UNIT 3 TRADITIONAL FOLK MEDIA

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit of the course is intended to introduce you to the scope and the potential of traditional folk forms of entertainment such as the Puppet, Katha-Kirtan, Nautanki, Yakshagan etc., in communicating development messages in modern times, especially in the context of rural masses.

After going through this unit you should be able to:

- identify the different varieties of folk forms of communication that are popular in the respective rural areas,
- enlist the general characteristics of the folk media,
- describe the applications of the folk media in the process of development and change,
- discuss the potential of the traditional folk media to be integrated with the mass media for the dual purpose of entertainment and development,
- identify and describe suitable methods by which to increase the efficiency of the folk media to obtain the intended results.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the first two units of the block, we had described the origin and development of the mass media: the Press, Radio, Television and Cinema. As distinguished from these modern media, in this unit we shall dwell on the traditional folk media, which are deep-rooted in our culture and have been with us naturally for ages. We shall explain the nature of these folk media, enumerate the different types and suggest methods for increasing their efficiency. After this, in the concluding unit of this
block, we shall move on to the latest communication technologies of computer, satellite and the like. These are aptly called the “New Communication Technologies”.

Activity 1

a) Identify some of the major folk forms of entertainment prevalent in your region.

b) Which of these is the most popular?

3.2 TRADITIONAL FOLK MEDIA: WHAT ARE THEY?

“Traditional Folk Media” is a term used to denote “people’s performances”. It describes folk dance, rural drama and musical variety of the village people. This term speaks of those performing arts which are cultural symbols of a people. These performing arts pulsate with life and slowly change through the flux of time. During the past five decades they have been increasingly recognised as viable tools to impart even development messages, both as live performances as also in a form integrated with electronic mass media. They have rightly come to be called “Traditional Folk Media” for communication.

For millions of people living in remote areas in developing countries, to whom information is to be quickly imparted, mass media channels of sound and sight do hold a glamour but often enough they mask the message. Therefore, a premium is now being put on traditional folk performances which were once considered mere museum pieces. Traditional folk media have been consciously persuaded to come out of their shell to give a personal touch to the otherwise impersonal mass media programmes.
Behavioural changes are most easily brought about by personal interaction. And traditional folk media are personal forms of communication, of entertainment. These forms of art are a part of the way of life of a community and provide acceptable means of bringing development issues into the community on its own terms.

Traditional folk media are playing a meaningful role in the affairs of developing countries in Asia and Africa. As a much loved body of interpreters of indigenous culture, they have proved to be highly influential with the rural masses. For policy makers and administrators, they are matchless as persuasive means of communication. For mass media personnel they are an inexhaustible treasure of colourful forms and meaningful themes.

3.3 LIMITATIONS OF MASS MEDIA

In developing countries, despite painstaking efforts, the print medium has not reached the rural millions to the desired extent due to illiteracy. But the print medium, through cartoons, caricatures, symbols, emblems and photographs, does convey meaning to the masses, though not to the extent that the printed word can.

Radio, on the other hand, has made inroads into the distant rural homes in developing countries, but perhaps it is more a box of entertainment than of information, let alone education. Even the Farm Forum Programme which involves community listening, discussion and feedback to the source, covers only a handful of people, who often do not work in the fields and so are not knowledgeable of the ground realities of agriculture. The radio is a one-way-track to the villager, bringing messages from an unknown and unfamiliar source. To the rural illiterate, "to see is to believe" and so, the sound medium is urbane and impersonal to him.

Television has made its presence felt in most of the developing countries though there is a limitation of coverage. When harnessed with imagination, the medium is expected to revolutionise the living style of the rural inhabitants with new and tested inputs of information in agriculture, education and health. An audio-visual medium like TV, proves too glamorous to the rural ignorant. The message sought to be conveyed gets overwhelmed by the glamour. The unsophisticated rural viewer finds more of entertainment than information in the software. Also, the medium is far too expensive for the rural poor.

