

STRENGTHENING LIVES, SHIFTING BEHAVIOUR: THE UNIQUE MODEL OF ‘LOK PRASAR PRAKALPA’

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Abstract

Lok Prasar Prakalpa (LPP) is a flagship programme implemented by the Government of West Bengal in India to promote folk forms in the state and improve socio-economic conditions of folk artists. Its uniqueness lies in the innovative design of strengthening and involving a critical mass of folk artists enrolled in this programme to give key messages on development issues and promote behaviour change at the community level through Entertainment-Education (EE). These folk artists play a crucial role in reaching out to different communities with customised, language-dialect sensitive and context-specific social and behavioural change communication (SBCC) messages, including people in underserved areas and also people with low literacy levels. Within three years of implementation, the programme has yielded encouraging results. Certain programme features like monthly fees for enlisted folk artists, regular and quality-based enrolment, frequent capacity building, and appropriate socio-economic support have largely contributed to the success of the programme. UNICEF has also collaborated by extending technical support to the programme in certain areas like training of master trainers, content management, strategic and convergent planning and development of tools for monitoring and documentation. A major advantage of this model is that it is sustainable and easily replicable in other geographic areas with certain minimal necessary adaptations.

Everyone is using Folk Media – What’s so special about Lok Prasar Prakalpa?

The importance and effectiveness of folk media in communication for development have been recognised by researchers and development practitioners for ages. Using different folk forms and artists to bring in social and behaviour change among intended audience segments is not at all a new approach. So, what is distinctive about the government initiative in West Bengal, a state in India to involve folk artists to give messages on key development issues?

The uniqueness lies not in the approach but in the innovative and sustainable design of the process that socio-economically empowers folk artists as well as

strategically involves critical mass of these folk artists for behaviour change and demand generation at the community level through a government flagship programme called the Lok Prasar Prakalpa (LPP). This article explores the specific features and effectiveness of this unique model and also looks into the possibilities of its replication in other states and countries.

Interestingly, Lok Prasar Prakalpa was primarily launched not as a communication programme, but rather as an initiative to promote the rich folk heritage and provide livelihood support to the folk artists, so that they continue practising their traditional folk forms. This scheme was initiated in 2015 as a flagship programme by the Government of West Bengal under the Department of Information & Cultural Affairs (I&CA) to promote and revive diverse folk forms of West Bengal and improve socio-economic conditions of folk artists. Each folk artist enrolled in the scheme gets retainership fees and also regular income from public performances. As the enlisted folk artists started performing within the community for entertainment purposes, the opportunity of engaging them for reaching out to communities with key behaviour change messages through Entertainment-Education was immediately spotted. As a programme policy, the government started to engage the enrolled folk artists in public campaign programmes on key development issues.

With only around three years of implementation, this scheme has become a crucial instrument in the state of West Bengal for reaching out to grassroots-level stakeholders in different communities with customised and context-specific SBCC messages. This includes people in hard-to-reach and underserved areas and also people with low literacy levels. Since the folk forms are created from the social and cultural fabric of the community that the specific form belongs to, the symbols, expressions and metaphors are never alien to that audience segment. Hence, that messages communicated through the performances can be understood correctly in appropriate cultural context and in resonance with local knowledge. The folk artists being themselves members of the community are in close social and cultural proximity to the audience. So both the performer and the audience are part of the same organised and complex body of community knowledge and beliefs that inform their social behaviour and influence adoption of desired practices. The programme has also been beneficial in effectively reaching out to indigenous communities speaking different dialects within the same district because the performances are more language sensitive, culturally contextual, emotionally acceptable and better tuned to the way people of a particular indigenous community think. Also, the localisation through use of local art form, local dialect, locally relevant incidents and information helps in mobilising 'involved contact' with the audience who are stakeholders for bringing in desired changes.

