



Folk Media: The Changing Contours in Covid-19

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



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Abstract

India is a multicultural and multilingual nation. This diversity poses many challenges. With the outbreak of deadly Novel Corona virus, the entire world has been shaken. Even today, many of us are not aware of the difference between epidemic and pandemic, lockdown and shutdown. We are coming to terms with what is quarantine, what is asymptomatic. So the need of the hour is to inform and educate the masses, especially the rural population on the seriousness of Covid-19. And what better way than by entertainment through their own people and not someone who is elitist or suited-booted? Folk media is the way to meet the challenges of Covid-19. Effective use of folk media can create awareness, provide information and bring about desired attitudinal changes and behavioral changes among populations. Far from being stagnant, Folk media are highly flexible and adapt to changing times and are supportive of Health Communication. The research paper aims to look at the changing

contours of folk media in the current scenario and suggests ways for folk media to meet the challenges faced today. The role of the communicator is also looked at.

Key Words

Folk media, information, Covid-19, Health Communication.

Introduction

The current century tells a story where the old order has yielded place to the new. Folk media has been displaced by the Modern media. The research paper aims to bring out the relevance of folk media and the changing contours in the background of Covid-19. It suggests that integration of modern media and traditional media is the key.

Covid-19 has forced us to rethink on ways to preserve our culture and heritage. Folk media is a form where we have live performances with a lot of audience participation and improvisations.

But today when we are advised to keep social distancing, how will folk media rise to the challenges? Folk media draws inspiration from the instant feedback from audiences, mainly from rural background, folk media educates and informs, apart from the entertainment factor. Used, wisely it is the perfect medium to use in Covid-19.

Let us consider the role of Government to popularize folk media .A positive direction is the Government guidelines and use of traditional media or folk media in its development programs and for publicity. The Government of India in 1954 established the Song and Drama Division with its own initiation and sponsorship. The aim was to facilitate training and education.

Folk media is the soul of a country. India, this is multi-lingual, multi-cultural and highly heterogeneous with widespread locations. The majority of the population belongs to the rural background. It is this rural setup that is the originator of folk culture.

Folk Media is the creative dissemination of information through cultural and performance arts. In traditional societies, folk media: drama, skits, poems, stories, riddles, songs and dance have been popularly and successfully used to disseminate messages and even to pass on wisdom of older generations to the youth. In different societies the use of folk media is seen in circumcision, betrothal and marriage ceremonies, cleansing and funeral rituals and in all forms of entertainment and festivals.¹

Role of Folk Media

Folk media play very important role on the rural citizens of our country. Folk media uses forms like satire and humor to subtly point out flaws and shortcomings in daily life. Folk media can make us aware of dangers of visiting quacks for treatment of Covid-19 symptoms. People should be encouraged to contact the local health worker.

Unique Features of Folk Media

Folk media has outstanding features that make it an effective tool for entertainment, information and development. Some features are:

- Folk media is spontaneous.
- Highly flexible. Very easily adaptable to audience needs and perceptions.
- Literacy level of audiences is not a factor.
- Can use various dialects as per needs and settings. Can portray emotions as most are live performances. Local customs, festivals, culture can be shown.
- Feedback is instantaneous. Impact is direct. Question answer sessions can be integrated (two-way communication).
- These performances are never unidirectional or unilinear. Diffusion of messages is better.
- Cost-effective. Costly sets, equipment not required. Minimal use of make-up or expensive costumes. The appeal is at personal and intimate level.
- Barriers of illiteracy and access to electronic equipment can be overcome.
- Usually performed by local artistes and community members.
- Participatory mode is effective to promote development.
- No intrusion by foreign institutions of corporate. Therefore credibility is more. Cultural imperialism and cross cultural barriers nonexistent.
- Community members use folk media to identify, prioritize and try to resolve issues with help of folk media.
- Gender inclusion can be seamlessly done. Gender specific messages find better and effective integration through Folk Media. Children respond better to these forms.