The film medium enjoys immense popularity and has been influencing rural masses in changing over to the urban life-style. Films are packed with action. Yet the medium has remained static with regard to ever-changing themes like population control.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: i) Identify which of these sentences is 'True' and which is 'False'.
   ii) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1) Traditional folk media are mere museum pieces.
   (  ) True (  ) False

2) Traditional folk media are impersonal.
   (  ) True (  ) False

3) Widespread illiteracy is the fundamental drawback that is preventing the print medium from reaching greater heights of popularity.
   (  ) True (  ) False
### 4) Television has the potential to convey information on new and tested inputs in the areas of agriculture, education and health.

- True ( )
- False ( )

### 5) Radio Farm Forum Programmes lay emphasis on obtaining farmer's feedback.

- True ( )
- False ( )

### 6) It is possible to exchange new experiences and ideas through the traditional folk media.

- True ( )
- False ( )

### 7) Traditional folk media are rarely local based, popular folk art forms.

- True ( )
- False ( )

### 8) Traditional folk media cannot be used to publicize the government's welfare schemes.

- True ( )
- False ( )

## 3.4 STRENGTH OF FOLK MEDIA

It is against this backdrop that the traditional folk media have come into the limelight in developing countries like India. Since these arts are woven into the social and cultural fabric of the rural society, their role in educating the non-school population assumes significance. At one level, they give expression to people's life style and values through the spoken word, songs, plays and spontaneous choreography, and at another level, they act as persuasive channels of communication. They have lived and grown with the rural people and so the rural masses, without any inhibition, get involved in their game and emerge more relaxed and better informed.

There are many advantages of traditional folk media for the purpose of informing and educating the rural illiterate, including women. Field experiments have shown that the credibility of selected traditional folk media is very high in convincing and even motivating the rural individual. They are rich in variety, readily available and economically viable. They are relished by men and women of different age groups. They command the confidence of the rural masses as they are LIVE. They are themes-carriers by nature, not simply as vehicles of communication but as games of recreating and sharing a common world of emotions, ideals and dreams. Above all, Traditional folk media are in a ‘face to face situation’ between the communicator and the receiver of the message, a situation which energises discussion that may lead to conviction and motivation.

In a developing country like India, traditional folk media have been reckoned as successful mass-motivators. During the years preceding the advent of the sound and sight channels of mass media, the traditional folk media not only reflected the joys and sorrows of people, but inspired the masses during the times of stress and strain. They played a significant role in the freedom movement in India. Since the country achieved independence, selected folk media have been effectively harnessed for communication of new “development messages”. An integrated mass and traditional folk media approach has paid dividends in communication. Mass media have extended the area of coverage of a folk performance, while traditional folk media, with their inspiring colour and costume, dance and music, have enriched the content...
of the mass media channels. In addition, utilisation of folk media for communication revives culture. Systematic organization of people’s performances makes the motivational work more community based with the objectives of social and economic betterment and cultural revival.

Check Your Progress 2

Note:  

i) Fill in the blanks with appropriate phrases choosing from the ones given in the brackets.

ii) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1) The credibility of the ................................ media is comparatively higher than that of the ................................ media (mass, traditional folk).

2) When witnessed live, the traditional folk media create a ......................... mode of communication (distant, face to face).

3) Traditional folk media have time and again proved to be ......................... (mass motivators, functional media, economically viable media).

4) An integrated mass and traditional folk media approach has ......................... in communication (not paid dividends, paid dividends).

5) Traditional folk arts are woven into the ......................... and ......................... fabric of the rural society (political, social, economic, cultural).

