

Commentary

Global Media Journal – Indian Edition/ISSN 2249-5835
Winter Issue / December 2011

Vol. 2/No.2

THE ROLE OF FOLK MEDIA AND PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT: AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY OF COMBATING CHILD MARRIAGE IN MALDA

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Abstract: *The practice of marrying daughters early is widespread and almost a prevalent practice for many poorly literate, financially backward villages of Rural Bengal. The district of Malda in Bengal is reported to have the highest incidences of child marriage in the state. Parents consent to child marriages to ensure male guardianship for their daughters, protect them from sexual assault, avoid pregnancy outside marriage or out of economic necessity. This may lead to severe negative health consequences like Anemia, HIV, AIDS, sexual exploitation and early pregnancy for the child. Child marriage is Child Abuse and represents absolute violation of human rights. The aim of my research is to explore and design a combat mechanism to this social curse of child marriage in Malda through participatory awareness and mobilization programmes using the folk media of the district.*

Key words: *Participatory Communication, Folk Media usage, awareness and mobilization campaign*

Introduction

Child Marriage is alarmingly common in India. Traditional notions and patriarchal social systems continue to justify this practice of marrying daughters early as a positive social norm with social and financial benefits. Marriage may be seen as a way to provide male guardianship

for their daughters, protect them from sexual assault, avoid pregnancy outside marriage ,extend their child bearing years or ensure obedience to husband's household.

The surveys conducted by the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), District Level Household Survey (DLHS) and Census reveals that in India the median age of first marriage is 17 yrs and about 30% of women give birth before 18 yrs. Early marriage is usually associated with entering into marriage without adequate information about critical sexual and reproductive health including general awareness on HIV/AIDS. This may often led to serious health consequences like anemia, unwanted sex, greater risk of reproductive morbidity and mortality. The Law Commission report also highlights the possibility of the young girls becoming victims of forced or fake marriages ending up in brothels or trafficking for commercial exploitation.

The NHRC Report(2002 -03) points out that 71.8%of the respondents who were survivors of trafficking were married when they were children suggesting that child marriage is among the key factors that makes children vulnerable to trafficking. The social curse of child marriage is Nationwide. However surveys conducted by the Department of Women and Child Development, Government of West Bengal in 2007 reveals the silent complicity to child marriage in West Bengal which ranks it sixth in terms of magnitude as compared to other states in the country. In Bengal about 48% of girls are reported to be married before 18yrs and 25% of women bearing a child at an age group of 15 -19 yrs .

In Rural Bengal the problem seems more acute. The Singulate Mean Age at marriage for rural women in West Bengal is reported to be 18.9 as compared to the state average of 19.7 for the same category. The 2001 census indicates that in the rural areas of West Bengal the rate of child marriage is at least 5% higher than the state average. Thus, 42.57% of rural girls in West Bengal were seen to get married before the legal age of 18 during the period of 1996 -2001 whereas for the state as a whole the corresponding percentage was 37.16%.

A district wise break up of child marriage in West Bengal showed financial backward districts like Malda, Birbhum, Murshidabad, South Dinajpur, Purulia, South 24 paraganas ,Nadia ,Cooch Behar to be more prone towards child marriage ,the scenario being worst for Malda where there was demographic dominance of Muslims(51.32%) with poor literacy rate (40.9%) and high cross border trafficking with Bangladesh. Malda is reported to have the highest incidence of child marriage (45%) in the state and the second highest among rural women (50.52%).

Aim of the study

To develop awareness and mobilize people to combat the social curse of child marriage through participatory Communication using folk media in Malda

Objective of the study

To study the causative factors of Child Marriage in Malda

- To analyze the impact of early marriage on a girl child and the society as a whole
- To evaluate and find out tools and mechanisms to be used for sensitizing and mobilizing people to fight child marriage
- To evaluate the form of media that can be used as an educational and awareness tool.
- To analyze the acceptance of folk theatre shows and its utility in creating awareness.
- To enlighten the ignorant village children of their rights
- To identify contact personalities, helpline and support mechanism to the village children of Malda.

Research design and methods

30 villages, two in each of the fifteen blocks of Malda were selected as my area of research work. The work was done in close coordination with the District Social Welfare Department of Malda, UNICEF and a reputed NGO of Kolkata, Bangla natak.com. Surveys in the form of personal interviews and questionnaire were conducted among 3300 villagers to understand the causative factors and formulate an awareness campaign between July to November 2009. Folk forms of media viz. the Domini and Gambhira were chosen as the communication tool for creating the awareness and mobilization campaign which included regular workshops to train the Domini and Gambhira teams, interactive theatre shows, meetings with the adolescent girls, parents, SHG women, Aganwadi workers, ASHAs, Moulavis, Panchayat members, teachers, local NGO's and stakeholders at block and panchayat level like ADM, DSWO, BDO, BWO, ICDS, PRI, BMOH, SHG officers, ASHA, ANM, CEC, CDPO and FEO's.

