

Innovation and Participatory methods of message construction and dissemination: Street Theatre model

Jolly Jose

Abstract

Drama is a powerful tool to be pro-active in integrating cultural and linguistic translation for social change. Therefore, use of drama with carefully drafted communication strategy to meet specific development needs of a society is a not a well explored tool to meet the development communicational needs. As an art form developed to meet the development communicational needs of India, the study explores street theatre as development communication tool and an agent of cultural and public diplomacy in today's context. The street plays performed by 'Perna Kala Manch' the drama wing of 'Viswajyoti communication' Varanasi, are the cases examined to determine the development communication strategy used in construction of drama message and its presentation. The study further explores the use of 'audience-message-change' strategy and elements of innovation and local realism used for the generation of message and diffusion. The study proves that the theatre goes beyond diffusion innovation method and further a participatory and culturally engaged realism is applied in the process of construction and dissemination of message. Participatory observation of theatre presentation and interview with the director, play writer, trainer and performer of 'Perna Kala Manch' drama and street theatre are the methods used to gather information and it is examined in the light of development communication strategy developed by World Bank (PaoloMefalopulos,2008)and the drama techniques, innovations in realism suggested by Andrew Skuse and Machael Wilmore, and Ingaki

Keywords: communication, audience, message, change, innovation, realism

Introduction

Development indicates change. This change needs to derive from within and should not be imposed one. According to the World Bank Report (2008), one of the common errors in the application of communication intervention is that the strategy designed for communication is generated without analysing situation. Therefore, it is important to consider communication focused to bring change need to include the in-depth analysis of the cause, stake holder's back ground, their positions on the issues of interest, knowledge and clearly stated, and measurable objectives of the communication.

A message designed for social change, is an innovation where a 'new' idea is transmitted to individual or community that would bring changes or help to adopt new way of being or behaving. When innovation is perceived as a new idea, practice or an object in other researches, according to Roger (2003) in communication, the messages are perceived as *new* by the receivers, even though they are usually anticipated or are familiar. In diffusion of these innovations, it is an 'intercultural encounter of heterophilous individuals. "*The individual who perceives the idea, object or practice as new experiences a high degree of uncertainty in seeking information about, and deciding to adopt an innovation*". Moreover, here the source of message must be more knowledgeable than the receiver.

Behavioural psychologists and interpersonal communication scholars explain the microlevel adoption of behaviours, personal decisions and attitudes through *diffusion* as '*the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system*' (Rogers, 2003). Development communication intent to bring change both at micro- and macro level where the message (new idea) is disseminated to a specific unit of the society with development objective.

Street theatres are messages intended to bring changes to specific sections of society by certain individual or group through the encounter of heterophilous individuals. The study explores social and local realism used in street theatre as innovations to diffuse the message through participatory approach. It analyses the content generation and performance, which is the message and process used by *Prerna Kala Manch*, the theatre wing of *Viswa Jyoti communication*, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh.

1. Street Theatre as medium of innovation

Street theatres are one of the effective development communication tools to enhance knowledge, bring public awareness and to influence positive public behaviour. This medium of drama represents social realities to modify human behaviour and to stimulate socio-political, cultural and economic change. Earlier, 'street play was a tool in the hands of the poor, their supporters were mainly the voluntary and civil organizations. Today the government, political parties and corporate companies are using street play to propagate their ideas'. Drama expresses ideas about life, such expression is '*capable of interpretation by actors*' and interest audiences who watches actions or hear the words. 'Drama is a mirror of nature' that, what may be found in nature be introduced in the plays and the effectiveness of

drama is ‘not the creative process involved in the construction of the play, but on the effect which the whole drama will have on an average audience (A Nicoll, 1969).

Therefore, as a medium of innovation, street theatres are exclusive tools for education and social action. The source of message involved in this process are familiar with the dynamism of the society, unique cultural rudiments of the people for whom the message is constructed and the socio- economic and political context of the place and its global connectivity. ‘Street theatre are forms of drama, well-rooted in the Indian tradition as noted in the presence of the *sutradhar*ⁱ in Indian puppetry and the existence of the narrator in Indian folk theatre. It is an artistic expression in illustrating the colour of daily life’(Negi MohitaNext Generation library). It does not have the support of orchestra, galleries, audience, music, songs and stage to reach the common people. It is not a form of entertainment but used as art form to create social awareness. The ultimate focus of a street theatre is imparting a new idea, which would bring certain positive and constructive changes in a particular unit of the society (or more) in development dimension.

