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Folk Media as Health Communication Tool : Case Study of West Bengal During Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Media has always played a pivotal role in shaping public awareness. As can be identified with the concept 'Medium is the Message', coined by Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan, suggests that the medium through which a message is conveyed has a greater impact than the message itself. This statement consolidates how our perceptions and interactions with information are influenced by the medium's character. The concept finds close relation with folk media too for it emphasizes the folk medium's inherent characteristics of using live performance with interactive community-based nature drastically influencing audience's perception, societal interaction and overall experience. Folk media, being an infotainment tool, aware rural audiences on various social needs especially health issues. Over the years, Government and non-government organizations too have conducted health awareness campaign through folk media for rural people. This study investigates the efficacy of folk media as an important communication tool for disseminating health awareness information during Covid-19 pandemic in West Bengal. Covid-19 has had a great impact on our society that needed strategic communication to be dispersed at the time of crisis to the rural people of West Bengal. The study explains how folk form such as storytelling, singing, drama, dance etc influence the message's reception and comprehension during pandemic to navigate its impact on society and culture. The researcher employs qualitative approach to address the objective of the study which is to understand and explain how folk media of West Bengal played an important role as a health communication tool during Covid-19 pandemic especially in rural area. The study uses case study approach by considering secondary data to unravel the role played by folk media as an agent of development.

Keywords : #FolkMedia #Covid19 #HealthCommunication #RuralCommunity #RuralDevelopment #TraditionalMedia.

1. Introduction:

Folk media is a traditional form of media used by common people, frequently within their cultural context, which can be describe as 'of the people, by the people, for the people' (IGNOU). It is the oldest form of media and one of the earliest tools for development in our society. It involves people participation to the maximum level (IGNOU). This form of media combines with various art forms like song, drama, dance etc., which are unique to a certain community and society. Folk art forms are widespread in rural India and have become an integral part of the rural social system. In India, there are 28 states & 8 union territories and each region have its own folk forms like *Puppetry* in Rajasthan, *Bhangra* in Punjab, *Bharatanatyam* in Tamil Nadu, *Dandiya Ras* in Gujarat, *Baul* in West Bengal, *Bihu* in Assam etc, which are very well-liked and pertinent to the respective population or community. In addition, they all differ in their way of representation and behavioural pattern. Despite having this variation, these all folk form of

media represent some unique and common characteristic like community based, personal and intimate appeal, cultural perspectives, participatory nature etc.

In a developing country like India, which is multi lingual and diverse in character, folk media is an essential tool and has played significant role to disseminate information regarding various aspects like health, education, family planning, environmental awareness etc. Health is one of the major concerns among these. There are 63.13% people of total population who live in rural area of India (Trading Economics, 2025), where Folk media is the key medium for health communication. Health communication can be explained as a system that disseminates information about health-related topics to various audiences in an effort to interact and influence them. Folk media, being an infotainment tool, aware rural audiences on various social needs especially health issues. Over the years, Government and non-government organizations too have conducted health awareness campaign through folk media for rural people.

Having consider the concept 'Medium is the Message', coined by Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan, suggests that the medium through which a message is conveyed has a greater impact than the message itself, this study investigates the efficacy of folk media as an important communication tool for disseminating health awareness information during Covid-19 pandemic in West Bengal.

1.1. Folk Media of West Bengal:

West Bengal is a state with a wealth of folk media. This form of media has always held a prominent place and influenced the rural people of Bengal. The folk art of West Bengal can be divided mainly into three categories like- Folk songs (*Baul, Bhadu, Bhatiyali, Kabi Gaan*, etc), Folk dance (*Baha, Badna/Saharai, Chhau Nritya, Chang Nritya*, etc) and Folk drama (*Bhahurupi, Bolan, Bono Bibir Pala, Chor-Chunni, Gajan*, etc) (Information & Cultural Affairs Department, Gvt of West Bengal, 2025). This traditional form of media has been developed throughout the years to depict the cultural norms of the people. It not only helps in preserving and transmitting our culture, tradition and values to the next generation but also help in boosting developmental activities.

The researcher employs qualitative research approach to address the objective of the study which is to understand and explain how folk media of West Bengal played an important role as a health communication tool during Covid-19 pandemic especially in rural Bengal. The study uses case study approach by considering secondary data to investigate the role played by folk media as an agent of development.

