



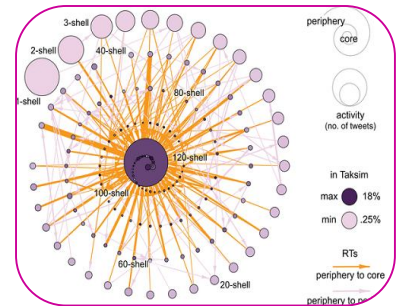
MEDIA REACHES THE PERIPHERY: STUDYING MEDIA HABITS OF ETHNIC SOCIETIES IN ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

The rural as the emerging market place poses challenges to the mass media sector. In under-developed economies the task of creating audiences gets more complicated and challenging. Mass media is a means which caters to a large audience with homogenous fare wherein all audiences are presumed to have the same taste. But this creates a tension of images and sounds, varied audience but similar choices. This paper aims at examining the situation of a rural audience which is bombarded with images and sounds made for an audience keeping in mind a different society with its own set of norms and culture. How this rural community comes to terms with such programming and their ways of appropriating such ideas although alien to them. How the rural people chose one medium over another and the circumstances that influence their choices, whether it be age, gender, or social status. The past two decades has seen a huge influx of media messages reaching the extreme corners of the Indian sub-continent. Communities which were thus far removed from receiving media messages came under the purview of mass media. Ethnic communities started to receive messages that were inconsistent with ideas and values that they held so dear. Thus these ethnic communities faced situations which were brought on by the advent of new technologies and such remote societies were not untouched by them. Younger generations were the one who adapted to mass media early and along with it other sociological changes started taking place in the lives of these communities.



KEYWORDS: Mass Media, Ethnic Community, Rural society, Media Messages

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly media saturated world where audience are bombarded with innumerable signals at every moment whether be it the cell phone in our hands or the graphic board in the side walk, or the advertising panel in an airport, processing media signals has become a challenge. It is during these times that media researchers are excited to lay their hands on communities who are yet to be fully media dependent. This paper locates its study on two distinct villages in Assam, India where media is still a new phenomenon especially traditional electronic media forms such as television. There have been a lot of historical studies on the role of media on rural societies. I have mentioned a few in the following paragraphs.

Media can perform various functions in promoting consciousness for development. Broadly media can help contributed in three areas- economic, social and political, which will in turns make our society cohesive and better organized (Mathur, 2006). Today media is now split into two powerful segments, the print media and the electronic media. There is a rural and urban area divide in the print media as well. The complaint that rural areas which cover 80 per cent of the population get hardly 25 per cent of the coverage in the media is undoubtedly true. (Prabhu, 1995)

Print media is in private hands. As less than 30% of rural people are educated, the circulation of newspaper and other print media mediums are mostly confined to urban area where the literary rate is 60 per cent. Another important factor for the poor consumption and intake of print medium in village is the meager coverage of rural scene. Television has the potential to diffuse developmental information and supplement the extension effort. This potential however remains largely underutilized. The role of performance of television in relation to other available channel was analysed mostly in qualitative terms to understand the critical parameters of response to television output designed for the enrichment of quality of life. (Rao, 1992)

Mass media are enormously instrumental in including and accelerating development in many areas of human endeavor. The potential of mass media in development was though realized late in India. but once having been recognized, multiple media exploitation in several development activities has proved tremendous power of media. On contrary to print media, electronic media like television is an audio visual communicative technology. Today television covers over 86.5 per cent of country's population. However, the access to television and video to the rural people is still very limited. The same is true of film also (Dua & Gupta, 1994). After independence, the union government utilized traditional performing arts to convey the message and generate awareness of development in the rural areas. Even also Shahir Sable, P.L Deshpande, Habib Tanveer, Balwant Gargi, Gurusaran Singh, Ratan Thiyam used it as technique of generating national identity and social awareness among the Indian masses. (Kumar, 2006)

