

# PEOPLE'S MEDIA: AN ALTERNATIVE

by M.X. Pooranam Demel sj

In June of 1992, the writer was in a village in Tamil Nadu, animating the members of a dohhies (traditional launderers caste) association. Legally they are backward classes, and not listed as Harijans (untouchables). But actually they were undergoing all the discriminations suffered by Harijans in their village. They were ruthlessly exploited by the upper-caste landlords. They wanted to strike work and demand an increase in wages. But they could not come to a common decision because there was no unity among them. No amount of rational appeal by the leaders could bring about unity. Then the writer called four volunteers from among them, took them to a nearby room and rehearsed with them a wordless street-play on unity lasting about five minutes. Then it was performed in front of the dohhies. After this the whole atmosphere of the meeting changed. All of them repeatedly referred to a sequence of gestures by the performers, struggling to unite themselves. That led to a heated discussion among themselves, as to why they could not come together. Past hurts, hang-ups and familial quarrels among the members surfaced. Angry exchanges were there. After this catharsis, they got united and decided to strike work. Throughout this process, an old man was constantly commenting «Suddenly something has happened among us. Father has done some magic with his drama». Communication, which failed on the rational plane, took place effectively in a meta-rational, meta-logical plane. Meaning was perceived at the gut level through expressive body-language and mere sounds.

The above is an example of how People's media operate. Who are these «People»? And how is People's media different from any other?

Media of the dominants  
vs people's media

It is the prevalent custom to divide the media into the mass media, group media and folk media. It is also fashionable among some media critics in the Third World to «demonise» the mass media and to eulogise the virtues of the group and folk media. It might be better, from the perspective of social change, to categorise them as the media of the dominant and the people's media, meaning here the oppressed, as rightly the article on low-cost media in the IB 1/1993 of CAMECO was captioned. Irrespective of whether any media is mass, group or folk media, the above categorisation is on the basis of their social functions, status quo or change-oriented. The professed functions of the mass media are to inform, entertain and educate. But these manifest functions apart, the more important and latent function is to generate meaning for the masses that makes the existing social order appear as natural, acceptable and to make them take it for granted. This hidden curriculum can be seen in all the forms and content of the media of the dominant, be they mass, group or folk media. And the communication process here is top-down, from centre to periphery, making the receiver an object.

Functions of the mass media

Communication process

## The Need: An Alternative

Communication for change

Hence, the need for alternative media and alternative communication. Alternative media has people as its focus, and hence, people's media. This will be communication for change. Change for the better. For the majority who are marginalised. Unlike the media of the dominant and the communication structures controlled by the powerful in order to control the powerless, these people's media will be, as much as possible, owned and controlled by the powerless in order to empower themselves to acquire a just share of scarce resources in society, material and non-material (like human dignity, egalitarian relationships, status, etc.). Here, people's media does not necessarily mean low-cost/group/folk media or what people produce, or what is popular and saleable. People's media are a way of using any medium with largest section of the disempowered in focus. They carry their voice and concerns. They are rooted in the liberative social processes for change. The sociological assumption is that there is a bipolar division of society into exploiters and the exploited and the implicit conflict there. This recognition imposes a

Media controlled by the powerless

hermeneutic function in the efforts in alternative media and communication. It is to see, interpret, know and report (construct reality) from the view of the poor majority. This has implications in the choice of content, form, audience and process of the alternative media and communication. It will be marked by a content for change, a participatory, democratised and communitarian form, a two-way, top-down flow and audience who are potential change-agents.

**The Task**

This is a tall order. It calls for

- i) grooming of an alternative audience;
- ii) alternative use of existing media/media structures;
- iii) identifying, using, propagating alternative (people's) media; and
- iv) research, experiment on current communication structures, dynamics and meaning-generation processes, searching for an indigenous theory of discourse.

Strategically,

- i) it would mean evolving counter-cultural structures owned by small collectivities where the mode of production of messages will be based not on the talents of a particular individual, but on the total contribution of the people.
- ii) choosing and highlighting themes normally neglected by the media of the dominant.
- iii) exposing oppressive discourses and replacing them with liberative ones while portraying these themes.
- iv) positioning the audience as active readers and positively rejecting the dominant position that is prevalent currently.
- v) not aiming to merely deliver messages, but creating doubt and methodological skepticism regarding the issues being dealt with in order to respect and inculcate the critical autonomy of the audience; that is, even in the name of a good cause, alternative media should not degenerate into propaganda which will certainly be self-defeating.