Awareness campaign

(a) Preparatory Phase: Campaign Planning:

The project commenced with a rapid study of communication needs for promoting the value of girl child. Vulnerable gram panchayats and villages were identified by discussing with BDO and BWO and members of gram panchayats. Similar consultations were held with Aganwadi workers, members of self help group, various community based organizations like youth clubs, local organizations to finalize campaign route charts, identify local stakeholders for protecting rights of children. Overall plan was finalized in consultation with the District Social Welfare Officer. Effort was undertaken to understand the various causative factors to this social crime and the major findings were as follows –

- ✓ The patriarchal social system that justifies child marriage as a positive social norm with social and financial benefits
- ✓ Poverty/Increasing Unemployment and High Cost of living : When poverty is acute ,a young girl is considered to be an economic burden

- ✓ Illiteracy and lack of formal education which indirectly leads to immaturity and financial dependence of a child.
- ✓ Presumption of child marriage as the ultimate protection measure against premarital sex and loss of virginity
- ✓ Escalating demands of Dowry :The older the bride, the demand for dowry rises proportionately
- ✓ Ignorance and lack of adequate information and proper awareness about adverse effects of child marriage.

(b) Theatre based awareness Campaign

1. Capacity Building:

Fifteen workshops were held to train fifteen local theatre groups of Gambhira and Domni and local NGO teams.

Gambhira and Domini are folk dance theatres which owes its origin to the Hindu community of Malda in West Bengal. The characters of the dance represent puranic deities like Shiva, Parvati, Kali and are often accompanied by a big drum Dhak as its principle accompanying instrument. At present the main characters in the Gambhira are a maternal grandfather and his grandson. The performance is usually structured as a dialogue between them interspersed with songs, dances and jokes.

The groups were first sensitized on the issues of child rights and child marriage and then guided on developing theatre scripts on these themes. The local NGO's and folk groups enthusiastically participated in the awareness campaign.

The Gambhira and Domini teams were to aim at sensitizing villagers on –

- a. Legal age of the marriage(18 yrs for the girls and 21 yrs for the boys)
- b. Problems of early marriage
- c. Severe health problems like anemia
- d. Early pregnancy affecting the health of newborn and increased risks of mortality.

e.Vicious increase in poverty

f.Domestic Violence/sexual violence

g.Children rights and laws

h.Skill Development of girls

i.Names and contact details for different agencies working for prevention of child marriage

2. Street Theatre Shows:

In each block 10 theatre shows were held in market places, schools, near Panchayats, ICDS centre, Masjid, temples, Madrasas, clubs, sub centres etc. Folding exhibitions were put up at the site of the street theatre show depicting ill effects of child marriage and disseminating names and contact numbers of different agencies who may be contacted for preventing child marriage. The street theatres would be followed with audience interactions where villagers would be asked questions based on messages disseminated.

(c) Workshops with adolescent girls:

While theatre based activities helped to bring about attitudinal orientation, workshop and community meetings were conducted to sensitize and discuss the value of a girl child, various laws against early marriage, dowry, domestic violence, and monitoring system by health workers and routing discussions where they could share their problems and views etc. There were thirty such workshops held which were attended by school going as well as out of school girls, GP health supervisor, AWS and coordinator of DWSO. The objective of such workshops was to encourage and motivate school going as well as out of school students to take a leading role in sensitizing their peers.

(d) Community Meetings:

Community meetings were held to sensitize parents, family members, influential persons in the village, religious leaders and mobilize their participation in spreading awareness.⁷⁵ such meetings were held covering around 1500 villagers including SHG women, Anganwadi workers, ASHAs, Moulavis, Panchayat members, teachers, families of girl children and local NGO's .Detailed Discussions were held on problems of early marriage, schemes for skill development and education of girls and laws like child marriage restraint Act, Domestic violence Act and Dowry Prohibition act.

