

## **Community Media: Local is Focal**

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For the past decade and more, India has seen unprecedented growth in satellite communications. First, expansion of entertainment and news channel has been phenomenal, and now, the direct-to-home services have opened doors for Indian TV consumers to far-reaching connections. The modern world proudly proclaims that the world has shrunk and access to information, entertainment and knowledge has become easy and smooth, and that in itself, it is believed, has served as a tool to strengthen democratic norms. For the upward-mobile communities this might be the new mantra and ways to accumulate more wealth. However, for the majority, the reality they experience is far from all this. Massive depletion of natural resources, commercialisation of land and erosion of traditional values which helped bond the community together are forcing communities into confusion and indecisiveness. The confusion mainly relates to action. Whether to accept and continue on the traditional path of livelihood and local culture or follow the road modernity asks of us, to traverse. This has an enormous impact on the lives of majority of the rural communities. The tension between the old and young, the vast visible disparity and despair compound the matter further. Modern institutions like education, mass media and the state, work hand in glove to drive home the message that modern is better and sure road to development. India, the land of diverse cultural roots and traditions, thus began to witness changes in its collective expressions and organisations. As global networks of entertainment industry began to spread its commercial tentacles of consumerism, rural households started experiencing its tremors. Traditional ways of living, learning and behaviour began to change. Communities have started adopting consumer lifestyle, cash economy and dependence on external sources, to guide their lives. The worst affected has been the local culture.

Local culture which thrived on diverse forms of expressions, relationships and means of production, slowly began to become less visible. Many communities, especially tribal societies, celebrated together in the evenings by dancing, singing and sitting together listening to stories being narrated. Being together, in each others company created a lot of opportunities for daily informal exchanges, circulation of information and values, and opportunities for learning. For the young, the atmosphere was relevant for their initiation into local culture, to get a sense of history and traditions. It served as meaningful platform for their identities to get shaped and rooted in local ethos and values. It was the way in which life was organised. Now, one witnesses marked difference. Collective forms of celebrating life through different ways have undergone a major shift. Television now enjoys a special place in the rural households and has restricted community movements to gather together and interact. Young people prefer to ape the urban lifestyle and aspirations. Having studied in institutionalised forms has fuelled their dreams further. They have become mobile and with hardly any desire to work manually in their farms or in traditional occupations. Unconsciously and unwittingly they have been sucked into the vast unreliable world of employment market which has no regard for traditional knowledge, skills and their leadership. This has also severely affected their dignity, self esteem and identity. The time for coming together and dialoguing is becoming rare —

this is even more so, when matters concern issues of long-term nature. There is a sense of hopelessness about the future and lack of confidence to engage with the pressing issues that confront communities. Perhaps people lack faith that they can generate possible solutions, either individually or collectively.

A significant feature of modern landscape is its reliance on institutions and the systems it has created. Public health, education, transportation, food, mass media and governance are inter-linked. These institutions are driven by market economy, which dominate our lives. To such an extent that we can't think life is possible without them. The question is are these institutions serving the purpose for which they were created? In specific terms are schools promoting learning, do hospitals really heal the patients, do mass transportation ease our travel, do mass media provide entertainment, do the state machinery deliver welfare? Do corporations govern civic life? It is obvious that such questions will evoke mixed answers, more rhetoric than a clear picture of the reality. But by looking at the catastrophe and ecological degradation that modernity has festered while drawing heavily on the resources from the rural communities, it is not difficult to imagine how this 'development' has come about. What the modern institutions have bred is a dependent community, which stares more at the problems than fruition of its dreams.

In a globalised world increasingly dominated by ready-made images, the choice of self-determination is shrinking by the day. Rather easily, people fall prey to the 'options' produced by some propaganda machinery, believing they have a wide range of choices available to them. What is glossed over is that our role and involvement is that of a consumer. When we allow others to control our minds and decisions, we lose our freedom — to choose our paths, to involve ourselves with members of other community, and to reclaim the most vital element of our lives, creativity. Creativity and reflections are pillars on which wisdom shapes and evolves but that is the price we have paid for taking the road of modern development.