Street play’s focus is encapsulated in certain defined objectives, where ‘the meaning making reflect a specific idea and impart it through identification and engagement of characters from the same community or familiar to the community. Thus, the audience can identify the desired elements of message and adopt certain behaviour’ (Singhal et al. 2004). Street play also uses entertainment (Humour), as a significant part of the drama for education and behavioural change. The message of the play is focused as in any drama for development, ‘to make explicit and implicit change among people and carefully crafted to trigger reactions leading to the adoption of desired change’(Ingaki , 2007). This change can be attitude, behaviour, norms and practices at a macro -level or microlevel. For example, a viewer would make a decision to stop drinking, adopt behaviour that can stop the spread of HIV virus, find a role model to gather women to take a protest rally to close down a liquor shop which is in their village or Denay voting for a candidate who tries to bribe them during an election. Street theatres are two-step or multi step flow of information which is presented directly in the midst of the target audience. Unlike other drama format, it needs to manage the essential concerns such as drama (the story), a development idea within the drama (the message), media (the size of the audience and the standards of delivery), audience (the socio-cultural context), management (facilitation of multiple elements and the sustainability of this art).

The central concern of the whole performance is 'audience-message-change'. The target audience reactions to the message is repeatedly discussed and assessed to design the play and for further performances or for persuasive purposes to repeat messages for behavioural changes and to finalize the order of things in the play as *ANicoll* refers 'must be easily grasped by the other'. In street theatre, this multilayer information is constructed and communicated through the process of (i) Identifying issues and concerns at micro level (and macro level if needed) (ii) determining the elements of motivation for change (iii) identifying appropriate models of change (iv) setting visions for future in relation to the development objective and (v) area of self-realisation where information is combined with role modelling.

2. Multi-layer process communication model of street plays performed by *Prerna Kala Manch*

Prerna Kala Manch (PKM) , meaning art forum for inspiration the theatre wing of Vishwa Jyoti Communications Varanasi, India, has given 7288 performances from 1993, till September 2018, which include 56 street plays. The team has given 1350 drama performances alone, of which 42 are stage dramas and a few puppet dramas. Street plays use multiple communication exchange tailored to specific groups and communities: personal identification with characters, moving story lines, language, symbols and cultural practices of the community, culturally and religiously linking properties, probes, use of hand gestures, chorus, music, dialogues and emotive elements to accentuate and be persuasive. Albert Bandura (1977; 1986; 2006) in his research on cognitive and social learning process have demonstrated that:

“carefully crafted media role models could directly influence audience attitudes and behaviours without the need for influential intermediaries”. “Diffusion research explains how mass media effects occurred through a two-step (or multi-step) process. Opinion leaders glean new ideas from the mass media and pass them forward to their followers through personal influence. Here an intermediary opinion leader plays a crucial role in diffusing new ideas at the level of the social system or community” Singhal.” (2016)

Generally the objective of street play is to create direct impact on the audience with an immediate effect according to the objective set by the play writer, or the by the donor organization who request the team to perform the play.

Construction of drama and message in Street play

The storyline construction for the street play follows unique methods of segmentation and targeted message design strategies. Veteran drama artist, playwright, and street theatre trainer Anand IMS says that:

“Street play is performed live in front of the people, face to face, in their level (ground level). Stage play too has a different type of impact. The lights, costumes, make up etc. and it create glamour. But street play has a direct and lasting appeal because it is interactive and has a component of feedback which is an essential element of the basic process of communication”.

The message of the play is constructed to make it more engaging, interesting and meaningful. PKM plays follows unique strategy to construct message:

“It is close to the people culturally, emotionally and technically. It is directly focused to a specific need. The audience are closely observed, by their day today activities, languages, idioms and phrases are used by them, some of the unique customs and practices are replicated in the play. The play often is centred around an issue, concern or a cause and its connectivity to the individual or the community in specific. Thus, the message becomes the unidentified or unexpressed voice of the people themselves.” (Anand IMS, Interview, September, 2018).