Activity 2

There must be several issues that are generally addressed in the media in your region. Select any two issues for the purpose of this activity. They may be political, economic, social, medical or other issues. Now, having selected two issues, you must then explain if the traditional folk medium in your area is capable of incorporating these themes. Suggest a reason for the probable matching or mismatching of the message with the medium.
3.5 ROLE OF TRADITIONAL FOLK MEDIA IN COMMUNICATING MODERN THEMES

India is a treasure-house of people's performing arts. There is a tremendous wealth and variety in traditional folk media of India. Conventionally the traditional folk performances have been theme-carriers, usually carrying themes of morality. They have served as "night schools" in rural areas. Among the rural performances the "flexible" ones like the puppet and katha-kirtan have shown their capacity to absorb any modern message, and reflect it in terms that are easily understood by the village masses. Several song types have handled vital contemporary themes like the green revolution, scientific temperament, eradication of illiteracy and superstition, family welfare, health and sanitation. The rural drama, with its stock characters, has also carried across modern messages, without, in any way hurting the community's traditional culture. When handled with care and consideration, the sensitive folk media have proved themselves to be meaningful and effective tools of communication for development. During the past four or five decades, they have slowly acquired a functional dimension without losing their cultural roots.

3.5.1 Role During Freedom Struggle

Indians comprehended the communication potential of their rural performances as early as in the 1820s. The 'Lavani' and 'Geegee' songs of North Karnataka were used as effective channels of communication to motivate the masses to rise in revolt against the British, in the times of Kittur Chennamma. An ingenious British agent, however, employed the same medium to help quell the uprising with counter arguments. However, the 'ballad', 'katha-kirtan' and the rural drama with its jester continued to play a crucial role in motivating the masses to rise against the British in 1857.

Nearer our times, in the 1940s, the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), the cultural front of the Communist Party of India, trained and employed popular rural performers to carry to the villagers the messages of a different set of economic theories. The IPTA even earned an encouraging pat from Pandit Nehru for investing the traditional folk media with functional relevance. And, in Gandhiji's time, it is said that 'mass communication was achieved by non-mass media'. The six radio stations in the country were then under the control of the British, but the people's performances, charged with inflammatory messages, roused the Indian people during the freedom struggle, drowning the sound of the British-controlled radio. There could not have been clearer signals of the power of the people's performances.

3.5.2 Song and Drama Division

Not surprisingly, soon after achieving freedom the National Government started a full-fledged Song and Drama Division in 1954, with the objective of identifying, training and utilising the services of traditional folk performers to inform the rural masses about the planning and development programmes of the country. A decade later, the Amarnath Vidyalankar Committee, which was appointed to assess the communication potential of different information media, recorded that:

"From the point of view of its great appeal to the masses and its quality of touching the deepest emotions of the illiterate millions, the medium of song and drama is matchless".

3.5.3 UNESCO and MacBride Commission

The UNESCO picked the thread and made new efforts to find the most viable means of communications for rural millions in developing countries of Asia and Africa. It sponsored an international seminar in London in 1972, and a follow-up workshop in Delhi in 1974. The document prepared by the experts, practitioners and critics in London proved most significant in laying guidelines for utilising the traditional folk media for communication. It declared that "no communication
strategy would be complete unless it included people's traditional media". The Delhi Declaration confirmed the positive qualities of folk media and declared that they were indeed the most viable tools of communication in rural countries.

A little later, when the world stood invaded by mass media, the MacBride Commission attributed considerable credibility to popular artistic forms in modern communication strategy when it recorded that,

"Even where modern media have penetrated isolated areas, the older forms maintain their validity, particularly when used to influence attitudes, instigate action and promote change... practitioners of the traditional media use a subtle form of persuasion by presenting the required message in locally popular artistic forms. This cannot be rivalled by any other means of communication... examples abound when song, drama and dance groups and the like were used to promote campaigns against social evils such as alcoholism, burdensome dowries, discrimination against women and archaic taboos..."

3.5.4 Efficacy for Development Communication

As against the urban-based mass media, the rural-based folk media are found to enjoy greater credibility with rural audiences. They couch the new messages on vital themes like Family Welfare Plan in their performances in such a way that the people can easily understand and accept them. The London Seminar declared that

"themes like family planning programme are intensely personal and have to fall back on motivational methods which touch traditional beliefs, customs and social structures..."