Creative expressions which define our individual and collective being, are part of our dignity and self-worth, and are unique to us as humans. But in the mad rush of competing, accumulation and getting adjusted in the ready-made world, our expressions have been silenced and suppressed. The challenge is to explore ways to liberate us from the chains of dependency and in the process, to discover our many-hued, multi-coloured expressions. How do we create new understandings of wisdom in our societies if we are to really create peaceful, just and sustainable people-centred development?

We have come to believe that democracy cannot exist in vacuum. It needs citizens of all shades and colours who engage actively in concrete, organic and specific actions that nurture democratic values. It also needs self-directed learning processes to promote democratic functioning. It means active citizenship who are ready to dialogue, challenge the dominant models of development, engage in critical reflections and undertake innovative actions for transforming the current state of our society. The transformed society would no longer be hegemonic, hierarchical and exploitative global monoculture but a plural, multi-layered network of relationships committed to nurturing diverse, creative, just and wisdom based cultures.

Having witnessed this from close quarters while working with diverse communities for the past 18 years we were concerned and alarmed at this state of affairs and change. Abhivyakti decided to intervene with the aim of reclaiming the diverse voices of the local communities.

Abhivyakti strengthens media and communication resources among grassroots and social movements for generating community-centred development actions. Abhivyakti views people-centered development as a process in which communities can fulfill their basic political, social, economic and cultural aspirations, by deciding for themselves the type of society they want to live in, irrespective of their social identity. Not many in India work holistically on development communications. We see an opportunity through development communications to create a learning environment that leads to the re-emergence and sustenance of local culture and diverse communities. We also believe that critical understanding of one's identity and social role is crucial in contributing creatively to a community building process. We are, of course, challenged by a world, which continuously narrows our worth into dehumanized categories of 'backward', 'illiterates', 'vote-banks' or 'consumers'. But as a group of media activists, we feel there are many ways to support and promote the varied expressions and identities of those who are excluded and oppressed.

The primary strategies of Abhivyakti's interventions are:

- Generating multiple creative expressions
- Strengthening spaces of co-learning
- Nurturing dialogue for critical reflections

**a) *Generating multiple creative expressions*** means taking cognizance of the diverse reality experienced by the marginalised and vulnerable sections of the society, and generating and promoting various forms of media and its exchange across society. The void that exists in the mainstream media in terms of developmental images and perspectives would be addressed by producing audio visual designs and material not only by us but by variety of actors, publishing alternative messages and promoting the perspectives, problems and aspirations of the marginalised populace on a regular basis.

The aim is to develop multiple creators/producers from the grassroots so that they start creating their own media laced with their perspective and circulate it in the environment. This would not only enrich the media environment but also generate diversity of voices and views. Our intention is to develop local writers, video producers, media critics, local media forms, and also establish centres of distribution of such media material.

**b) *Strengthening spaces of co-learning*** is related to strengthening the communication and media resources of development and grassroots actors. We believe that effective communication is the key to understand and build relationships with varied constituencies in the process of empowering the individual, collectives and communities.

Along with structured training, methods also include field-testing, video feedback, group work and plenary, and reflections of experiences among other. The emphasis is on generating learning through participation, interaction, sharing and use of multiple sensory approaches to cater to different learning styles.

*c) Nurturing dialogue for a critical reflection* entails creating spaces that bring diverse people together to get engaged to discuss important issues confronting their lives. Cross-cultural dialogue helps to bring to fore different social realities that exist, and, in turn, challenge the hegemonic domination of a favored few. These dialogues value participation of people from diverse backgrounds and try to evolve shared learning among them. They seek to create an atmosphere of non-judgmental acceptance and openness. Because they are fueled by our own reflections, experiences and life dreams, people begin to develop confidence in their thoughts and capacities. Inter-generational dialogues grow on give and take, allowing relationships to be nurtured and re-shaped. Dialogues are essential for shaping and promoting learning communities.

