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NEW MEDIA AND PEOPLE’S EMPOWERMENT
The Second Public Affairs Lecture 2002

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The views expressed in this lecture are of Dr. Mallika Sarabhai.
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Dr. Mallika Sarabhai

Friends,

I come from having spent four very deeply disturbing days in Ahmedabad. The troubling part is not just the violence. We have seen violence. But what we are seeing today in Gujarat is the use of technology and communications for the indoctrination of hate. The Gujarati psyche today is one that says that we'll only rest when the last Muslim leaves this state. And this is a result of the tremendously successful communication strategy of the RSS and the VHP over a 15-year period. Against this background, the work that we are trying to do, and what I hope to share with you this evening, takes on a particular poignancy.

I was a young child when my father (Vikram Sarabhai) first brought television to India. At that time ISRO was just created or being created. He felt that if a country like India had to leapfrog rather than follow the very slow process of reinventing the wheel, we would have to re-think technology. We would need technology that could skip a century so that we could catch up with the developed countries without having to walk every footstep. I remember, an absolutely thrilling moment, it must be in 1968, when the first five hundred black & white television sets were switched on in 500 villages in Khera, in what has gone down in television history as the SITE experiment. I clearly remember the absolute wonder on the faces of these farmers who were seeing themselves on television and talking back to themselves. This was the space instructional television experiment, conducted by ISRO. Today we may have forgotten, as many of us probably were born after television came in, the sheer wonder and
magic of television. Unfortunately my father died very soon after this launch. And what should have become a key to the rapid growth of education in the country became Doordarshan. And what Doordarshan has become, I think, is history. For many years after that television remained Doordarshan. It was only in the 1990’s with the satellite revolution, that we got an alternative to state sponsored television.

Is instructive communication a new concept for us? Quite the contrary. Let us look back into our historical records of over 3000-4000 years ago. Whether it was classical arts, sculpture, story telling, dance, or music, it is clear that these were all languages to educate. They were not entertainment media. Perhaps in those days spiritual education and values was the central theme that needed to be communicated to the people. All our arts, even today, talk on those lines. The bible of dance in India is the Natyashastra. You have 1100 pages of rules: how to communicate, how to use the fingers, how to use an eye. But at the end of the 1100 pages, Bharata Muni, the apparent writer of Natyashastra, says: these are only tools that you must use to communicate what you want to do. This creative freedom was given to us at least 2000 years ago. And for the next 2000 years we have kept a means of communication more or less frozen. So today what a classical dancer performs or what a sculpture etches remains frozen in that period. Society has changed drastically. Today the central theme can no longer be just the passing on the value-based stories of the Vedas or the Ramayana. We need to bring in modern situations and communication techniques. It always seemed very obvious to me that the arts - and by definition the arts represented either through radio or Films or later through television - was a very significant factor in communicating ideas.

In 1963, I witnessed for the first time the power of live art and its long ranging impact. My mother (Mrinalini Sarabhai) was learning Gujarati, and used to read the newspapers for practice. She started noticing that the newspapers had many reports on the unnatural deaths
of young brides in Saurashtra. This made her curious and she researched the matter. The result of this was a dance drama called "Memory is a Ragged Fragment of Eternity", dealing with the issue of the isolation of a bride in her new family. The piece was inaugurated at a conference where Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru was the chief guest. After the performance he asked my mother: "Mrinal, what are you talking about?" And that was when the first inquiry into what later came to be known as 'dowry deaths' was instituted. One dance drama did that. Till then, there was little knowledge of this phenomenon which continues to this day and had taken on the proportions of genocide.

I grew up straddling the world between the arts and science. But for me perhaps the turning point came with Peter Brook's international version of the Mahabharatha where I played Draupadi. At that time a new wave of feminism was gripping the mind of the younger generation in the west. And for the first time young women were looking into feminist thought and ideology. And performing in over 20 countries over a five-year period, I realised that live art was a radical way of touching hearts. I had women of different backgrounds, black mamas from Harlem, sophisticated Sorbonne graduates, aboriginal women from the Australian outbacks – coming up to me and saying ‘why don’t we have role models like Draupadi today? She makes sense to us.’ One evening in the Paris Metro two slinkily dressed women came up to me and said, ‘we have stayed away from the feminist movement, things like ‘bra burning’. But today, after seeing your performance, we feel that is the kind of woman we want to be.’