The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Guidelines

The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting in its Working Report has provided guidelines related to media.⁵

Traditional media should continue to be an important instrument of information transfer. It has become more relevant and useful in the contemporary society.

However, for developing suitable strategies in this area, efforts should be made to take advantage of New Media with its IT enabled applications.

Exposure to new techniques of communication would not only be most effective, but also could expose the rural populace in the process to the emerging technologies of contemporary world. Increased use of traditional media should be encouraged on PPP basis to carry out intensive campaigns at village fairs, religious festivals, social gatherings etc. Joint efforts should bring more impact and be cost effective.

Community broadcasting should be expanded to include elementary education programs;

Song and Dram Division (SDD), that uses traditional media to reach people, should continue to modernize its infrastructure in view of its renewed importance and new emphasis being accorded during the 11th Plan;

Directorate of Field Publicity (DFP), with its vast field network, should redefine its objectives and reposition its network in such a way that the remote, inaccessible and strategic areas for the countries are fully and effectively covered to reach the people.

Government should consider instituting awards and endowments on specific subjects/issues like gender, water resources management, child rights, human rights, environment to encourage special and developmental reporting in the country.

Some Popular Folk Media forms in India

Tamasha, Powada, (Powala), Keertana, (Harikeertan), Yakshagana, Nautaki, Jatra, Bhavai, Therukoothu, Rammlia and Rashlila, Street Theatre, Puppetry.

Objective of the Paper

- The changing contours of Folk media with the onslaught of Covid-19 will be examined.
- The paper will suggest steps to be taken to cope with challenges.
- The role of the communicator during the challenging times will also be stressed.

Review of Literature

Moshe Triwaks quoted, “Don’t embrace technology for technology’s sake”. “Use common sense to determine when to use new media and when to use more traditional methods. It’s great to have electronic relationships, but we always need old-fashioned human contact.”²

Casey (Casey, 1975) says that folk media are products of the local culture, rich in cultural symbols, and highly participatory. They have great potential to be integrated with modern mass media.³

Ranganath (1975:12) defines traditional media as living expressions of the lifestyle and culture of a people, evolved through the years.⁴

Methodology

The paper is in a discourse and analysis format. Besides. Short interviews were also taken with three folk artistes only and their views were considered regarding the changing face of folk media.

The Changing Contours of Folk Media

1. **Gandhian Example for Folk Media in Covid-19:** Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation gave a call of developing at the grassroots. He warned us against the dangers of industrialization. He laid focus on sustainable development and rural reconstruction. Women empowerment, equality in society, skill oriented education, cottage industries and recognizing our cultural values are ingrained in the Gandhian philosophy.

Folk culture and folk media have the potential to fulfill the dream of Gandhi through the inherent quality of connecting with people and being the media of the people. It is during the times of Covid-19 that we can use Folk media to connect with the rural folk. What we are being advised today as *Atmanirbhar* or Self-reliance can be achieved through cottage industries, Khadi weaving, cleaning of own latrines, no to wastage, sanitation and other issues. Communal harmony is the cementing factor during Covid-19 times. Gandhian thought can be communicated through Folk media as a weapon to counter Covid-19 casualties.

2. **Behavior Change Communication:** Behavior change communication or BCC aimed at motivating people, especially rural folk to accept social change and adopt newer habits. Folk media is used extensively for information, education and communication (IEC).

On the same steps, on a war-footing folk media can play a major role to empower the masses in the fight against Corona virus and we can challenge Covid-19.

Wearing of masks, frequently washing hands, keeping physical distance, maintaining social distancing, covering face while coughing, washing mask with disinfectant or disposing mask, taking the help of health professional in case of symptoms related to Covid-19, going for quarantine can be well communicated to masses, especially rural folk.

There can be minimal dialogues and more music in the current scenario.

Visual aids like posters can be added with performances.

Considering the situation, folk media can be also communicated through channels like radio, television and community media for spreading awareness on Novel Corona virus, lockdown news, curfews, relaxations, transport services, helplines, food and shelter, medical care.