### **Focusing on Local**

Basically, we believe that each one of us is gifted with enough resources that can generate creative expressions and critical energies. However, due to many reasons related to the domination of a singular worldview, most of us, and certainly those who are vulnerable, do not believe in the potential of their own resources. The strategies try to focus on releasing these important resources in grassroots activists and others as part of our vision to strengthen the emergence of creative and critical communities. It means working towards encouraging members to believe in the strengths of their expressions, in their abilities to produce their own media be it a simple puppet, a story or a sophisticated documentary, and through their expressions generate opportunities to dialogue with others members on different aspects of community life.

For the past two years we have been engaged in serious dialogue with many media activists and youth in our region in Maharashtra. We have identified several members who are using media in remote corners of rural Maharashtra and who believe in their craft. These media activists as we call them are using different forms like the songs, theatre, music, video, photography, folk forms among other. Most of them are from the marginalised and lower socio-economic communities and asserting their identities through the media has been their main reason for using the media. Some work individually while some have formed small groups. Our intention of reaching out to them was two-fold. One, to form a loose network of media activists who are using some forms of community media, and second, channelise their energies in strengthening communities at the local level. While our first aim was easily fulfilled as there was no dearth of such media activists, and inviting them into a network was easily achieved. It was with the second goal that we realised the enormity and complexities involved. Trying to get them involved in local issues and concerns was easier said than done. Weren't local issues too small and insignificant when big personal ambitions that were stoked by many

influencing factors like global media and competitions more important? When we started relating to different members and their groups we found several major hurdles.

- Emphasis on performance over content
- Ambition to become famous and rich
- Indicators of success were influenced by mainstream indicators
- Local hardly figured in the content
- Lack of perspective in using the media for community building

We decided to work closely with the media activists by meeting them regularly in their area and dialoguing intensely with them. We also worked on our relationship with them by visiting their homes, interacting with their family members and discussing their dreams and aspirations. Though the 'local' didn't figure prominently, the activists had good rapport in the community because of their base and roots. We began talking about their activity as the focal point of many possibilities. We opened up the channel of how their media could be the key to transforming local development process and also the means to shape their own destinies. We discussed how the media and their role could also pave way for their own development. We repeatedly emphasised their role in transforming the local conditions and how this could be achieved by using media and communications.

The biggest challenge was to make the media activists realise the autonomous resources they possess within themselves that could help them to empower themselves. From learning on their own to generating creative forms to producing meaning from their own experiences and insights rather than becoming dependent on the ready-made solutions provided by others. When the activists began seeing that the possibilities of creating meaning in their life lay in their own initiatives and resources, and through engagement with other members of the communities their perspective changes dramatically, a shift begins to emerge. Taking control of their own communications resources, the strengths of dialogue, reflection and creation that can invigorate change process was inspiring to many of them. When the perspective changes from seeing power within than outside their location, it motivates people to generate their own resistance, derive meaning and satisfaction to make the community life enriching instead of leading a passive, dull and dependent life.

We stressed on multiple approaches.

- ***Media for ushering in localization.*** Using media for expressing local issues would be the main focus. They were the best authors in understanding local reality and conditions. Micro themes would form the content which would be further enhanced by interacting with different community members, especially the elders who had seen the change from earlier situations.
- ***Media as a tool for hosting dialogues.*** They would look at the media as a tool for communication, for strengthening relationships and for marginalized communities to voice their concerns, problems and views without feeling any hostility and anxiety. Thus, primary use of media was how it was disseminated before the community. This required serious thought and organization. People needed to be informed in advance and invited. The key was in understanding the concept of

hosting dialogues. Their role as hosts was vital in circulating a vibrant and trustworthy environment where people felt belonged and as well as challenged to utilize their resources to solve their own problems instead of relying on outsiders. The challenge therefore was in planning not only media productions but also in facilitating dialogues with diverse groups in the community.

