

Alternative Communications: Problems and Prospects

In this paper, the author defines the term 'alternative'. He then makes a tentative exploration of knowledge systems, examines the strengths of two folk forms from India that have prevailed as alternative approaches to communication, and surmises that much more analyses needs to be done specially at the point of reception of 'local-specific' alternative means of communication.

PRADIP N. THOMAS

A decade ago, 'alternatives' could be discussed in a wide range of fora. Today, with the demise of the 'big Bear' and its cubs, the globalization of the free market, the retreat of the State from its 'public' commitments, and the 'evacuation' of Unesco's concern for a new 'communications' order, 'alternatives' are quite definitely out of fashion. The only alternative discussed today is the option and necessity of privatized competition to monopoly state-media structures.

A brief explanation of the term 'alternative' media may be in order. The need for alternatives arises in a situation where communities are denied access to existing forms of expression — the press, broadcasting, the media in general — which are either controlled by the State or by private interests. *Access* and *control* are at the crux of alternatives, be it community cable TV in Canada (Goldberg, 1990), popular video in South Africa (Tomaselli, 1989), community radio in Nicaragua (White, 1990), community art in the UK (Kelly, 1984), or popular theatre in India (Thomas, 1988). In a real sense, therefore, alternative strategies of using communications are a response to felt needs and come to occupy a 'space' in popular expectations.

But there is more to an alternative medium than just a change in structure. It is not just a question of replacing one specific type of medium with another, but is realized through a stretching of the medium (any medium)—its form, its content, its role, its aesthetics—towards an exploration of the politics of possibility. The tension between individual creativity and collective creativity is

manifested in pre-performance, performance and post-performance, as in the case of popular theatre, or as group decision-making in the production of a community video programme. The stretching of a medium's potential—from its moorings as an essentially individual form of expression to a collective one as in the case of community video, or from an expression of traditional order as in the case of Wayang performances in Indonesia, or the Tamasha (Maharashtra), Terrakoothu (Tamilnadu) or Teyyam (Kerala) (folk and semi-classical forms from India), to an expression of 'solidarity', a means for unveiling reality and an exploration of another order—is a unique, primary characteristic of alternatives.

Knowledge Systems

This analysis begins with a tentative exploration of knowledge systems, particularly those that are brought into a reckoning in the framework of any alternative communication strategy. We all have, at one time or another, been exposed to and influenced by knowledge systems stemming from tradition, belief systems, upbringing, education, interaction with others, etc. and these influences are layered in consciousness. These systems, in association with other socio-psychological variables (that have the potential to influence knowledge systems as well provide entire knowledge frameworks), like class, caste, ethno-religious background, national characteristics, etc., contribute to the formation of identities that have both permanent and variable features. Culture, in other words, is a dynamic entity; change and permanence are built into a seamless web that predates us, accompanies us in real time and outlives us. And culture is made up of different identities that are layered

Pradip N. Thomas is the Asian Regional Co-ordinator for the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC).

in consciousness. Our understanding of reality is based on the cultural baggage that we have both inherited and formed in a lifetime of 'encounters'.

The success of an alternative communication strategy will be based on the extent to which its knowledge system is capable of providing a superior framework to systems already in existence, call it dominant, or traditional, or mainstream. Superior, not in terms of taste or sensibilities, but in terms of its overall value and capacity for interface in the lives of people. Take the relative strengths of two folk forms from India—the Tamasha from Maharashtra and the Terrakoothu from Tamilnadu—both play a role in consensus formation, the reintegration of the Little Traditions of Hinduism within the larger all-India traditions; both, through their characteristic blend of satire, farce, ribaldry, make the connection between the profane and the sacred, the secular and the religious. Both provide the basis for the preservation of popular memory on a collective basis; and allow for the identification between the past and present, and provide a justification for the existing order. Both allow for the Gods to be humanized. Both express commonly held attitudes and beliefs, and fulfill expectations; and in both cases, their closeness to the lived life of their audience is their greatest strength. The reinforcement of caste divisions and power relationships is an important by-product of the overall performance, in both cases.

In other words, the knowledge system which provides the framework for a Tamasha or Terrakoothu performance is both an extensive as well as intensive one. It is extensive in that the performance touches aspects of lived reality that are common, daily manifestations, i.e., problems of love, jealousy, anger, that provide a framework for daily morality. It is intensive in that it provides a complete means of identification with a system that provides security and solidarity for an individual as well as for a collective.

There are two ways of approaching alternative ways of using folk forms like the Tamasha or Terrakoothu. Firstly, from inside the knowledge system, with reform of the system as its main goal. A good example of this would be the use of Tamasha in the anti-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra. Playwrights like Jotirao Phule turned around the content of the traditional Tamasha. Traditional conventions were changed; there was as well a radical change in the content and purpose of the *gan* (invocation) and its characterization. As Omvedt (1973, p. 1973) has noted:

The traditional *tamasha* opened with an invocation to Ganapathi with an implication of support for this traditional deity; however, Satyashodak leaders . . . counteracted this by explaining that the actual meaning was from *gan* or 'people' and 'pati' or 'leader' and that it therefore represented an invocation of the people as the source of rule . . . The traditional drama section seems most often to have featured a play concerning the efforts of Brahmins and sometimes money-lenders to cheat innocent but generous peasants, while songs were added involving opposition to caste and religious superstition and the oppression of the peasants.