What has worked? Key features of Lok Prasar Prakalpa

The state of West Bengal in India has a rich cultural heritage that comes alive in multiple folk art forms in the realm of music, dance, theatre, puppetry and the

visual arts. For ages, these tribal and rural art forms have played an important role in transmitting community wisdom through oral traditions, handing down social and cultural norms through generations and shaping collective identity of people. However, the breakdown of traditional social structures, growing urbanisation, explosion of new media, and lack of sufficient patronage have resulted in the erosion of livelihoods for performing folk artists. These factors have also pushed certain folk forms to near-extinction.

The Lok Prasar Prakalpa has been successful in addressing these challenges and uses the opportunity of effectively involving the folk artists in the social and behaviour change communication process through their performances. Let's quickly look at the programme features and specific factors that have contributed to the effectiveness of this initiative:-

Regular Enrolment through Audition Camps: Lok Prasar Prakalpa has mobilised the state's vast talent pool of folk performers and enrolled them through auditions that are conducted at regular intervals in each district. Lists of enrolled artists are prepared as per the folk forms and their area of residence. As a result, the programme has an updated list of competent artists, enlisted as per their geographical location and details of the genre they practice.

Quality Control during Enlistment: Though the programme aims to bring as many artists under the ambit of this scheme, quality control, based on the competency of the artists is very stringent. For example, in the enrolment camps done in August 2017, there were 290,634 applications from which only 110,000 artists (around 38%) have been enlisted.

Monthly Retainer Fees and Pension Support: In order to ensure economic sustainability of folk artists and encouraging them to carry on with their art form as their primary livelihood, the scheme provides monthly retainership fees and pension support to all enrolled artists as per their age. Enlisted folk artists within the age group of 18 to 60 years receive a monthly retainership of 1,000 INR (rupees) (US\$15) and assurance of a number of fixed performances which ensure additional fees of 1000 INR per day. Those above 60 years of age receive a monthly pension of 1000 INR.

Issue of Identity Cards: The Government of West Bengal has issued identity cards to the enlisted artists, which has helped them to establish their identity as an artist within the community and has given a strong boost to their confidence. The identity cards also come in handy if the artists have to travel in remote areas late at night because of performances and they are interrogated by police or local authority regarding their identity and reason of movement at late hours of the night.

Financial Inclusion and Social Security: In order to comply with proper e-governance mechanisms, bank accounts have been opened for every registered folk artist. Cash transfer is done in these bank accounts every month. While this ensures transparent and timely cash transfer, the bank accounts have to some extent fulfilled the requirement of the artists for financial inclusion. Artists are given basic guidance on the use of bank accounts. They are also gaining an understanding of

the other development schemes and programmes that they are eligible for and are accessing the available services.

Capacity Building for Improving Performances: Every year, the programme arranges for form-wise training of artists for improving their performances and address issues they are facing in their performances.

Investment by State: The investment by government in this programme is evident from the rapid increase in budget allocation from its year of inception. The allocation for the financial year (FY) 2015-16 has been around 50 crores (approximately US\$800,000) (1 crore = 10 million INR), which has increased to around 80 crores in FY 2016-17, 120 crores in FY 2017-18, and a projected 210 crores (approximately US\$33 million) in present FY 2018-19.

Key Challenges faced in implementation of Lok Prasar Prakalpa

This flagship programme of the I&CA Department, Government of West Bengal has played a critical role in organising and capacitating a critical mass of folk artists who can provide language and dialect-specific customised social and behaviour change messages across the state through local folk forms. The initiative that started as a folk art revival initiative has gone beyond its scope and evolved into a major resource for reaching out to communities with messages on critical issues like maternal and child health, immunisation, toilet construction and use, prevention of child marriage, and different government schemes. However, there are certain issues that are being faced during implementation of this programme and involving folk artists to spread messages on critical development issues. Some of the crucial challenges are:

Managing “Content” of Folk Performances: The challenge is related to the fact that most folk forms do not follow a pre-written script. Artists generally use traditionally existing content and also use on-the-spot improvisation. While this allows participation and enthusiasm of the audience, the risk of deviating from the correct message remains in such performances. The content is left to the interpretation and presentation by the folk artist. However, within the scope of delivering messages to promote certain desired behaviour and correct practices, ensuring correct and complete message delivery is critical. Hence content management becomes a crucial issue while delivering messages using folk performances.