And so, the folk media are the answer. Selected traditional folk media have been effectively harnessed for development communication during the past five decades. When they were integrated with mass media, the result was even more rewarding. While mass media like radio, TV and film extend the sizes of the audiences for the folk media, the colourful folk media in their turn enrich the content of mass media. Organised and systematic use of traditional folk media makes the motivational work more community based, for social, economic and cultural development.

3.5.5 A Word of Warning

A word of warning has been sounded by the London Seminar for mass media practitioners with regard to handling of the traditional folk performances for entertainment and communication. The folk media are sensitive and need to be
handled with care and consideration in the entire process of integration. It is desirable that the radio microphone and TV camera capture the ‘message charged folk performances’ in their own haunts so that the tradition and cultural ethos of the media is not lost. The stress and sophistication of studio management of folk performances have often ironed out the charm of the rural ruggedness and wild beauty of the folk performances so as to render them tailor-made, tame affairs.

Check Your Progress 3

Note:  
i) Match the items in Column I with the related items in Column II.  
ii) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COLUMN-I</th>
<th>COLUMN-II</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) ‘Lavani’ Songs</td>
<td>a) Identify, train and utilize the services of traditional folk performers to convey information to rural masses,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Song and Drama Division</td>
<td>b) Communist Party of India,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) UNESCO’s International Seminar, London, 1972</td>
<td>c) North Karnataka,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA)</td>
<td>d) Identify the most viable means of communication for rural people.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.6 USING OF FOLK MEDIA FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Traditional folk performances like ritualistic dances, religious songs or mythology-based rural plays, though highly popular, have proved unsuitable to absorb and reflect new messages on population, health or hygiene. Communicators, therefore, have to test different categories of folk performances to identify the ones that are flexible enough to absorb development messages to meet the contemporary needs. Flexibility is the most important factor which determines the viability of a folk medium for rural communication.

Flexibility of a folk medium might reveal itself either in its form or theme or in both. The art of story-telling or the puppet, offers unlimited flexibility for new messages both in their form and theme. Traditional rural theatre, on the other hand, associated with religious or classical themes have limited flexibility only in some of their characters in story-situations. A folk play, like the ‘Bhavai’ of Gujarat or ‘Tullal’ of Kerala, based on social and even contemporary themes, has unlimited flexibility for development messages.

3.6.1 Categories Based on Flexibility

Depending on the nature and extent of flexibility, the traditional folk media reveal themselves in three categories, namely, rigid, semi-rigid and non-rigid. This classification, however, does not imply watertight compartments. A particular folk medium may turn out to be rigid for a particular message (say family planning) but may be semi-rigid or even non-rigid for another type of message (say eradication of illiteracy/untouchability).

Rigid media are those that reject a new message summarily. These are ritualistic or intensely religious in form and theme. Their content is hard-core and they are unchangeable, like the African and Indian ritual dances, songs based on religious scriptures or those in praise of gods and goddesses. ‘Theyyam’ of Kerala, ‘Bootasthana’ of Karnataka and ‘Gondal’ in praise of Amba Bhavani in Maharashtra, are examples of this category.

Semi-rigid traditional folk media are those that provide limited scope for the new message. Even while dealing with a classical theme, the medium would have in-built characters or situations which hold out flexibility. The rural drama with its jester, the Katha-Kirtan, and the temple-based, traditional Rod-puppets are examples of this category.
Non-rigid media are those that absorb new messages without any reservation to reflect them effectively in the field. Many varieties of the ballad with social content, educational and functional songs, the string and glove puppets and group sessions of poetry recitation and story-telling are illustrations of this category.

3.6.2 Need for Balance between Entertainment and Information

When employed with discretion, the traditional folk media have proved rewarding as tools of communication both as LIVE performances and also when integrated with mass media. As they come from the people themselves, their appeal is personal and functional. They have seldom failed to entertain, inform and even introduce new ideas for change.

Limitations of traditional folk media are revealed when the communicator, in his enthusiasm, 'overloads' them with messages of instructional nature. The folk performances demand a balance between entertainment and information in their content material. So the new messages need to be fitted in with due consideration to the innate quality and cultural ethos of the media.

