

DOORDARSHAN AMONG THE FARMERS



In this blog, G Sajan recollects his personal experiences apropos a few experiments which were conducted by Doordarshan to make some small changes in re-designing the concept of public service broadcasting.

When I joined Doordarshan in the early 1980s, television was in its infancy in India. I was doing my post-graduation in Agriculture Extension at the Kerala Agricultural University when the national broadcaster – Doordarshan – invited agriculture graduates to be a part of the emerging visual language creation in the country. I found this to be an interesting opportunity to work in a new and emerging field of communication. Those were exciting times for any agriculture extension personnel joining television since the creation of the massive infrastructure for terrestrial television transmission was justified in the name of farmers and others in rural India, and to strengthen the concept called ‘development communication’.



In 1985, the year in which regional television commenced telecasting, Kerala had a unique history and practice of agriculture communication through various media channels. Daily programmes in All India Radio titled ‘Vayalum Veedum’ (Field and House) was very popular and close to the hearts of farmers. Along with that, major Malayalam dailies set apart a page for Agricultural news and articles every week. Even reputed cultural magazines like ‘Mathrubhumi’ devoted some space for articles on agriculture. As pointed out by Mr R Haly, the doyen of agriculture communication in Kerala, there was no other state that has been publishing this much content to strengthen agriculture in the state. Along with that there were about 1000 Krishi Bhawans in the state, namely one *Krishi Bhawan* for each panchayat. Such an extensive extension system was quite unique in the country.

So when Doordarshan commenced telecast of agriculture programmes in 1985, we were forced to reconsider our options regarding the role of television in complementing the existing network of parallel extension services. We took tentative steps to make our presence felt in a simple but substantial manner. To start with, we went around the state meeting farmers in various eco geographical zones talking to them.

“It is all just meaningless promises. No one actually cares about us,” said the farmers. “Everyone says that we are the producers of food and are as important as the soldiers who guard the borders of the country. But in reality we are not given any consideration by anyone.” They asked us a simple question: “See, all of us are talking about the role of agriculture in nation building. But why is it that there is no respect for farmers?” We were taken aback by the sincerity of their question. But we had no answer to give them.

Yet this question made us think about the existing patterns of extension methodologies.

Agriculture in Kerala was quite unique as compared to other parts of the country. The farm economy was dominated by cash crops. The area under food crops, especially paddy, had declined considerably. Holdings were fragmented especially after the much acclaimed land reforms. There are diverse agro ecological zones in the coastal belt, western ghats and the midlands. Problems faced by the farmers included price crash of farm commodities, ever increasing cost of cultivation, and various other socio economic and technological problems. The inability to compete in global markets for many export-oriented farm produce created more concerns.

Despite the wide network of extension systems, adoption of technologies was just 30 percent as shown by a study conducted by the Kerala Agricultural University. We thought that there was a need to revisit the concept of development communication. The existing extension system was top down, uni-directional and also technology driven. In most of the programmes the experts talked down to the farmers. Most of the discussions centred around technological solutions. The politics of farming was never discussed. The new paradigm had to ensure that the content and presentation has to undergo major changes. The new era of developmental communication has to have more respect for the viewer. It needed to be a two-way affair with a lot of give and take.



To start with we tried to reverse the existing top down mode of communication. As part of this, we initiated in 1988 a new series to introduce the most innovative farmers in the state in a programme titled ‘Noorumeniyude Koythukhaar’ which can be broadly translated as ‘Harvesters of a Hundredfold’ a term that was coined based on a popular Malayalam phrase. The show was anchored by Mr R Haly who, at that time, had just retired as the Director of the State Department of Agriculture. We identified 12 farmers representing different agro climatic zones and did a travelogue visiting their farms and interacting with them. Here instead of the experts talking, the farmers talked and the expert listened.

The ideas and opinions that emerged from these interactions were quite eye opening. Farmers narrated their experiences with regard to farming, problems of available technologies, and constraints in the markets. They described the various practices that they had developed in the field. These conversations brought out a lot of hitherto unknown facets of Kerala's agriculture.

The series also helped change the attention given towards the status of the farming community, and also the role of innovative individual farmers. The farmers were actually practising scientists and each day brought out a new find that could change the methods prevalent in daily farming. The programme was a tribute to the 'Farmer First' concept that was being evolved at that time by Robert Chambers in European universities.

The newfound attention towards individual farmers initiated a series of awards for the most innovative farmers in Kerala. *Malayala Manorama*, a prominent Malayalam daily, instituted a one lakh award for the best farmer titled '*Karshakashree*'. The state government came up with a stream of awards for various types of innovative farmers. There was a time when the maximum money awarded was in the field of agriculture.

In another experiment we tried to bring the ecological debate into farm programmes. Kerala has a strong history of environment movements such as the Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad, which spearheaded the movement against the Silent Valley Hydroelectric Project. Due to better awareness about nature, development projects were being re-examined from the angle of environmental impact. The sustainability question in development discourse was coming up with diverse points of view. In the



background of this debate, we introduced a series titled '*Mannum Manushyanum*' ('Man and Earth' in 1991, which looked at various developmental issues from an ecological point of view. We tried to address issues of sand mining in rivers, problems created by brick kilns in paddy fields, water management, tribal settlements, etc. Looking back I feel happy that some of the present day ecological concerns were carefully analysed in the early nineties.