Innovations in realism

The production logic of this drama seeks to escape the formulaic scripted dialogue of a stage drama or other dramatic format for a ‘good drama’. Instead it captures the real stories of the community where it is performed. ‘The stories are their stories, nothing is imported from outside, characters are from the village. Many on-the-spot improvisations are done in the script, adopting the name of the village, police station, cinema theatre, cinema shows etc’.

The popular theme of our play here are atrocities on women, discrimination based on gender, caste, class and creed, education of girl child, evil of alcoholism, environment concerns, water issues etc. People's organisation, corruption, health issues etc. are also major themes (Anand IMS, Interview, September, 2018). Thus, the play becomes the mirror of real life with better accuracy for the audience. The local artists are the preferred players who can easily use the local slang and various nuances of the dialect which is also an important element in performance

Social and local realism in PKM street plays

Street theatre performance of PKM is the radical expression and commitment to social changes. The organization based in Varanasi has made the performances in all districts of Uttar Pradesh, parts of other states such as Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Haryana, Uttarakhand, Assam, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, and Jammu and Kashmir.

Multiple factors are taken into consideration while writing the play and after, as it is a social responsible action and performance of art. The community is carefully observed before the play and the immediate response taken by the players soon after the performance gives a sense of appreciation to the drama and concerns are further clarified during discussion with the performers. (After the performance of the play, generally a discussion is carried out with the audience, where the PKM director/ Play writer or anyone can guide the discussion with the audience is usually present). This one to one interaction makes the audience feel that the drama is more realistic and enable them to make better associations with the personal and social messages. Here, realism is culturally coded, and the drama gives visual representation with greater dramatic force of voice tone, music and probes. 'The language of the play is not formal classic language or Sanskritized language, but of the common man; simple words which are easy to understand is used. For example, the police characters have their own unique expressions. Such 'mild' abusive language of the police within a permissible limit is used and the people enjoy it. Alcoholics have their own unique language' (Anand IMS, Interview September, 2018).

"We adopt the language of alcoholics, beggars, shopkeepers, money lenders etc. as per the character. Another unique language is some expressions mixed with mannerisms, which is repetitive and that causes humour. The simple context created and make it feel realistic is the important technique used in street theatre. Minimum

property is used for the play. Easily available prop like stick, *lota* (water bowl) are used. Most often hand props and stage props are mimed. Hand props such as a tumbler, plate, broom, pen, pencil, beedi, cigarette, blackboard, chalk, comb, soap etc. are mimed. Stage props such as door, window, chair, sofa, table, bench, stool, ladder, bicycle, motor cycle, bullock cart, jeep, hand pump, plough, well etc. are also mimed.

People not only understand these props, but they thoroughly enjoy it. The more enlarged a prop's use, the better clarity. Space dimension is very important for the play as there are no other properties used."

Innovative techniques of local realism used by PKM

The team of organizers and performers walk very closely to the people to construct the appropriate character. Number of characters are deeply rooted in the minds of the people. The popular character *Bihari* in the play *Thamasaon* police atrocities and *Madiradevi* in another play *Goirohband* on electoral politics are examples of how people identify and connect to the character. Anand IMS says:

"The play has full of ordinary people. The characters are mostly common people with common names. It is a deliberate attempt to give the common and local names to the characters. But the action performed is in the most natural manner. Only in one play *Bechara Muzhook Singh* we have unusual and out of ordinary characters such as mosquito, illnesses like T.B., cholera, asthma, malaria, jaundice, because it is a play on HIV/AIDS and the script demands enactment by such characters. Even these odd characters are localized by giving them names such as TB Singh, Peeliya (Jaundice) Singh, Malaria Singh, Haija (cholera) Singh etc. who act as ministers in the cabinet of Raja Roganu Singh (King Illness Virus). The HIV /AIDS virus too comes as a character.

In the play *Thamasa* the character with the name *Bihari* who is alleged to be a thief and is beaten by the police cruelly. People identify themselves with this character and remember him in the next programs. In the same play, there is also another character called *Girdhari*, a compounder, assisting a pseudo-quack in fake operations. The character is a representative of all such semi-literate compounders who spoil the health of the patients who are trapped into their net. The audience remember the character for long.

