Uttar Pradesh in order to experience the performances and men's and women's reactions in the field, orient themselves on the process and assess relevance and feasibility of replication;
- Visits by a core theatre group, social scientist and communication advisor from Uttar Pradesh to other states to make their approach known to staff and villagers involved in Indo-Dutch development cooperation projects and start a learning-by-doing process with selected villages, paying particular attention to the gender aspects as described in Chapter 5.
- Provision of consultancy services for training of trainers on participatory theatre by the communication specialist from Uttar Pradesh to interested Indo-Dutch cooperation projects and villages in other states.