Traditional folk media should be considered as a part of the social fabric of the community. While they could reinforce relevant social changes that are already occurring, folk performances should not be used for propaganda as they could become counter-productive.

The appeal of traditional folk media is more emotional than intellectual. Their purpose is more to inspire than to inform. The folk media, therefore, need to be treated with enough care and consideration to ensure that they inspire social change. This role of the folk media is bound to lead to an improvement in the quality of the rural millions and to revitalise the country’s cultural heritage.

3.7 INTEGRATING THE MESSAGE WITH THE MEDIUM

The three primary factors in a goal-set communication project are the message, the medium and the masses. In order to identify the message needed, and the medium relished, the “field” where the identified masses reside needs to be studied in the first instance. The “field” is the ‘action-group’ for the communicator to implant the ‘message-integrated-folk medium’ for effective communication to inspire change. ‘Field’ simply means an area, a locality of a community base, where the folk performance of message would be presented. The ‘field’, however, could be intriguing, for two areas of the same ‘field’, may be different in community structure, value systems and the measure of understanding which would demand different messages, different approaches and even different performances in the media. A study of the ‘field’, therefore, is most essential in order to understand the needed messages and the preferred folk medium.

The ‘pre-media field study’ would assess vital factors of the field like its:

- community composition,
- literacy rate,
- socio-economic level,
- prevailing value system,
- susceptibility factors,
- forces resisting a new and vital message,
- occupations of the people,
- available categories of folk media, and
- voluntary service possibilities.

This would then give a lead to the communicator to identify the needed message(s) and preferred medium.
Once the communicator obtains a feel of the field, he would be able to identify the most influential performing troupe of the preferred medium, and work on the needed message for integration. He would then ‘home-test’ the message-charged-medium, make necessary changes and present it in the field. The post-performance possibility of a face-to-face situation between the communicator and the people, in order to dispel doubts and ward off misgivings is vital in the communication strategy. It would provide a measurement of the effect of the communication plan and lead to motivation and action by the people in the field.

3.8 INCREASING THE EFFICIENCY OF COMMUNICATION STRATEGY: FOUR METHODS

For increasing the efficiency of communication strategy in order to obtain the intended results, there are four methods as follows:

1) Mutli-media approach,
2) Package plan,
3) Utilising rural structures and village functionaries, and
4) Objective evaluation of the strategy.

3.8.1 Mutli-Media Approach

While folk media create a face-to-face situation in the field and go a long way to convince the masses about the varied meaning of the message ‘on a personal basis, with a personal touch’, a simultaneous support of mass media channels would be of great value. The multi-media approach holds glamour for the field, covers different aspects of the message and interacts with different sections of people simultaneously. Documentary films, printed material, phased broadcasts and telecasts, together with folk media, mutually support each other in the cause of effective motivational strategy. Multi-media approach demands careful planning and faultless co-ordination.
Folk media performances in-built into the multi media package, would surely establish a two-way communication channel. They would strive to dispel unfounded fears and misgivings in the field. The programme would also pave the way for smooth functioning of an extension service.

The multi-media approach demands fool-proof planning and involves more expenditure. But its benefits are multiple for each medium makes up for the deficiency of the other, and all together make communication proficient and productive.

3.8.2 The Package Plan

The package plan is an integrated time-bound work-programme which eliminates time-lags between communication, extension and service and brings to fruition the efforts of the communicator. Time-gaps between (i) communication and extension, and (ii) extension and service are often responsible for the failure of a goal-set communication strategy. Hence, the gaps should be plugged.

3.8.3 Utilising Rural Structure and Village Functionaries

It is borne out by experience that mass media channels of sound and sight do bring awareness to the people of a development theme, and traditional folk media succeed in reinforcing it with information and education by a personal approach. However, motivation for action could be energised by change-agents who are inter-personal communicators. One should look for such change-agents in the rural situation itself and identify the motivators in village teachers, priests, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, barbers, tailors, toddy-sellers and carpenters, apart from the village mid-wife and doctor. The village postman is a potential change-agent when motivated and harnessed for development. The service of the traditional folk artists will draw good results with such village-based functionaries.