3. **Challenges from Modern Mass Media:** The modern mass media required huge investments and thus demanded a mass audience. The commercial entertainment industry set standards of technical perfection and professional accomplishment few grassroots performers could match.

The commercial industries developed powerful infrastructures that ensured that their messages reached everyone possible. The commercial culture generated the stories, images, and sounds that mattered most to the public.

Today the same folk media that was sidelined with the advancement of modern media can be used for community motivation, mobilizing support and participation in programs and at the same time for entertainment.

Role of Communicator for use of Folk Media During Covid-19

- The communicator must be aware of the statistics related to Corona cases of the region.
- The communicator is the bridge between the Government and the people.
- Awareness of geography of the region is important
- The communicator should maintain sensitivity while reporting issues.
- He must acquaint himself with the socio-cultural and economic set-up of the stakeholders.
- He must adopt a friendly attitude and not focus on the negativities of the people while delivering messages through folk media.
- He may team up with local people for use of street plays, skits, chorus songs or dance drama.
- He must use simple language and make use of effective communication skills to deliver messages using folk media.
- He must not create panic in the audience. He must build up their trust and inspire them to adopt the precautionary measures to combat Covid-19.
- He must be ready with FAQs relating to Covid-19 from the audiences.

Analyzing the Discourse and Providing Suggestions

- Folk media is a viable option to integrate education regarding daily work of audiences. This will positively impact the wellness of people.
- Many people are engaged as daily wage laborers, farm hands cart pullers, dairy farms, as barbers, as helpers in stores, in small shops. Their specific needs can be taken into consideration and the language and dialects they use can be used in folk media,
- Use of masks, disposing or cleaning the masks, sanitization of door handles, houses, and disinfecting clothes, keeping pregnant women, elderly, sick and children in safety are vital issues that can be communicated by songs, skits and mimes.
- All these issues must be communicated but the artiste must bring certain changes in performances and adapt to changing scenario.
- They must educate with plays or songs while maintaining social distance.
- Folk artistes can write songs and dialogues suited to scenario of Covid-19.
- Information about Government initiatives, Helpline numbers, Quarantine centers, symptoms like difficulty in breathing, cold cough related to the virus can be enacted.
- Those rural folk or those in semi urban areas must be given information to use *Aarogya Setu* App if possible. Folk artistes can demonstrate how to download and install.
- Issues like loss of livelihood must be countered with information on Government help.
- One nation one ration card must be informed by folk artistes.
- Covid-19 is a time where each one help one. Issues like health and sanitation, obeying Government norms. Compassion, empathy and national unity, respect for health workers are the new themes.

Folk music can serve its purpose of entertainment. It can inform through storytelling. It can be made into educational modules. Folk dance can build up participatory mode of communication. Youth of a community, adolescents can be made aware on issues related to Covid-19 through folk dance.

Audiences of folk media are not mere listeners or viewers. They are part and parcel of the show. Their feedback invigorates a performance and motivates the performers. They sometimes become part of the live performance by spontaneous participation. These shows could be recorded and videos circulated. Modern media could broadcast and telecast the folk forms.

Conclusion

Folk media are effective means of recreation and infotainment. They showcase the changing values in society. They create awareness, educate and inform. Media planners have realized that empowerment from grassroots cannot be achieved if folk culture and folk media are pushed to the sidelines.

With Covid-19 reaching global dimensions and death cases rising, the need of the hour is to motivate the masses.⁶

Folk media is the only media that will touch the heart of rural folk, the displaced, the migrants, and others. This issue cannot be tackled by adopting an elitist approach, rather we must reach the grassroots. Projection of optimism even amidst crisis can be highlighted through the media the masses can relate to.

Effective use of folk media can create awareness, provide information and bring about desired attitudinal changes among populations that is the need of the hour today.

Folk Media can also easily be integrated in Health Communication models.

Far from being stagnant, they cope up with changing times. Today we are at the stage of community transmission. From a practical approach, Folk media can also be integrated with modern electronic media to telecast programs regarding Covid-19.

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