Ensuring Reach-out to the Primary Stakeholder Segment: Folk performances are organised in spaces accessible to all members and stakeholder segments of the community. While this encourages community participation and dissemination of messages across the community, there is a chance that the primary stakeholder group, to whom the messages are addressed, might miss the shows. For example, if a folk performance promoting complete and timely immunisation of children is performed at a time during noon when most of the male members of the community

are out for occupational reasons, the opportunity of reaching the desired practice is missed. Often fathers and other male caregivers decide on immunisation and other health services for children, and they are one of the primary audience segments to whom the messages are directed.

It was observed during the first two years of implementation that district officials managing the programme focused only on performances but not on pre-performance planning and publicity to attract the intended group of audience. Hence, there were challenges in reaching out to the proper stakeholder segment and in expected numbers.

Lack of Appropriate Documentation and Systematic Monitoring: One of the major gaps at present is lack of regular and effective documentation as well as lack of systematic monitoring of every performance. Documentation is mostly looked at in terms of numbers – numbers of artists involved, numbers of venues, numbers of performances done in a district, etc. The objective of both documentation and monitoring at present is primarily to keep a check on the authenticity and quality of the performances and keeping evidence of these figures. Though certain initiatives have been taken to document the results and also analysis impact of the performances, they have largely remained as sporadic interventions rather than evolving into a systematic method that is an integral part of the programme.

Addressing certain issues – collaboration with UNICEF

UNICEF, as a key development partner in the state of West Bengal, partners with different government departments and civil society organisations to ensure that policies, practices, programmes, public opinion and social norms advance the rights of children and adolescents in the State. As a part of this objective, the UNICEF Office for West Bengal focuses in supporting and strengthening communication interventions at different levels to attain better results in the areas of child survival, development, protection, and participation. Looking at the potential of Lok Prasar Prakalpa to bring in sustained behaviour changes that can positively affect lives of children, UNICEF partnered with the I&CA Department to provide technical support to certain aspects of the programme. These supports include:

Capacity Building of Folk Artists through Training of Trainers (TOT): This includes training around 1800 district based Master Trainers among LPP artists across the State. The training focus on basics of SBCC, how folk performances can be used to bring in sustained behaviour change within an audience, and importance of correct and complete message delivery. The Master trainers, after receiving this TOT, further train fellow artists in a cascading mode, so that every artist in a district has the required basic understanding of how to effectively apply their performances for SBCC.

Facilitating Content-development Processes: Appropriate content with correct messages is one of the key requirements for strategic implementation of this programme. UNICEF has been facilitating and providing technical support in

content-development workshops. In these workshops, folk artists are oriented to key SBCC messages on specific issues. Based on the orientation and the given messages, the artists create content for their performances and get them technically approved by district authorities.

Supporting Strategic Planning at District Level: In order to reach out to the intended group of audience segments, it is imperative that district officials not only focus on the planning of performances and distribution of artists but also on pre-performance planning and publicity. UNICEF has supported district officials in select districts to plan performances on convergent programmes prepare monthly performance calendar, prioritising issues, and finalise/approve messages for the performances and also organising pre-performance publicity.

Preparing Monitoring and Documentation Tools and Demonstrating Their Use: Very simple tools for monitoring, documentation and exit interviews of the audience have been developed, and their use demonstrated in select performances and districts. Impact of these performances has been monitored through exit interviews after performances. Two dip-stick assessments were done in intervention areas of diarrhoea management and toilet construction to assess knowledge, perception, retention of messages and call to action.