I came out of the Mahabharata tour with a new perspective toward my art. I felt that if the role of one woman affected women across cultures then my advocacy and my performance had to marry. In my performance, I had the strongest tool of advocacy that I could use. My performing career at that stage took a definite turn towards creating
issue based performance pieces. In ancient Indian tradition, dance, music and theatre were not separate forms, exclusive of each other. It was sangeetha (music), everything was one art. It was a complete theatre experience that the west reinvented centuries later.

My second or third piece was ‘Sita’s Daughters’. This dance drama was a direct result of my interaction with NGOs working on gender issues. In ‘Shakti’, that is the power of women, I had looked at the patriarchal definition of what a woman is. By this definition anything that was woman became ‘not man’. The piece was in English. Many women’s organizations felt that this piece should be translated in Hindi and taken to the villages. But I felt that concept catered to an urban audience and would not strike an answering cord with women in rural areas and slums. I felt I should create a new piece for them, and not a translation. I wrote to the five largest women’s organizations in the country asking them to list the ten most pressing issues concerning women that needed to be communicated to our society. The response lists had a lot in common. I selected an issue that I thought was not verbose. Issues like property rights require a lot of verbal information to be conveyed. What was needed was communicating an attitude change, not information.

‘Sita’s Daughters’ is about how mythology is interpreted to suppress women in this country. “Beta Sita jaise ho, Beta Savithri jaise ho” (Daughter, be like Sita, be like Savithri). In 1991, Sita was my choice as at that time the Babri Masjid issue was beginning to boil and the Ram wave had just started. I interpreted the Ramayana from Sita’s point of view at the time when she is asking earth to take her back. From then on I depicted issues like female foeticide, rape and how established judiciary views rape, the ‘Chipko movement’ and women involved in development activities. I read transcripts of close to a thousand rape cases, given to me by women’s groups, who were counselling rape victims. This insight helped me in creating an apocryphal, not a typical rape victim. During the first few shows I performed, the VHP
threatened to burn down the theatre. Other fundamentalist forces used to stone my car. And I said to myself, 'I must have got it right'. Today it is 10 years since my first performance of 'Sita’s Daughters' and I have done over 350 shows in 40 countries. It has been made compulsory viewing for all the SAARC judges as part of their general sensitization programme when they join the supreme force. It is also compulsory viewing for all cadets graduating as police officers from Mussourie. Two years ago the Judiciary in Maharashtra invited me to perform 'Sita’s Daughters' for 400 district judges. They felt that this 90 minutes performance summed up everything that they wanted to transmit about gender sensitization.

'Sita’s Daughters' has a song that I wrote which became my daughter’s lullaby. I was pregnant with my daughter when I was working on this theme. Basically I was talking to my daughter telling her that it is a rotten world out there with people who will try to limit you, demoralise you, and even destroy you. But let me tell you a secret. The secret is that things are changing. The secret is that we have taken charge. They may not know it yet, but its true. So pass this secret to every little girl. After my first performance of this show in Ahmedabad, at 6 o’clock the next morning a couple came to see me. Since it was too early for me to meet them I asked them to leave a note so I could get in touch later. They left a letter for me that really touched me. The husband was an army officer who was posted at Ahmedabad. The letter said that they were at my show last night and it helped them to see things differently. They have two girl children. For seven years they had been unhappy about not having sons and worrying about arranging dowries for their daughters. All the friction between the couple concerned the misfortune of having only daughters. But my show they said made them sit up and think for the first time. They wanted a script of the lullaby, because now they had taken an oath to bring up their daughters with confidence to face a hostile world.
The song now has been translated into 14 Indian languages and a school anthem in some educational institutions. So this is working. But then what next? How do I multiply the effort? How do I reach a larger group? That is how Darpana for Development was born. It is a communication agency that works with government organizations and NGOs to communicate their social messages. Do you want to talk about a smokeless ‘choolah’ (charcoal stove)? Fine, come to us. We will create your message for you with art. Tell us what your message is, who your target audience is, and we will create a performance piece. It might be contemporary, it might use television, it might use videos, or it could be folk theatre. The artists in the academy are committed to the cause of development and also know the pulse of their audience. The next step was making the transition from a personal performer to training groups in the community to go out and become artist-activist.