Another play on electoral politics, we have a character called *Madira (liquor) Devi* in *Goirohband* who is contesting election and goes around distributing liquor bottles before the election as an incentive. The other characters *Katta* (country pistol) *Guru*, and *Ganja* (*Guru* are also candidates who threaten the voters showing pistol and the other distributes *ganja* (local addictive substance). The objective is to warn the people against falling into the trap of those who give incentives and buy their votes. The audience remembers the characters, very specially *Madira Devi*. They have taken in the message and remember it for long.”

The performers team and organizers of PKM consistently stay connected to the local communities where there are multiple developmental needs. The team is highly sensitized to the socio- economic- cultural and ecological issues of the country and well aware of the interconnectivity of life, dynamism of the society and new communication patterns. The local performers are another local realist technique use by the PKM team, they can easily replicate local language and culture. ‘The entire play will not use colloquial language, but a colloquial touch is always found useful to make it more realistic and the people feel ‘affinity with the artists, and do not treat them as outsiders’ certain plays also become very popular because of its relevance of the theme, humour, and use of colloquial language, songs and entertaining action’ (Anand IMS, Interview September, 2018). This way, the appeal of emotional and social realism is innovation widely used in the plays. The local realism of actual life situation (mirroring) which lead the audience to be self -reflective. Along with the use of humour, colloquial language and songs make the play memorable.

“Our play ‘*Kamla Ka Kamaal*’ against discrimination of girl child is very popular. There have been 581 performances of it until 31st Dec 2017. Similarly, ‘*Phans Gaya Badalu Chakkar Me*’ on exploitation of the uneducated had 978 performances. ‘*Tamasha*’ on corruption and village issues had 857 shows, *Gadda* on social sensitivity had 541 shows’ *Bhagwan Ki den*’ on family planning had 500 shows. A play titled ‘*Bhookh Banam Dharm*’ had so far 352 shows. All these are popular plays because of the relevance of the theme, the humour and use of colloquial language, songs and entertaining action. When we go out of the state we try to learn a few important and commonly used words, phrases and sentences. When PKM visits Jharkhand we use some Sadri words, some songs of the locality.

Similarly, when we were performing in Sundergarh district of Odisha we used both Sadri phrases and Odiya phrases.” (Anand IMS interview, 2018)

Performance of drama closer to the target audience is another important balancing technique used to create sense of local authenticity. It is challenged by the people of other sections. These decisions are important to communicate development messages directly to the target audience.

“We avoid school compounds, ‘Panchayat bhavans’(Local government office)and such public places. We always avoid gated colonies and bungalows or ‘*kothis*’(Court yard) of the rich and affluent. Programs are mostly performed in the middle of the ‘*dalits*’ hamlet or a backward’s‘*basti*’. It may be in the courtyard of an ordinary person, or close to the well where the women gather. We start with a game for children. They are the first ones to arrive. Rapport and an affinity with children is built up which is infectious and spreads to the adults (their parents and elders) who join one by one. Then songs are snuff. A brief introduction of ourselves by the organisers lead to a relationship. When the play is performed, there is a lot of humour and fun. The audience, familiar, unfamiliar ones, strangers and mere onlookers, all smile, laugh, clap and thus the rapport is ‘cemented’. As the play progresses, people’s issues are discussed dramatically, they get engrossed in it, characters are identified locally, emotions mixed with comedies and also tragedies bring tears into their eyes. The cemented rapport is now turned into a ‘concrete’ relationship.” (Anand IMS Interview September, 2018)

3. Participatory approach in construction and diffusion of messages for change

PKM choose this specific medium as it is a “*medium which is no cost or low-cost. What motivates us is to reach the message of social change with minimum expense to the people who live far away from the technical devices of communications*”. Even though it appears to be less structured “*it is easier to have it under an organisation. But the organisation and its institutional structure is unimportant as street plays are part of a larger social movement*”.

