Chapter 5:
Learning through Traditional Cultural Forms

(Excerpt from Part One: The Educational Potential of Community Media)

Rezaul Haque in Chapter 5 illustrates the importance of cultural context and traditional communication forms through the work of Rupantar with three different cultural media formats. Rupantar is a development communication organisation in Bangladesh that works with traditional cultural forms as development communication tools and is now exploring the use of community radio, which was sanctioned by the government of Bangladesh in 2010. Haque suggests that community broadcasters look to traditional cultural forms, such as theatre, the visual and performing arts, and even more contemporary popular print publications, to inform models and approaches to non-formal education and local, community media.

More information: www.col.org/LearningWithCM
COL’s Healthy Communities programme: www.col.org/HealthyCommunities
Non-formal open and distance learning
The success and impact of community learning on sustainable development, particularly at the grassroots, continue to grow as new models and methods are being applied to the learning process. Non-formal development education imparted at the community level through a variety of indigenous development communication tools and technologies has added a new dimension to traditional open and distance learning (ODL) approaches.

In an effort to bridge the fields of development and education, this new dimension may be referred to as non-formal ODL. Conducting development communication by using traditional cultural forms as tools and technologies — in effect, tools not common to formal ODL approaches — is part of non-formal ODL.

Why traditional cultural forms?
Despite the unprecedented development and advancement of modern communication across the globe, there remain millions of disadvantaged men and women, in thousands of communities in Commonwealth countries, who have yet to access modern electronic and print media. Poverty, underdevelopment and illiteracy are the prime causes.

Development goals will continue to remain unachieved for these communities if their members are unable to access development education through alternative communication tools. Traditional cultural forms provide this alternative.
Folk media in development communication

Traditional cultural forms — often loosely and interchangeably referred to as traditional media, folk media and folk art forms such as drama and songs — are strong and effective means for development communication. They are rooted in indigenous culture. Originating from different societies and evolving over time, they have been used for moral, religious and socio-political education. These forms are still alive and receptive to new ideas, and therefore have great potential as development communication tools.

Traditional folk media forms are personal, familiar and credible. Community members can easily identify themselves as part of their folk art forms. Therefore, despite the rapid diffusion of new communication technologies, folk media continue to demonstrate value as effective vehicles for developmental messages.

The appeal of traditional cultural forms is also that they are universal and intimate. They are popular regardless of the educational, social and economic standing of any community. They use colloquial dialects, which makes the communication clear and distinct. Another big advantage of folk media is that it is flexible in accommodating new ideas, themes and issues. Folk media satisfies the inner need for self-expression and everyone can participate in it. Thus, it is particularly effective for community learning. Folk art forms not only preserve and disseminate the wisdom, tradition and culture of the past, but they can also be adapted to incorporate modern development education.

Rupantar’s method of development communication

Rupantar is a development communication organisation that believes culture and sustainable development are closely connected. For the last 15 years, Rupantar has been using, alongside conventional methods, traditional cultural forms to impart life- and livelihood-centred education and awareness to people in Bangladeshi communities. Some of the key areas in which the organisation has successfully worked are: women’s empowerment and leadership development; disaster preparedness and mitigation; alternative livelihood options; human rights (including rights of women and children); biodiversity conservation; revival of folk culture; grassroots democracy and good governance; protection of women and children from human trafficking; and theatre education for children. Development messages on these issues and other matters, communicated through traditional cultural forms, have reached over 2 million people annually.
Although Rupantar works to revive dozens of traditional cultural forms for developmental purposes, it uses three distinct forms primarily in its development communication activities: pot songs, folk drama and popular publications.

- **Pot songs** – Pot songs are songs illustrated by drama and coloured pictures and scenes painted on a large canvas scroll. As the song and dance proceed, the canvas scroll is unrolled, changing the pictures to correspond with the words of the song. The script is prepared in a participatory method where the composers, performers and would-be audience take part. This 12th-century low-cost communication technology can effectively and easily reach illiterate and semi-literate people with messages about complex developmental and social issues. Rupantar has so far developed over 100 pot songs on various issues.

- **Folk drama** – This ancient, traditional form of entertainment has been used to educate and communicate with common people on moral, social and life-based issues. Rupantar has adapted this form into living theatre and uses it as a means of “edu-tainment,” or mass education through entertainment. The themes are usually based on issues of relevance to the community. The desired messages are conveyed in attractive style and rhythmic form for better understanding by the audience. The script is prepared in a participatory way with the performers. For this method of folk drama there is no need for decorative lights, heavy make-up, costly props and stages. Rather, it is highly minimalist. Rupantar has used this form extensively for civic and development education.

- **Popular publications** – Popular publications represent a special type of literature and form of journalism. These are written in easy and simple language and often with lots of pictorial illustrations. The target readers are urban and rural people with basic literacy skills who likely do a limited amount of “serious reading” because of educational, social, economic and occupational constraints. The contents of the publications use real-life problems, issues of current relevance and topics of human interest. Hawkers and peddlers usually sell these publications to passengers on trains, buses or steamer boats. The cost of a booklet is between the equivalent of 10 and 20 cents (US). Rupantar’s many booklets with development messages have reached communities that do not otherwise have access to such information.
The communication activities of Rupantar rely on three main traditional forms — pot songs, folk drama and popular publications — to promote learning on a mass scale.

Folk drama has been used to educate and communicate with common people on moral, social and life-based issues for hundreds of years. Rupantar has adapted this form into living theatre and uses it as a means of “edu-tainment,” or mass education through entertainment.
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Rupantar is a development non-governmental organisation (NGO) working in 12 districts of Bangladesh, impacting the lives of 1.2 million disadvantaged people. Rupantar endeavours to establish democracy at the grassroots level; promote mass education; revive and foster folk culture forms and methods; conserve biodiversity and the environment; and enhance peoples’ coping capacity with climate change and natural disaster impacts.

For further reference, see:

- www.rupantar.org