- ***Communication process as a means for harvesting knowledge.*** Crucially tied with hosting dialogue was seeing the process as fertile ground for harvesting knowledge. The need was to understand the dynamics that shifted the onus and responsibility of producing knowledge lay with us and our reflections. The interactive process created the right conditions for making meaning out of our conversations, observations and analysis. It didn't need theories and nor experts to point it out to them. The claim to authorship was with them and their processes.
- ***Streets as nodes for showcasing their media.*** Roads, community corners offered strategic locations for disseminating media forms. While markets have captured these spaces to advertise their products with seducing messages no media activist would look at this possibility. Roads, streets and nukkads (corners) belonged as much to the community and there was a need to reclaim this space. Performance/exhibitions didn't need close confines of a hall/theatre. It could be done anywhere as long as it was a means to reach others. The need was to innovate in organizing the space for exhibiting the media.
- ***Inspiring others to create.*** The process of creation, dialogue and reflections would definitely ignite the passion in others to feel the magic of expressions and how it related to holistic development of their own selves. It provides an opportunity to help members to link their inner and outer worlds, and weave a web of rootedness, belongingness and well-being. The process of creation is a strong statement of challenging the hegemonic monopoly of the globalised world, by showing that we as individuals and our community have enough resources within ourselves to 'co-author' our worlds with values and meanings we cherish.

## Looking at Practice

Our visits, continuity of dialogue and regular exchange was able to strike a responsive chord in the hearts of many media activists. We could sense positive energy emanating from them. I would like to cite a few examples of some of the practices that have emerged.

Geeta is an eager, young woman based outside Nashik, in a small township of Bhagur. She is a budding poetess with burning desire to do something for her community. While her poetry was the means to express herself she was unable to see its potential to communicate with the members of her community. She was also distressed about the lack of community bond, which had gradually eroded. In addition there was a general apathy about cleanliness in the neighbourhood. After lot of discussions on the best course of action, she decided to work with the children in her community on the idea of family life. What ideas and feelings children held about family? How could these ideas be expressed in a form that could be communicated to the community? She kept the dialogue with the children going, shared her poems with them and gave plenty of time to listen to their

animated chatter. This gave her the confidence to invite children to a workshop on producing a wall paper on the theme of their homes. The workshop was facilitated in such a way that motivated children to openly share their expressions and share it with others. The wall paper titled, 'Maza Ghar' (My Home) emerged from the intense process of the workshop. It captured the world of children, their dreams and aspirations about their homes. The wall paper was not edited nor was it polished to appear 'beautiful' to others' eyes. The wall paper was a collective expression of the children of this community. It was their media and their way to communicate their concerns to the community. It was also a space which generated new forms of learning, by doing, by observing, by listening to others, by sharing openly and freely what they thought of their homes. There wasn't any external expert to correct, to teach and to punish them. They were their own teachers! The process strengthened their relationship with each other and became the basis for their learning as well as the production of the wall paper. After the workshop, discussions and reflections were about the process and its many-hued significance in children's lives. The wall paper was displayed at prominent places in the community and families were invited to share their views. More such wall papers are planned with children and youth. And the dialogue that would be generated with the family members would facilitate crucial issues concerning the community. That the community has taken notice of the wall paper is a step in the right direction. Gita herself is elated about the process that has been initiated and that she is able to understand community dynamics has made her more determined and focused. She is now thinking of working with women through her poems.

In Ahmednagar, another district town in western Maharashtra, Anant Diwedi, a professionally trained theatre veteran had rigid ideas of using movements and of overall performance. Though he was very good in his art of popularising folk forms he rarely dialogued with the members of his community. He treated them as audience who had to be entertained. He never considered his art form as a means for building relationship and as a vehicle for community development. For him performance and 'right' body usage was the most important part of his art. Abhivyakti's team members dialogued, debated and even fought with him on making him understand his own power and how it could be used in communicating with others. Audience, we told him, were not passive blocks but active members who could be involved at different stages of production. Even during the performance, members could be invited to share their views on the issue making the artist audience relationship into a vibrant and dynamic partnership. At heart, Anant had sincere intentions of serving the community, but he was hardly moving ahead. People in the audience liked his performance but that was the end of it. Yet it wasn't easy convincing him, so fixated was he about his performance. Eventually, we had to demonstrate to him how he could turn his talent into community-strengthening practice. We emphasised on community as a source for identifying the issue, content-development, in design of production and specifically during after-show dialogue. He experienced the process and the lively community dialogue session was what convinced him in considering using the participative method. The process with Anant took more than a year but it has been enriching for both of us.