In case of media and communication in Indian context dramatic changes occurs as a nation of Bullock carts became a nation of Cyber marts, presenting a fascinating picture of paradox, contradiction and uncertainty. Metaphorically to us, the bullock cart symbolizes the "past", the traditional "rural", the "disadvantaged", the "agricultural", the "slow", and the "local", the cyber mart on other hand, symbolizes the "future", 'modern", the "urban", the "elite", the "informational", the "fast", the "connected", and the "global". Indian society at the turn of the century is caught between dialectal forces (Singhal & Rogers, 2001). In the age of globalization, liberalization and privatization, the habits of media in rural areas also causes a social change and gives a cultural influence of media among the rural people. Johnson argues that a strong correlation can be drawn between television and social change. While Television in India was initially linked to development initiatives (intelsat), *Doordarshan* (the state run channel) and a variety of commercial networks have undergone dramatic change over the past 10 years. There has been significant development in both the culture of television in India as well as technological advances in both software and hardware. And though commercial networks are finding their way into village communities through satellite dishes and other means, *Doordarshan* remains the dominant form of television that most of rural village families watch (2001).

In the age of globalization media has great contribution to human life as a mode of communication, mode of entertainment, relaxation, mode of gaining education and last but not least as a mode of gaining new ideas.

Media not only refers to the radio, television, internet & print media (news papers, journals, magazines etc.) But also understands itself in terms of traditional media, put in terms of various drama, theater, socio- cultural performances like street theatre, puppetry etc. which in under-developed and regions with low literacy indeed are powerful and effective mediums. Particularly in the case of Assam, Guwahati became the nerve center of news and views alienating the local masses. The boom in media has seen a rise of the concentration of media in Guwahati. Language newspapers who published from other towns have felt themselves alienated from the nerve center Guwahati, so much so that some of them had to move out of the districts and set shop in the state capital of Guwahati. (Das, 2018)

With the passage of time, the habits of people on media have seen to change. For centuries, our society has been depending upon the traditional means of communication processes and word of mouth. Human relationship, interpersonal communication processes & word of mouth, in closed out society used to develop in a natural, healthy and productive social environment but in early nineties of the last century satellite and cable television created a new type of society not only in urban areas but also in rural areas. In

the present study conducted in two villages, the habits of the some of the selected families on media have been analysed.

Media habits in Chinatoli village

Chinatoli village is a small village comprising eighty two families. 10 families have been selected for the study.

Newspaper

The regular exposure to daily newspaper in villages is restricted to 20% to 40%, the rest of the population remains completely untouched by the medium due to both illiteracy and indifference. Only a handful of people read newspapers on a daily basis.

Assamese news dailies are the only newspaper that reaches these villages. While other print forms like magazines find little takers. But, among the young girls and married women now days 'Sakhi' and 'Nandini', two women related magazines are quite popular.

Radio

Before the coming of television and other electronic media, 80% of the villagers had access to radio. But now a day only a few villagers in this village have shown their interest in programmes that are broadcast in radio. And at the same time, these villagers have no idea about FM radio which is now a day's one of the most popular radio stations mainly in urban areas. Here the fact is that FM radio station are still not broadcasted to rural areas, being only confined to the urban centres such as Guwahati.

Even in a home, where the families of this particular village are very poor, who have no access to television and other such electronic devices the younger generation of the family show no response to listening radio.

Village elders, younger generation, teenager, children's exposure to radio is not the same, some responses to radio related queries got responses such as:

- (a) "I like to watch television than radio as I can not only hear but also able to visually watch a drama or a film gives more pleasure instead of only hearing a drama" – *Arun Handique*, 28 year old youth
- (b) "my children have great interest in television but I have to listen radio because it gives us more information about agriculture crops and adoption of modern technique" – *Prabin Baruah*, 56 year old farmer
- (c) "Radio programmes are very boring to listen even gives no entertainment" – *Suraj Gogoi*, 14 year old student
- (d) "I like to listen to radio, than watching television programmes, while listening a radio, we are able to read, able to do our work; it helps to develop our imagination power".- *Hemanta Fukan*, 39year old teacher

Television

Television began in India as an educational and development programme directed by the government. Today it has grown into one of the largest commercial television market in the world. Television advertising has made great inroads into village society (Johnson, 2001).

In Chinatoli village the first and only television began arriving in 1987 and that was the television of the village head man. Villager said that at that time television was like a magic box for them. At that time many of the village people went to village head man's house to watch 'Ramayana'. Then some years later many of the villagers brought television to their home and brought about the idea of privacy to their homes. At first people selectively chose the programmes to watch. They organized their favorite shows in their afternoon and evening.