The above situation can be shown in a diagrammatic and tabular form as follows:

**Communications Structure**

*Present*

*Alternative*

1. CONTENT

of the rich, by the rich, for the rich, powerful; for more profit

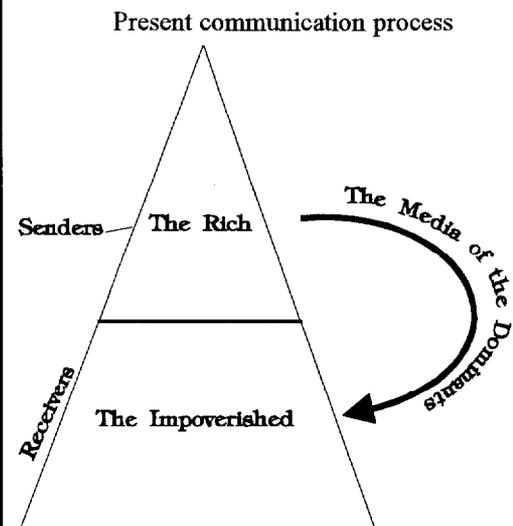
of, by, for the impoverished, powerless. Formulated by them in their own cultural idiom. Tells their stories, songs and life-situations, joys, suffering and dreams.

2. FORMS

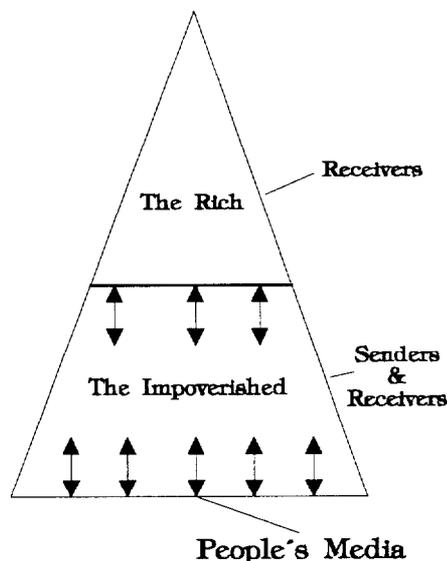
Inaccessible to the impoverished and beyond their economic reach. Massifying, objectifying human persons into easily learnable and hence passive consumer-blocks.

Accessible to them and within their economic reach. Flexible, portable, easily learnable and hence easily teachable or even self-disseminating. Respects the sovereignty and autonomy of human persons and their ability to be active meaning-makers. Transforms them from passive consumers to critical participants and actors on their social reality.

Content for change  
Participatory, democratised and communitarian form  
Two-way, periphery to centre flow



## Alternative communication process



Alternative and liberative use of any non-traditional media

Empower oppressed groups

## 3. MESSAGE THROUGH CONTENT &amp; FORM

«Accept the present social order as natural, as good and just». Reinforces, holds up the identity and culture of the dominant and their cultural hegemony. Pushes down the powerless into a culture of silence.

«We are born in an unjust society. We will not leave it as we found it. Change the existing social order». Affirms the liberative aspects of the culture of the masses and their identity.

## 4. COMMUNICATION PROCESSES

Top-down, centre to periphery, one-way, non-participatory, individualistic. Projects larger-than-life-size «heroes» to ape.

Down-Top, periphery to centre, two-way, participatory, communitarian. Projects the collectivity of people as the hero. Communication process not limited to mere «performance» between the raising and lowering of the curtain. It begins before and continues after. The masses discover their voice. This is a deeply spiritual experience in the sense that it results in the recovery of the self, individual and collective, torn asunder by the dominant culture. Each event of communication here is fundamentally an event of inter-human relationship.

## 5. MEDIA STRUCTURES

Owned and controlled by the powerful, in order to control the powerless. Linked structurally to the dominant social institutions, socio-political, religio-cultural. Inter-textuality of the various media and the monopoly of the ownership of these media by the power elite ensure repeated reinforcements of their message.