Similarly, in the town of Jalgaon in north Maharashtra, Vinod Dhage used his street play skills to earn a living, by writing and staging it for his many clients on contractual basis, although he considered it as an act of community service. With Vinod, too, the process of dialogue has been a long one. Everything centred on his acting prowess and how he wooed his audience by his performance. He didn't see it as an extension of mass media system by virtue of its one way communication. He believed the solution and the 'education' of the masses lay in the packaged message. When he attended our community media workshop and started interacting with our team he confessed that there was nothing of his inner self in his creations. Everything was based on what the client demanded and told him to do. Things started to change when he started asking questions to himself, which he later posed to his group as well. How was the street theatre related to their lives, to their own stories and to the community they lived in? Did he see himself as an expert whose task was to solve the problems of others without involving any members of the community or was it something else? As they engaged the process of reflection within the group we could see the shift. They are now involved in a deep dialogue with their community about the issue of female foeticide, a serious problem growing at an alarming rate in the region. Vinod confesses that he is involved from his heart for the first time in his life. And he sees an opportunity to build bridges within the community through his media.

### **Confronting Challenges**

A recent challenge that is before us is about a dalit (from a socially deprived caste) poet in Dabhadi, Malegoan in the Khandesh part of Maharashtra who feels deep resentment when he is sidelined and not given his due during the regional 'Kavi Sammelan' (Poets Convention) by the dominant caste members. His actions, in form of his poetry renditions, were affecting his identity and social functioning. According to him, his lower caste status was depriving him of his rightful place in the community of poets. He was deeply hurt. But when he sang his poetry in his village community it immediately touched his fellow brethren, and became a means for sharing common concerns. However, in the dominant world his caste lowered his stature as a poet. The problem was complex, and multi-layered. It was one of the fundamental causes of social-cultural division and tensions. How do we address this sensitive issue that is disturbing one of the recent members of our network? Would it be enough to dialogue with the poet and question his deep-rooted need to find recognition in the dominant system which is anyway external to his immediate local existence? Who decides and awards this recognition and why is it so important? How can we learn to distinguish issues of behaviour with identity? What is the role of poetry in communities? At the same time is it possible to work with those who constitute the dominant community of poets? Would they listen to the pains suffered by others who belong to the minority? Is there a space for reaching common grounds?

Some of the media activists have started small community-based media resource centres in their regions. Our idea of a media resource centre is that it should become a cultural hub of diverse communication related activities. Community members should see it as a symbol of cultural regeneration, something that would contribute to strengthening their

community life. From production of local media by different members to active dissemination site to becoming a learning centre generating local knowledge, could the centre function be controlled by the community members themselves. Do the media activists share this vision? It is a challenge to their leadership to see the vast potential that such a centre holds for the community to reclaim its tradition and culture. How do we facilitate this process of shared envisioning?

Right now, the network of media activists that has been initiated is structurally informal, flexible and open. We would like it to have a convivial spirit rather than a formal structure. We would like the members to develop deep connections and think of each other as friends who enjoy the exchange and collaborations that evolve naturally and learn from each others experiences and insights. We believe that such networking would go a long way in fulfilling its aim of providing mutual support, critical reflections, creative inspiration and empowerment for its members. We see this as the biggest challenge.

The community media has the power and diverse processes for the community members to make that change from being dependent and passive to active and involved beings that can create a meaningful society through their own initiatives. Secondly, it emphasises on the practice of building collective leadership in contrast to the reliance on singular leaders to engage with the pressing issues confronting communities. And thirdly, by developing the value of local cultures, organic processes and grassroots governance it shifts attention to diverse ways of organising and managing life over centralised modes of control.

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