Nearly from 2005 in that particular village satellite television operators like Dish TV, Tata Sky has become more popular than *Doordarshan*. Local channels after 2008 viz., News live, *Rang*, *Dy 365* channels of Assamese language are more popular among the villagers. A few watch MTV, Channel V like channel even a few teenagers and children watch cartoon channels in this particular village. Young boys mostly like sport channels. The older generation has very less interest to any of these satellite programmes.

On observing the television viewing habits of the villagers, it can be analyzed that many of the old people of this village are disappointed from television. According to two old village elders-

“Television is the devil, after coming of television, the new generation only shows their interest to television, hardly they go to *Namghar* to pray to God. In free time, my daughter in law likes to watch daily soaps along with my grandchildren. My younger son after coming from his college, he lies on the sofa having remote on his hand & watch television hour after hour”.- *Jugada Baruah*, age- 59

“At one time the television programmes we were watch very traditional and religious, now ashamed to watch the programmes with my family” - *Beula Gogoi*, age-60 years.

30% of the viewer respond to television as not only for entertainment but also to gain educational information use television as development tool. While 40% of the viewers use it only for entertainment.

After coming of television especially the cable satellite channels, we can analyse behavioral changes that are obvious-

- Some years ago, the young boys after coming from school or work in evening time liked to play football or cricket in the field. There is a decline in outdoor activity attributed to mainly preoccupation with television. The village congregation of youths after work in common places has started to dwindle. These used to be spaces of public discussion among the youths
- Television also gives a platform to the young boys children’s and also to the adults to show their creativity. For instance many of the boys is girls are very good in performing *Bihu*, in singing and dancing. *Rang*, *DY 365* like channels give them a platform to show their creativity in the programmes like *Bihurani*, *Asam Idol* etc.
- The advertisements change the basic needs of the people from soap to food and dress. There is a perceived change in sleeping pattern according to hours of daily soaps.
- In evening time, the old peoples used to go *Namghara* where they practice - *gayan bayan* and pray to God where youngs have lost interest in *gayan- bayan*, and the community places such as *Namghar*.

In spite of watching television & listening audio, among the villages *bhaona* , mobile theaters like traditional media are still popular.

Media habits in Kanugaon

Kanugaon is a small village comprising nearly 70 families. 10 families were selected for the study. *Kanugaon* had received electricity as late as 2011.

Newspaper

Nearly 8% of the people in this village use to read newspaper basically it is noticed that the literary rate in this village is very low. Some of the adults have access only to the newspaper. Rest of the others like women, and the young girl and boys and old peoples do not have access to the newspaper and other print media like magazines, articles etc.

Radio

Radio has a great response especially among the adults and old peoples in this village. They like many of the programmes that broadcast in radio. For instance they like to listen to Assamese old songs, various Assamese dramas and the programmes related to agriculture. Some of the programs are most popular, for example, *Gitimalika*, *Jeuti Chora*, *Lakhimi*, *Bidyarthir Anusthan*, *Heiji Chora*, *Barnali*, *Goya Raijar Anusthan*. Even some of the young boy and girls till today like to listen to radio. The boys especially like to listen to games like cricket and football match in radio. One of the boys reading in college had told me, “I like to read my study book along with listening radio. Especially I like the *Barnali* program as the program makes me laugh.”

A farmer in this village named *Ananta Gogoi* in interview had told that the “*Gaya Raijar Anusthan* is my favourite program, not only me but most of my friends, we get together in our home, listen this program because this program gives us various idea how to use various methods, utensils, pesticides for the increasing the yielding rate of the crops in paddy fields”. The women mostly are fond of the programmes like *Lakhimi*, *Jeoti Chora*, *Gitimalika*, which are women centric and carry information related to them.

A teacher of this village named *Binanda Handique* had told in his interview, “Radio has a tremendous contribution in the development of the socio-cultural and economic life of the rural people of our village. The programme like *Bidyarthir Anusthan*, *Akoni* help in the mental development of the children, likewise women related programs help in development of women and encourage them to use their creativity in proper ways.