Owned and controlled by the impoverished. Linked up with the social processes for change initiated by people's movements. Here, the sheer number of the masses is their strength.

### Culture and Communication and People's non-indigenous media

It is with this understanding of alternative media and communication that Culture and Communication, Madras, is engaged in its communication works in Tamil Nadu, India.

People's media can be categorised into the indigenous and the non-indigenous. Indigenous people's media would include all traditional folk media, viz, folk theatre (theruk koothu), puppetry, mask drama, folk dances, stories, songs, proverbs, jokes, folk games etc. Non-indigenous people's media would comprise liberative use of any non-traditional media with the people in focus. For example, a film or a sound-slide production, or a newspaper report could be used amidst a group of people in order to evoke a discussion on an issue leading to greater conscientisation. Other components of non-indigenous people's media would be street-theatre ("free theatre" as Badal Sircar would call it) cf. CAMECO IB 1/93; photography, videography produced by people; and whole series of non-traditional, low cost media, such as slogans, writing of handbills, wall-writing, wall-stencil-making, posters/collages, blackboard journalism, manuscript magazines, low-cost screen printing, pantograph for enlarging pictures, wall newspapers and cartoons.

The incident described at the beginning of this article is an example of this peoples' non-indigenous media in action.

We, the staff of Culture and Communication, have also trained rag-picking child-labourers of Madras City in street-theatre and they have formed a children's theatre group and performed in three cities of Tamil Nadu. Street-theatre elements have been effectively combined with those of the traditional folk theatre, Theruk-

koothu, and taught to the sugarcane-cutting coolies. This new form has proved very effective in mobilising people when the sugarcane cutters association of Tamil Nadu was battling with the owners of sugarcane factories for better pay and service conditions. Similarly, child labourers of match factories and former child labourers were also trained by us. Our goal was also to search for and evolve new theatre games and exercises which would therapeutically free and empower socially oppressed groups like Dalits (untouchables), women, children. Our immediate question was how to evolve new, localised, acculturised games for Dalits to free them from psychological traits such as, a deep sense of dependency, powerlessness and low self-image, and help them take on different roles, other than those imposed on them by the dominant castes and play the role of change-agent after this psycho-political empowerment. Our search is on.

### Non-Traditional Low-Cost Media

The target audience for our non-traditional low-cost media workshops have been potential change-agents such as animators or action groups, and people's movements, rural youth, etc.

We train them to coin slogans on social issues in their earthy Tamil. They are taught how to make cheap paints. They go out at night to write the slogans on the city walls, facing harassment from the police and of course, the barking dogs. They also use the low-cost wall-stencils they had produced.

A well-plastered wall of a village house is painted black. On this blackboard, the trained youth write with chalk a news report and their comments. The attempts at manuscript magazines have been too short-lived.

Many movements including leftist parties and labour movements whose workers underwent training in our workshops, have produced issue-based low-cost screen printed posters on environment, Tsundur massacre of Harijans, bus fare hike, and pasted them on public places on many occasions in three cities of Tamil Nadu.

Pantograph is used to draw big pictures on the wall. Another simple method is to trace a picture on a tracing paper, project it onto the wall with a torch light, and then draw the enlarged picture.

About six youths in a village can publish a wall newspaper. Computer print-out paper or old waste paper with one side unused can be bought cheaply from the waste-paper merchants. Each of the youths prepares, on a foolscap-sized paper, a news item, topical, global, national or local issue with comments, an editorial, cartoon or titbits. The six sheets are pasted together on a wall in a central place in a village. The frequency and periodicity of the wall-newspaper depend on the perseverance of the youth.

In our experience of non-traditional low-cost media, slogan-writing, wall-writing and low-cost screen printing have been quite successful and put to frequent use by the trainees later.

In a society that has passed from the Age of Technology to the Age of Information, the challenges are varied and difficult. There are no ready models, no royal path. Especially in the attempts to bring about qualitative changes in the lives of the poor through media. We learn as we go. In our works, the greatest joy is seeing small groups of people coming into their own. ■

Qualitative changes in the life of the poorest through media and simple methods of communication

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