Facilitating Convergent Planning and Resource Sharing between Relevant Departments: Multiple government departments and agencies are involved in issues like child development, adolescent empowerment and participation, promoting hygiene, toilet use and water safety, etc. In select districts, UNICEF has encouraged integrated planning of campaigns with common messages among different programmes and departments using the same folk performances with appropriate sharing of resources.

Results so Far...

Lok Prasar Prakalpa is being implemented in West Bengal for around three years. The programme has been immensely successful in the socio-economic empowerment of folk artists and revival of many dying folk forms in West Bengal. In the context of its impact to bring in desired social and behaviour change, it is quite early to do a complete evaluation of the programme, since it is a complex, dynamic and time-taking process. However, certain results have been observed that substantiate its positive results.

One of the greatest strengths of this programme is continuous development and strengthening of a critical mass of folk artists who can provide language/dialect-specific customised messages through local folk forms. Numbers of enrolled folk artists have increased from 65,000 to 194,300 within a span of two and half years. In the financial year 2017-18 these registered folk-artists have been involved in more than three lakh (300,000) performances to convey key SBCC messages using more than 79 folk forms. The rapid increase in numbers of enrolled artists and diversity of folk forms performed is giving more choice for programme officials to plan and

intervene with more tailored SBCC interventions with the specific community-centred design.

Continuous performances in specific geographical areas have resulted in increased knowledge and more involved community dialogue after the performances. The focus of these performances has been issues like institutional delivery, toilet construction and use, diarrhoea management, and child marriage in districts like Malda, Murshidabad and Purulia. This is evident from the increased visibility of the issues and recall of messages among intended stakeholder groups, as documented in the exit interviews and dip-stick assessments.

Improved service uptake has been observed in the above-mentioned areas especially for issues like institutional delivery, toilet construction, kanyashree prakalpa (scheme to prevent child marriage and encourage retention of girls in the education system). Though this improved service uptake cannot be attributed completely as result of folk performances, the performances definitely have a role to play a major part of overall campaigns.

Another significant result that was not anticipated during the initiation of the programme is the empowerment of many folk artists as barefoot community volunteers and messengers within the community that they belong to. The artists, empowered with the basic knowledge of flagship programmes and the motivation to spread the messages, act as volunteers and the community's own points of communication who can listen, share knowledge, build trust and, if required, do informal referrals and linkages with the relevant service providers.

Tracing the steps: Sustainability and possibility of replicating this Model

A major advantage of this model of involving folk artists is that it is designed in a way that makes the process sustainable. This not only addresses livelihood and other socio-economic issues of folk artists but links them to the major scope of involving them for demand generation and behaviour change related to key development issues.

While there is a considerable budgetary investment from the government department, the structure also allows sharing the cost with other relevant line departments. For example, when the enlisted folk artists are involved in giving messages on diarrhea management or in a campaign to promote institutional delivery, the performance fees and transport are provided by the Department of Health and Family Welfare, while the I&CA Department pays for the regular retainership fees of the artists. This gives a forum for resource sharing and convergent planning between the different departments.

The programme also encourages convergence and integrated planning of communication interventions at the field level, where relevant departments come together to plan and give away messages. For example, messages on maternal

and on early childhood nutrition, care and immunisation are planned and given through the same performances, though the issues involve interventions by multiple departments.

Another interesting factor is that the programme structure becomes more organic and sustainable because of local artists performing the shows close to areas that they belong to. The audience can identify readily with the performance, and get more involved in the dialogue following the performance. The performances also help to create a sense of identity and community trust building which in turn can create an environment of acceptance and better participation in further interventions.

Every developing country has a rich heritage of folk art and in many cases; the artists face similar challenges to continue with their folk forms as sources of their livelihood. This challenge can be turned into an opportunity by involving them to physically reach out to the targeted communities irrespective of age, gender and levels of education; especially in media dark areas. The structure of the scheme is quite simple, and the investments are not context-specific. With certain minimal necessary adaptations, this model can be easily replicated in other states and countries to create successful and localised channels of demand generation and behaviour change within the community.

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