1.2. Societal impact of Covid-19 pandemic:

In recent decade, the most challenging issue to confront humanity was the Covid-19 pandemic. Perhaps it was a situation which has not been faced by the world in the past 100 years. The SARS-CoV-II virus, which is the causes for coronavirus infection, first appeared in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China, in December 2019 (National Center for Biotechnology Information, 2020).

Covid-19 has had a great impact in our society. Billions of people have been affected globally due to Covid-19 and created significant issues in the political, socio-economical, and psychological domains. In addition, public health, food system and world of work have also been affected. Millions of people had died due to this pandemic, millions were falling into extreme poverty due to loss of their job. Therefore, they are unable to provide food for themselves and their family. As a result, malnutrition and various disease have been faced by these people.

It imposed a great challenge for the health worker, as well as Government and non-government organization to control the situation. Information on COVID-19 awareness has been distributed through a variety of media. India, a country where 63.13% of the people live in the rural area (Trading Economics, 2025). UNESCO report of 2017-18 states that , 35% of the world's illiterate population resides in India, i.e. India has the highest population of illiterate adults in the world (Pranav Prabhu, 2021). Having consider

the socio-economic condition and literacy rate of rural India, many of them don't have any access of television or digital media as well as unable to read newspaper. Folk media is the most effective medium to communicate with them.

2. Literature Review:

Throughout India's history, folk media have been essential to rural communities, helping to shape their social, cultural, and political landscape. This ancient form of media has been crucial for social transformation, education, and preservation of cultural heritage. It evolved as oral form of communication. Knowledge, social standards, religious beliefs, and historical tales were primarily transmitted through storytelling, music, dance, puppetry, and oral traditions. People, who had the limited access of written materials and formal education, greatly relied on folk form of media. Rural communities were given a collective experience that helped them comprehend difficult social, political, and cultural concerns.

Padmanabha Kabbinahithilu Venkataramana and Sathish Kumar described how *Yakshagana* (a folk dance from Karnatak) spread covid-19 awareness among rural people, through their study called "Health communication through folk media: a study based on Yakshagana – A South Indian dance drama on Covid-19" (Venkataramana & Kumar, 2023). The study was based on primary data of survey. The study revealed that *Yakshagana* is an effective medium for health communication and played significant role during covid-19 pandemic to spread awareness information. In *Yakshagana*, speech, music, and body language are all crucial for deciding on a health message. (Venkataramana & Kumar, 2023).

Another study had been investigated the significance of folk media as a powerful tool for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 3 in India (Shaika et al., 2021). The authors employed the analysis of case studied developed through in-depth interview for this study to demonstrate the influence of folk media on health communication. According to the study, folk media can be used to create a successful communication model for rural communities' growth and development in order to meet SDGs connected to health. The best approach to spread messages about development is to incorporate entertainment, education, and information as key components. Folk media can fulfil all three roles at once (Shaika et al., 2021). Since traditional media in India caters to both urban and rural audiences, it is a valuable tool for promoting and achieving the SDGs. (Shaika et al., 2021)

A study by Mr. Nitin Mane & Dr. Ruhi Lal on the use of folk media to create health awareness about tuberculosis, where they tried to evaluate and explain about the role of *Nautanki* as a health communication tool to create tuberculosis awareness among rural and tribal communities in India (Mane & Lal, 2021). After going through the process and collected the data through focus group interview, they stated that folk media has the potentiality to play a significant role as a health communication tool.

A similar study had been done on the use of folk media to spread messages at public health care facilities (Radebe et al., 2020). The purpose of this study was to investigate how traditional folk media can be used to successfully spread diabetes education. They concluded that the importance of folk arts in spreading health messages should not be underestimated (Radebe et al., 2020). The folk art has the ability to unite people and cultures, close down the socio-economic divides, and dismantle barriers in the most basic ways while maintain strong cultural meaning.

Daluvuyo Lesego Treasure Radebe also stated that it is obvious that traditional folk media can spread health communication messages to a variety of low-middle-class communities (Radebe D. L., 2019). For people in low-middle-income communities, folk art is a reliable source of information and new ideas that can promote social and health advancement since it is respected, trusted, and relatable. (Radebe D. L., 2019)

Through a study, called "Use of Folk Media (Drama) in Communication of Public Health Messages on The Occasion of World No Tobacco Day"- the researchers also concluded that folk media is very much capable to spread health education among people in rural area (Chakraborty et al., 2014).