Secondly, from outside the knowledge system, the use of Terrakoothu or any other folk form by an activist cultural organization, to achieve transformative ends, expressed often in the language of justice, rights, struggle and a casteless, classless society.

While in the former use of folk theatre, the framework is the existing knowledge system shared by people, in the latter case a shared cultural resource is adapted to the expression of an alien knowledge system. In the case of the former, there is the basis for identification as the system is not at stake as a totality but only a part of the system. In the latter, the whole system is at stake; religion is often equated with superstition, and the emphasis is on the achievement of temporal power, with the exclusion of the religious. There is a clash of knowledge systems. While in the case of the former, there is a basis for continuity, in the case of the latter, there is a break with continuity towards a struggle for a new order.

Strategy of Alternative Communication

Struggle towards a new order is of course at the heart of any strategy of alternative communications, but the question that remains valid today is whether social change can be brought about through strategies that are based on an imposition of knowledge systems and epistemologies rather than through an accommodation and encounter of knowledge systems. Are there limits to extensive, grand universals such as class struggle, even class consciousness? Do the lessons of history teach us that 'struggle' is always local specific? Or that, for cultural struggle to succeed, its core objective must strike a chord in the collective memories of people? That, unless a cultural strategy respects popular memory—tradition, common understandings, shared meanings, collective goals—there is little chance of it succeeding in the long-term basis? Both 'tradition' and 'cultural struggles' have their drawbacks—'tradition' that is used to preserve and reinforce unjust power relationships and cultural struggles that are not receptive to the more positive aspects of tradition are both problematic. The question that needs to be posed, in the case of cultural struggles in South and Southeast Asia, particularly those that are waged in rural areas, is whether the alternative provided is capable of using the best in tradition to deal with its more problematic aspects and, as importantly, whether struggle is directed towards the creation of autonomous communities, where autonomous aspirations are preserved and not blunted by the weight of imposed ideologies and their grand objectives. Rowe and Schelling (1991, p. 228), in their study on popular culture in Latin America, have affirmed the plurality of popular memory:

Part of the violence produced by global homogenization is the illusion that there is only one history, an illusion which suppresses the differences between the different histories lived by different groups of human beings. There is a further point: historical memory is a vital cultural action in the making and preservation of those differences, and

the destruction of memory a prime means of domination. Social memory is just not continuity and unchanging identity, it is also memory of destruction and discontinuity. Nor is it appropriate to speak of a single popular memory: there are a variety of differentiated memories.

This leads on to a pertinent observation—that a lot more analyses needs to be done at the point of reception, at the audience level, for people do interact with the media and bring their own identities, understandings and meanings into play in their encounter with alternative media. In other words, the process of 'mediation' needs to be understood.

The question related to 'popular' memory is a question of 'power'. And it does seem necessary that in this day and age, we move away from the one-dimensional understanding of the 'nature' of power to one that is based on a 'dispersed', two-way multi-dimensional understanding of power. Such a reading would allow alternative communication strategies to be a lot more local-specific in its impact.

Other Aspects

There are other aspects of alternative communication as it exists today. A most obvious reality, is the 'institutionalization' of alternative communication organizations, processes and approaches. Words like 'participation' and 'justice' are bandied about by all actors in the development field, and these words have been emptied of their original significance in a number of cases.

Part of the problem is related to funding, and to a large extent, the role of Western agencies has not been constructive. The global economic scenario as well as local-specific political realities have continued to make life difficult for a large majority of organizations involved in alternative media work. The crisis also extends to the question of 'form', for a lot has been placed on the mechanical techniques of communications and little thought on 'the planning, style and aesthetic decisions which govern techniques' (Kelly, 1984).

Conclusion

This has been a pessimistic, rather grave reading of the scenario affecting alternative communication as a global phenomenon. 'Self-criticism' has been at a premium, and that for far too long, the rhetoric of liberation has allowed the question of performance to be pushed to the background. But it must be said that alternatives do have their place, and that there may be a need to consider alternatives to the existing alternatives. This, because during the last decade, hitherto unrecognised factors have a negative impact on alternative communication strategies; these include ethnicity, nationalism and communalism. These

new variables have forced theorists to acknowledge that the terrain has changed, that the question of identity/ies need to be focused on in a tighter manner, and that there is a need therefore to 'map' this terrain.

The old order may have changed, but old forms of violence in new guises continue to determine relationships between the North and the South. These include the moves made by the USA to include trade in services, including international information flows under the GATT (General Agreements on Tariffs and Trade) structure (Bremar, 1990), the increased use of information technologies for surveillance purposes, and the worldwide homogenization of cultural production, tastes and expectations.

But this is not only a problem between the North and the South. Within these enclaves there are situations of dependence between the centres of power and the regions, and between the regions and local areas, a conflict between the forces of homogenization and those of heterogenization, between the 'nation' and its constituents at a number of dispersed local sites. And there are multiple conflicts and multiple resistances at local levels as well.

In this situation, alternative communication strategies at grassroots level, and the formation of alternative communication lobbies at global levels need to be seen as necessary sides of the same coin. Both have as their objective the democratization of communications. Different routes will be taken, and these may be very local-specific, particular manifestations directed towards achieving the 'universals' of justice and peace and democracy. That is as well, for particular expressions of the universal are absolutely central to the formation of a new world order.

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