The media landscape changed substantially in the mid-1990s.

With the arrival of cable and satellite channels visual culture leaned towards more commercial tastes – critically submerging the developmental and public service demands in communication. Commercial television was mostly entertainment driven and it had fascinated millions of viewers. Doordarshan found some time to regain the trust of viewers and to redesign its oeuvre to better suit the livelihood needs of society.

New programme designs came up in commercial television. In the early 2000s reality shows were the in thing. There were reality shows to select the best singers, dancers, chefs, and even brides! We then came up with a challenging idea of a new genre called a Social Reality show, which was an innovative interpretation of a popular commercial genre for developmental communication.



We proposed to have a reality show titled 'Green Kerala Express' to select the best panchayat in Kerala. Kerala which had about 1000 Local Self Governments including Grama Panchayaths, Municipalities and City Corporations, had unleashed a new scheme called the Peoples' Plan in the late 1990s by earmarking about 36 percent of the total plan fund for the three tier Panchayat system. This decentralisation campaign strengthened local democracy and created a lot of innovative ideas in various developmental fields. We wanted to encourage these panchayats, and thus bring into focus some of the interesting projects that they had implemented.



About 250 Local Self Governments (LSGs) responded to our advertisements and they were asked to present a few unique developmental models on any field which they had implemented in their panchayats. Short films were made on these ideas which were presented to the jury in a studio, and a team from each LSG interacted with the jury based on which they were given marks. The jury consisted of experts in the field of sustainable development, economics, farming and women's empowerment. The best panchayat would get one crore rupees as the prize money.

This unique show was produced by Doordarshan, CDIT (Centre for Development of Imaging Technology) and The State Sanitation Mission. The programme got the Prime Minister's award for innovative media experiments. This was in 2010.

A similar show titled '*Ini Njangal Parayaam*' (Now we will speak') was organised to select the best block level unit of *Kudumbashree*, which is the largest network of women cooperatives in Kerala in 2013. Both these programmes are partially available on YouTube.



Social reality shows attracted a lot of national and international attention. Green Kerala Express was unique in that it redesigned a very popular television genre for development and social communication. This was also an attempt at a paradigm shift, not just in reversing the existing top-down communication model, but also in interpreting the mode of governance. It was a media experiment in which developmental models are socially audited on a media platform. There were also elements of peer learning and showcasing of replicable models and good practices. Most of the panchayats presented sustainable development models and the ensuing debates opened up fresh debates on climate change, sustainability, and locally adaptable technologies that mostly use renewable energy.

In 2018 while working with the DD Kisan channel I produced a farm reality show to select the best woman farmer in India. The show was titled 'Mahila Kisan Awards 2019'. The show can be accessed on YouTube if you search for Mahila Kisan Puraskar by Doordarshan.



At a time when the private media channels were full of negative stories, Kerala started hearing about people who work at the grassroots level trying to make small but consequential changes in the life of ordinary people. It was an alternative narrative raising the voices of silent people, bringing out unnoticed local initiatives, thus kindling hope about the future.

The principle of subsidiarity is an integral part of the decentralisation experiment which states that whatever possible at each level be done at that level itself. In many development sectors such as water and land management, sanitation, environment, health, energy, education, and social welfare this principle can play an important role. In the unique case of Kudumbashree which is the largest women's self-help network in Asia that has taken up major projects to improve food security and women empowerment, this is an important principle.

Doordarshan programmes helped to create a better understanding on the process of rethinking about governance. In Kerala, which is extremely fragile in ecological terms, farming and related activities have to be integral to the rural development process. These shows were quite helpful in offering a different perspective.



I have just narrated a few experiments on developmental communication which has made some perceptible changes in the rural scenario of Kerala. I have not gone into the details. But I feel that these experiments could trigger some further thinking on the need for redesigning our information framework for developmental needs in the changing media landscape of India. It should also be helpful for understanding public service broadcasting in a better light. It may also help in creating regulatory guidelines so that private media channels ensure some amount of mandatory public service content in their overall programming.

After joining Doordarshan with a Degree in Agriculture, G. Sajan has been with the public broadcaster of India for more than three and a half decades. He has worked across the geographical diversity of the country serving in Bangalore, Shillong, Port Blair, Delhi along with a substantial part of his tenure at Thiruvananthapuram. He has been instrumental in designing innovative developmental programmes like Green Kerala Express, Ini Njangal Parayam (Now I Speak), Mahila Kisan Puraskar 2018 all variants of Social and Farm Reality Shows along with documentaries and features on various themes on science and technology. He is a writer, columnist and speaker. He is currently in charge of publication with KSSP (Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishath) India's largest science popularisation movement. He can be contacted at sajangopalan@gmail.com

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