Television

Before the advent of electricity a few television sets were found in the village. The owner of the televisions used to see television by using battery. But they used to watch only films on VCDs in CD/MP3 players. After the electricity connection to the village all the villagers in the study area had bought television in their home. From the poor to the upper middle class family, everybody have their own television set. And along with television set they have Dish connections too. Directly they use colour television with remote. Interestingly, they hardly know about the programmes of *Doordarshan* channel. Most interestingly from children to adult all like the program *Ramayana* from *Star Utsav*, and other local channels are popular too. The younger lot and adults also like sports channel where they watch generally cricket and football.

The older generations have a different view of television. One of the old man of the village about 83 years had told that, “first of all for me radio is the most valuable medium, yes off course in television in *News Live* channel I like to watch and listen the speeches of *Tarun Gogoi* (the former Chief Minister of Assam). But I have noticed that with the coming of this television I am not being to have my meal in time, as my daughters and daughter-in-law all the time like to watch television shows, which make me neglected sometime in my own house. Even my radio is not working today, but my son has told me that now a day radio is useless so you should pass your time by watching television and going to the *Naamghar*.”

In case of habit of using television is very recent on this village. So the people are very confused what to see or what programmes will helpful or beneficial for their socio-cultural, economic development. Now they use it only as a mode of entertainment.

One thing have noticed in this village, the villagers from old generation to the children have great access to the traditional medium like *Bhaona*- a traditional and religious dance and drama, *Rasa*. Mobile theatre is also most popular among the villagers till now. The cinema halls are very far from the place not near the village, so the young boys once in a month or two months use to go to cinema hall to watch movies.

CONCLUSION

Human beings naturally tend to use mediums of entertainment for leisure. The burgeoning spectrum of modes of media in India over the last two decades or so has had a profound impact on the largely rural populace of the country. The sheer vastness of India and its majority rural population was always a target for growth for the media companies. Post-liberalization has seen massive improvement in the development of the country as a whole. Be it education, health services, irrigation, road infrastructure etc. have all seen inflow of foreign investment which have resulted in improvement of basic human development index.

The improvement in the lifestyle of the rural people, economic independence and increasing literacy was making this vast portion of the population a ready market for the media conglomerates. Thus the last decade also has seen a phenomenal rise in the number of media outlets in the form of news paper, magazines, television channels, FM stations etc.

While studying the two villages it was found that like every other village they were not untouched from media. A comparative analysis was necessitated from the fact that one of the villages had received power supply rather late. After conducting a brief comparative analysis between these two villages relating to their media habits commencing from its introduction to present stage, it is observed that media culture

has brought some remarkable changes both in their lives individually and socially. But the patterns of changes are not symmetrical / similar to each other. In *Chinatoli* village people are marching forward keeping pace with every kind of changes in media, especially brought upon by radio and television, but on other hand in village *Kanugaon* inspite of being financially sound, they were unable to get connected with television because of lack of electricity. The incident of abrupt introduction of audio-visual media in general has caused an imbalance between their traditional life and newly exposed values as experienced through the eyes of television.

The idea that peoples reception of media is dependent on or influenced by the availability of such means. In the absence of power supply the people of *Kanugaon* village had different avenues for entertainment, avenues that were traditional and could be carried out without electricity. Thus we find the people of *Kanugaon* village more involved with *Namghar* activities, *bhaonas*, traditional games and even to an extent on radio. While on the other hand *Chinatoli* village gives us a different picture all together. Their media habits are directly linked to the easy accessibility to cable television. The attraction of the visual medium is a stark reality, influencing the lives of the villagers directly affecting their participation in traditional leisure activities.

A very important phenomenon was noticed from the comparative analysis of the media habits of these two villages. In *Kanugaon* village the leisure activity at still remains to an extent public activities, wherein most activities are still performed in public places such as the *Namghar*. Village youths are also seen engaging in activities around the street corners. The public domain of leisure still occupies a very important position but that with is under threat by the advent of power supply. Leisure activities in *Chinatoli* is confined to the private sphere. Leisure habits has remained confined to media habits, thus the private space becomes the dominant place in every day life. The decreased participation in community activities is an indication of the overarching influence of mass media, times spend on which hardly allows one to have spare time for other activities. The breakdown of the community space in the villages is a major finding of this study.

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