Dr. Neeru Prasad, Assistant professor from Central University of Rajasthan, described how folk media maintain its existence in present digital era. He concluded that despite the low ebb, folk media still play a significant role in rural area. (Prasad, 2013)

A similar study on health communication through folk media had been done by Olusegun Ojomo, called “Stemming the HIV and AIDs scourge in rural Nigeria with the Folk Media” (Ojomo, 2012). Through the study he discussed the substantial role of media in rural Nigeria (Ojomo, 2012). The negative impacts of HIV and AIDS in rural Nigeria are highlighted in the study, along with how these factors effects to the growth of the country. Taking into consideration of the achievement of folk media in various behavioural change campaign, he concluded that the greatest antidote to the scourge is information (Ojomo, 2012), which has existed even prior to the emergence of the virus, merely awaiting innovative application.

Solomon Panford, Maud Ofori Nyaney, Samuel Opoku Amoah and Nana Garbrah Aidoo also stated that folk media plays a significant role in changing negative social and reproductive health behaviours in rural Africa (Panford et al., 2001). They also stated that contemporary methods like participatory rural evaluation and use of mass media are less appropriate for theory-driven communication initiatives than folk media. (Panford et al., 2001)

According to a study, researchers concluded that folk theatre is a highly successful tool for advancing health education in rural communities (Ghosh et al., 2006). Archana Daya Shankar also suggested that disseminating health information through folk media is a very pragmatic approach (Shankar, 2001).

Although folk media has long been a powerful medium for cultural expression and social transformation, it also emerged as a powerful tool for health communication, especially in rural India. Over the year, a lot of research have been done on how folk media use as a health communication tool within and outside India. Some papers have shown that during covid-19 pandemic, how folk media played a significant role to disseminate health awareness information especially in rural India. The state of West Bengal has a wealth of folk media. This form of media has always held a prominent place and influenced the rural people of Bengal. Despite having significant role of Bengal folk media as to inform and educate rural people of West Bengal regarding covid-19 awareness, not too much research has been done on it. Therefore, this study is important to understand the role Bengal folk media played during pandemic to inform and educate rural people regarding covid-19 awareness.

3. Objective:

The general objective of the study is to understand how folk media of West Bengal played an important role as a health communication tool during Covid-19 pandemic especially in rural area. The specific objective is-

- To identify the type of folk media that disseminated such communication as well
- To understand the areas in which such activities were carried out.
- To identify the types of messages which had been disseminated through folk media during pandemic.

4. Methodology:

This paper is based on secondary data and case study research method has been used to address the objectives of the study. It is a qualitative research approach. Different news reports and YouTube videos have been critically analysed to understand and explain the role of folk media during Covid-19 pandemic in rural area of West Bengal.

4.1 Case Study:

In today’s digital era, where most of the people rely on digital media for news or information, the traditional folk media still has significant impact on rural area of West Bengal. Due to the socio-economic

condition, the rural people of Bengal still heavily depend on folk media as most of them don't have any access of digital media. In addition, having consider the literacy rate which has been discussed prior, most of the rural people of Bengal unable to read newspaper. Thus, the only way to communicate with them is through folk media.

In 2019-20 when the world was fighting with the Covid-19 pandemic, it was a great challenge for the government and health worker to control the situation. Folk media had played a significant role to create covid-19 awareness among rural people of Bengal. Numerous initiatives have been made to increase public knowledge of corona and its fatal power by the government, medical professionals, scientists, and regular citizens with the help of Folk media like-

- I. A project initiated by IIT Kharagpur, called "Folk Artists in the Time of Coronavirus", collaborated with folk artists (Patua) from Naya village in West Midnapore, where they used songs and scroll art to raise awareness about COVID-19 (Srijata Saha Sahoo, 2021). Prof. Anjali Gera Roy (Dept. of Humanities and Social Sciences) was a prominent person of this initiative. In order to help the understanding of the audience regarding the challenges posed by COVID-19 and the best practices that should be adhered to, artists composed their songs in regional dialects and produced scroll paintings.

The first performance took place at the entrance to the IIT Kharagpur campus. A group of folk artists conducted an interactive session about covid-19 with a performance of songs based on the theme to pats or scrolls outside the IIT gate. Through their art work and lyrics, the artists emphasized the need of stay at home, warning about not following lockdown regulations and other directives, and they encouraged the public to unite in the battle against the virus. (Srijata Saha Sahoo, 2021).