It is potential enough to create greater impact, as it is close to the people culturally, emotionally and technically. To make it closer to the people, the audience of each play is determined, what type of audience are expected, rural, urban and their specific needs is communicated by the donor organization. The use of social realism makes the message as

the un-identified or unexpressed voice of the people themselves. 'It is devoid of paraphernalia and gadgets' and the stardoms are like one among them with their own issues and concerns. Thus, the play help to identify appropriate models of change: The PKM team also go beyond the conventional style of street theatre and adopt certain therapeutic elements when it is necessary for self -realization and change:

“A play titled ‘*Tamasha*’ has a scene of police torture. The audience while watching this makes comments. Someone in the audience calls out another one saying that the same thing happened to the latter. We stopped the play there itself and asked the audience, esp. trying to identify the one who called out, and ask for details. We bring the victim to the arena, the circle in which the play is performed. We ask a few questions and ask him to take the role, not of his being victimised, but the role of the police who tortured him. After some encouragement, he gets into the role, uses the same abusive language, kicks and beats around..... the therapy takes place. He goes back relieved. We then ask the audience what could be done as a solution to this torture. They discuss and decide that next time any one is picked up by the police, the entire village will go together to the police station and will not allow such a torture to happen.”

Identifying issues and concerns at micro level and macro level and determining the motivation for change is a key factor in constructing message. In this process certain characters are imitated and deep rooted in the minds of the people and they function as changing agents. PKM street plays also focus to help code visions for future in relation to the development objective and social action.

“We have organised the women to raise slogans against alcoholism and march towards the liquor shop demanding closure of the shop. A few times we have performed a play against alcoholism and liquor business in front of the liquor shops. The response is always positive and enthusiastic. The issues are people’s own issues. No theme is odd, no time is odd for the people in the rural are as they are starving for entertainment and ‘connectedness’”. (Anand IMS Interview, September, 2018)

4. Analysis

As a radical medium for development communication, street theatres construct meaning making messages to its audience who does not feel the distance from the stage where it is performed, highlighting the concerns of the audience, using language and gestures very close to them, and the mood it creates. PKM street plays follow 'message-audience-change' strategy with a higher degree of participatory approach and local realism technique.

Though street plays are widely used by multiple organizations and groups, PKM street theatres focus on clear measurable strategy with innovations of local realism both in constructing the message and diffusing it. The creative realism used to connect 'message-audience-change' highlight the opportunities and potential of balancing the traditional narration and the radicalism. Social change dramas can be serious. Yet, culturally linked story line of PKM conveys serious messages, in engaging and interesting manner. Drama like *Tamasa Goirohband*, *Kala Badal*, *Ek Nayisuruvad* reflects high social realism and favours social change.

PKM street plays help its audience to identify the atrocities of police on innocent people, corruption and its impact on ordinary people (*Tamasa*) sensitise to the discrimination of girl child (*Kamala Ka Kammal*), exploitation of the uneducated (*Phans Gaya Badalu Chakkar Me*), creating social sensitivity (*Gadda*), education on family planning (*Bhookh Banam Dharm*), ecological concerns (*Dal dal Parjan*, *Truvar Sache Mitr*) etc. The plays are performed in highly participatory mode, where the message is constructed after association with the target group, understanding their concerns, considering culture and practices. Certain performers also have great sense of affinity to the communities and groups where the plays are regularly performed, as they also represent the same culture and speak same language. Conventions of realism are historically and culturally relative and they add to meaning making and message management. The radical creativity of using the local names, exaggerated actions, humorous titles and hand gestures and local probes draw the attention of the crowd who connect the story to themselves. Mirroring of drama to the reality and the discussion with the audience are change processes. Most of the play is focused to have selected impact. At the same time, it goes beyond as in the case of therapeutic situation and women getting organized and acting against social evils.

5. Limitation of the study

The study focuses on the message construction and dissemination strategy, audience response soon after the play to analyse the message. The view of the play writer and personal observation are the methods adopted, not the long term impact from the perspective of the audience.

Conclusion

Street theatre can be considered as 'world making' genre of other dramas, whose writers, directors and performers are engaged in challenging socio- economic cultural contradictions (Allen,1985, Das,1995, Martin, Barbero, 1995, Rofel, 1995). They are good analytical prism of the micro- and macro systems of the society(Andrew Akuse and Michael Wilmore,2011) The radicalism expressed in street paly is that it is potential to express the preferred meaning, considering the informational need of the specific audience better. The messages can create immediate and subtle impact and capable of bridging political, caste and religious gap, peace building, and ultimately to bring change from within.

Endnote

This paper is developed as reference for teaching street theatre as development communication tool for the students of Mass Communication.

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Jolly Jose is PhD and Assistant Professor, Xavier School of Communications, Xavier University, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India. Email: jollykuru@gmail.com, jollyjose@xcomm.edu.in