(e) Stakeholder consultation:

The feedback provided by the villagers on the factors leading to increased vulnerability of girls to early marriage and violation of their rights was shared with stakeholders at Block and

Panchayat level. The following meetings were held with participation of ADM, DSWO, Unicef and NGO partners, BDO, BWO, ICDS, PRI, BMOH, SHG Officer, ASHA, ANM, CEC, CDPO, FEO, Panchayat members etc. It was seen that various schemes like Kishore Shakti Yojna and Ballika Samridhi Yojna were not functional in the 30 villages covered by the project. It was observed that many SC and ST families were unable to avail of book grants facility either owing to lack of SC/ST certificates or lack of awareness. The problems identified by villagers regarding infrastructure, health and education facilities were also shared in block level consultation meetings.

Result

The awareness campaigns reached out to more than 3300 villagers in 30 villages across 15 blocks of Malda viz. Old Malda, English Bazar, Gazole, Ratua-II, Ratua –I, Bamongola, Habibpur, Kaliachak –I, Kaliachak –II, Kaliachak –III, Chanchol –I, Chanchol –II, Chanchol –III, Harishchandrapur –I, Harishchandrapur –II, Harishchandrapur –III and Manikchak. There were around 15 workshops held to train the Gambhira and Domini teams, 150 interactive theatre shows, 105 sensitization meetings with the adolescent girl child and parents. Average audience per show was 370 and included GP members, ICDS workers, SHG members, teachers, Club members, students, members of CBOS and families with girl children.

Altogether there were more than 173 girls who were mobilized to build awareness among their peers in the village on child rights and ill effects of child marriage. Following the workshop it was observed that the girls were seen to meet their peers in the village and share information on laws for protection of their rights on problems of early marriage, trafficking, rights of girl child and skill development. In at least four cases villagers were able to stop early marriage of girls in their village. Village girls, PRI members, SHG members were provided leadership. In some cases villages were taking care to check credentials before marrying off their daughters.

The following were the outcome of the project undertaken:

1. Improved awareness on problems of marriages, trafficking, rights of girl child and laws for her protection, opportunities for education and skill empowerment.
2. High acceptance of messages conveyed through dance dramas like Domini and Gambhira reflecting the high potential of folk forms to drive developmental messages to the rural villagers.
3. Development of local resources on promoting value of girl child. The various schools and even the local police station were seen to mobilize their resources to compose folk songs and dramas to create awareness among the people.

4.Sensitization of school going and out of school girls to avail schemes of Kishore Shakti Yojana, Balika Samriddhi yojna, grants for buying books for SC and ST girls. While parents were seen to approach panchayats to avail book grant facility for SC/ST girls, youth clubs and Gram Unnayan Samities in some villages were seen to monitor against early marriage.

5. Awareness of parents, grandparents and other members of families on the cost of child marriage on individual, families and societies at large.

6.The communication intervention led to participation of panchayat members, teachers, doctors, youth, SHG women, community based organizations(CBOs) ,religious leader etc. in making the village child marriage free ad reducing vulnerabilities to trafficking.

Observations

The following are some of the important observations made in the follow up meetings:-

- It was found that villagers at large are unaware of acts for prevention of domestic violence, schemes available etc. They were also not aware that trafficking takes place under the cover of marriage propositions to distant states where the poor parents are paid between Rs.10,000 -40,000/-
- Exposure to consumerism through television has led to an increase of elopement as young girls and boys are easily lured by materialistic promises.
- The villagers voiced the need for identifying contact points/helpline at block or lower level for strengthening law enforcement for prevention of trafficking and providing support services.
- There is a need to focus on strengthening implementation of the schemes for vocational skill development and education of drop out girls in these villages in order to achieve the target of eradicating early marriage. Drop out girls were interested in attending bridge courses and getting educated.

- There is a need to address strengthening infrastructure and health, education and other basic services in these villages to create an enabling environment for eradicating child marriage.

Conclusion

Child marriage is violation of Child Rights. It probably represents the worst possible form of sexual abuse and exploitation of a young girl. It can lead to deprivation and result in severe health risks of premature pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections like HIV/AIDS, decreased opportunity for education, isolation from family, lack of freedom to interact with peers and participate in community activities, bonded labourer or enslavement and commercial social exploitation. Child Marriage is therefore child abuse and its high time now when this prevalent traditional practice of the Rural Indian is abolished. However this is only possible when there is sufficient awareness and education of its drastic consequences.

Communication is an important key to social and cultural development of a Nation and the role of media in it cannot be overlooked. The diffusion studies since 1940's have established the phenomenon of diffusion of information to the receivers through interpersonal and mass communication channels. To overcome social curse as that of child marriage from rural India we need to make use of this basic theory of diffusion of information where we utilize not only the folk media to educate the ignorant, illiterate superstitious segment of rural people but equally use interpersonal communication skill to sensitize and mobilize people to participate voluntarily and bring end to child marriage in India.

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