- II. Chhau artists of Purulia also took initiative to spread covid-19 awareness through their performance. In April 2020, a programme called "Coronasur Bodh", where a Chhau group of three people from the Ghatbera village of Balrampur (Purulia) had presented an awareness-raising event through a song, while maintaining social distance. The song was composed as a tribute to the late poet Krittibas Karmakar's well known jhumur. In this programme 'Coronasur Bodh', their slogan was "যেখানে দেখিব ভিড়, করিব আমি প্রবেশ। প্রথমে হবে সর্দি-কাশি-জ্বর, তারপরে হবে শেষ।" [Wherever I see a crowd, I will enter. First there will be colds, coughs, and fevers, then the end will come] (Sumit Biswas, 2020).
- III. During the covid-19 pandemic, a group of local folk artist of Bankura with the help of Bankura police, started an awareness drive for Covid-19. They dressed up as corona virus and urged people to stay at home, to wear mask and follow the instruction, given by the doctor. They performed songs and dance with this outfit and tried to inform about the importance of stay aware from corona virus. The cops of Bankura also help them to successfully implement this initiative. The video of this awareness campaign has been released by a YouTube channel of IndiaTv (one of the leading Hindi News channel of India). (IndiaTV, 2021).
- IV. In 2020, an initiative had been taken by the Baul artists of Shantiniketan to spread covid-19 awareness among rural community. This programme has been leaded by Goutam Hazra, a minstrel of Baul community of Bengal, who sang a song "We can defeat corona, but wear your mask and wash your hands first" (Priyadarshini Sen, 2020) to create covid-19 awareness among rural people. In an effort to increase awareness among the local and tribal communities, he had written seven songs since COVID-19.
- V. A group of Bohurupee folk artists from Latiya village, Labpur block in Birbhum conducted awareness campaign on covid-19 in Howrah and Birbhum. Hindu mythological characters were bening imitated by artists using ornate costumes and makeup. In order to protect the artists from

contracting the virus while they are outside, the artists were completely covered by the costumes, which include masks and gloves. Through a statement, provided by the Birbhum police, said that this campaign for those who were breaking lockdown guidelines.

- VI. Nirapado Mondal, a puppet artist organised a short folk drama to raise covid-19 awareness among rural people. However, his teammates could not join him due to lockdown. Therefore, he appeals to his neighbours and relatives to perform the drama. It was 12 minutes long drama called '*Biswatra Corona*' (Corona, the terror of the world) (Soumya Das, 2020). There was five characters in this drama, they were COVID-19, Yamraj, the god of death, a doctor, a folk singer and some villagers. Every artist wore large plastic mask.

During this drama, Yamraj was told by COVID-19 that he will infect and kill anyone who is not taking precautions. The virus also told, I'll enter these individuals through their noses and mouths and you (Yamraj) will take them away whenever they pass away. Then a doctor came into the scene and advised everyone to maintain social distance and wash their hands frequently with soap. The district police officer also engaged with this campaign. (Soumya Das, 2020).

5. Finding:

After going through some cases, it has been shown that mainly folk song, dance and drama like *Baul*, *Chhau*, *Bahurupée* etc had been used to disseminate awareness information during pandemic. Especially in rural Bengal, where the people don't have proper access of digital and broadcast media due to socio-economic condition and lower literacy rate. However, it has also been shown that folk artists had been hired to perform on covid-19 awareness campaign in some semi-urban area.

The information which had been disseminated through folk media, is mainly on covid-19 protocols, what should do & what should not during the pandemic situation. Folk artists conveyed the message regarding the importance of maintain social distance, wear mask, frequently use of sanitizer etc.

6. Conclusion:

Based on this finding, it can be concluded that in this digital era, folk media still plays a significant role as a health communication tool especially in rural area of West Bengal. During covid-19 pandemic, when government use print, broadcast and digital media to spread awareness among people, folk media had also played pivotal role for rural Bengal.

We are living in a digital era where our traditional media like newspaper, television shifting their business to digital platform. But the developing country like India where 63.13% of the total population who live in rural area (Trading Economics, 2025) , where folk media is the key medium of communication. Having consider the socio-economic condition and literacy rate of rural people, many of them don't have any access of smart phone or digital media as well as unable to read newspaper. Therefore, folk media is the only medium to spread various awareness campaign. Over the years, folk media have significantly played the role of a tool of communication regarding health, family planning, environmental issues, social development etc.

7. Limitations:

- This study is based on secondary data and only case study has been employed as data collection tool.
- In addition, only the folk media of West Bengal has been considered for this study. Inclusion of other state's folk media may or may not be impact on result.

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