3.8.4 Objective Evaluation of the Strategy

A need for scientific research on the role of folk media in communication is essential, but until such studies are undertaken and results made available, the communicator would base his planning and action on information obtained through 'local observers, experienced informants and the artists themselves'. With the feedback material so collected, it should be possible for the communicator to identify attitudes 'that need to be changed in order to create the necessary social and psychological climate' in the field for people to receive the needed message. The programme package should then be suitably altered to incorporate the required messages.

Evaluation studies may tend to become quantitative rather than qualitative in terms of achievement. They may prove to be general assessments of the impact of all types of media and not of folk media in particular. Hence the recommendation of communication experts that 'evaluation of the quality and impact of the use of folk media should be ensured since quantitative evaluation may in itself be inadequate'. It is, therefore, time that specific studies were developed in folk media 'in an effort to acquire some reliable measurements for future guidance'.

Check Your Progress 4

Note: i) Give short answers of two to three sentences for each of the following questions.

    ii) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1) On what bases are Traditional folk media categorised? What are the categories?

........................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................
2) Explain with an example what is meant by 'non-rigid media'.

3) In what way can the presence of change-agents help the traditional folk artists?

4) Explain the word 'field' of traditional folk media performances.

3.9 LET US SUM UP

During the past five decades, indigenous performing arts have proved themselves as effective communicators of development themes, including 'personal' messages for planning one's own family. These virgin arts scored over mass media as message-carrying channels in developing countries and the communicator became deeply interested in them. But he was often inadvertently indiscreet in his treatment of the medium or the message, and failed to achieve the desired impact in his communication efforts.

Folk media come from the people and have always served to entertain, to educate, to reinforce or to alter existing ideas and attitudes. In view of their intimacy with the people at the local level, folk media channels have proved to be powerful tools of communication in a rural society. They deserve a scientific study and treatment in order to become unfailing educators of illiterate masses on a personal theme like contraception.

It is in this context that the communicator has to play a momentous role. He should adopt a policy of 'polite persuasion and concealed compulsion'.

The communicator has to know intimately the multiple aspects of the three primary factors in the mass-education project viz., the message, the medium and the masses. He should strive to achieve a happy harmony among them for the success of the project. He must be sympathetic to the sensitivity of folk media and selective in picking up the flexible ones for communication purposes. He ought to be patient and painstaking to educate the folk performer and train him to evolve himself into a successful motivator.

In a wider sense, the communicator may have to play a key role in the continuous process of judicious integration of folk media with mass media for optimum impact in the field. He should be inventive too, and affect cross fertilisation of select folk forms from one cultural context to another.

3.10 FURTHER READING

- UNESCO reports on the seminar in London (1972) and workshop in New Delhi (1974).
3.11 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS : MODEL ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

1) False
2) False
3) True
4) True
5) True
6) True
7) False
8) False

Check Your Progress 2

1) traditional folk media; mass.
2) face-to-face.
3) mass-motivators, economically-viable and functional media.
4) paid dividends.
5) social, cultural.

Check Your Progress 3

1) C
2) A
3) D
4) B

Check Your Progress 4

1) Traditional folk media are categorised on the basis of their flexibility to carry any new message to the same audiences. These categories are 'rigid', 'semi-rigid' and 'non-rigid' folk media.

2) Non-rigid media are the most flexible of the traditional folk media. Group sessions of story-telling can incorporate new, varied, socially-relevant messages and put them across to the audiences in a suitable manner.

3) Change-agents are those persons who publicize a positive attitude toward some changes in the traditional way of life. They are invaluable to the traditional folk artists for they serve as influencers of the masses, even after the performance of the artists is completed.

4) The 'field' is any locality where the traditional folk artists perform to an audience. Every 'field' has unique characteristics in terms of (a) community structure, (b) value systems and (c) measure of understanding of some new message. Accordingly, the same message will have to be suitably changed and presented in a different form of the folk art performance.