For seven years in Banaskanta in Gujarat, our organization has been running a programme with the tribals. We have trained a group of tribals from there to become actor-activists. They act out female empowerment by showing women making decisions and having control over their reproductive cycle. Simultaneously we decided to have an independent research team monitoring primary health centres to learn about figures on family planning interventions, collecting data on the number of girls in different age groups attending school. Our method of advocacy proved to be a big success. The next step was creating groups that went into the community, and offering them to NGOs across the country. Here is a pilot, and this is how you can use it.

But there still was something missing. How to use technology? And that was when the idea of ‘TARA’ was born in the year 2000. It was an idea that had to be born because there were an increasing number of NGOs doing good work but were limited to tiny islands with very little communication. India, I thought, was running out of time. ‘TARA’ was launched with the specific mission of being a channel for
empowerment, that was using the technology. It was fun, it was proactive. It was not the jholawala stereotype of a NGO worker: khadi clad, unkempt, with the proverbial jhola slung on his/her shoulder. ‘TARA’ aimed at using every aspect of the medium with a mission of communicating issues that had social relevance.

One of our first campaigns was the Ahmedabad civic election. We felt that in most cases voters made a completely uninformed choice. We approached all the contenders who were standing for the 100 posts. And, for the first time, we showed the voters every single candidate in their constituency. We asked all the candidates the same standard questions and basically threw them to the lions. At the rallies the star speakers of the BJP were not the ones that were allowed to woo the voters. It was the person who was standing from that particular ward who had to speak. The result: for the first time in 17 years the BJP could not win the Ahmedabad Municipal elections. And the blame fell squarely on Tara.

Our next expose was on alcohol. I am not sure how many of you know that Gujarat is the only state which has prohibition since Independence. It is also the state where Shaw Wallace and several other liquor companies sell the most number of bottles every year. TARA was able to show how the biggest illicit brewery in Gujarat was working. We captured on camera a woman taking a bundle of cash from a hand coming out from a police jeep. When this was aired on TARA it created total pandemonium. This kind of investigative journalism was happening here for the first time. We started getting phone calls saying ‘Mallika ben, we have this brewery next door, the police can’t stop it, the politicians can’t stop it, please send the TARA team’. Our office was flooded with information on all the corrupt activities going round the city. Even an MP sent me a whole file of evidence saying that the party whip has told him to shut up. But he was passing on the information to me hoping that I would be able to do something about it. Everyone started sending us tip offs. Suddenly people seemed to have somebody to turn to.
One interesting lead was given to us by a young girl that helped us bust a prostitution racket. This was really cloak and dagger stuff where we broke this racket that was going on in the name of an employment agency. The chief structural contractor of the Gujarat government and a retired DSP were running the operation. On the appointed day our team, with its hidden camera stood underneath the house of the client the girl went to meet. We kept passing on messages to the police till the police raided the place. Both the retired police officer and the structural builder are still missing. We were quite successful with our investigative stories.

Simultaneously, I started looking at how we could use fiction, music videos, quiz shows, etc. to push the same agenda. And last year, after great difficulty, the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Department of Adult Literacy agreed. If you wanted to talk about literacy to people who were functionally literate or illiterate you have to do it in a fashion that appeals to them. That is half the battle won. So I got permission from them to make music videos on specific themes. The themes I was asked to work on were functional literacy, literacy for children, why you should use a bank, why you should use computers, why you should vote; and women’s empowerment. Within the music videos we have used different kinds of formats. These will go on air on Doordarshan as half-hour stand-alone episodes. You will be seeing two music videos on functional literacy and electoral reforms. Since Public Affairs Centre (PAC) works in the field of electoral reforms I am showing this music video* we have made on why you should vote. We have used different techniques like a ‘Sutradhar’ (narrator) narrating why people should vote or study. We also went to one of the most famous lyricists in Gujarat, who writes for movies and television. We felt that if we had to get the message across to the people we would need catchy tunes. People should find the tune

* Dr. Sarabhai played the video in the course of her lecture and explained the contents to the audience.
hummable. The text can reach their conscience later. Positive lyrics will have a positive effect. We also went to rock musicians. Our gender issue videos are evocative and theatrical. The election videos are fun. The literacy ones have cartoons and other visual appeals.

The results that we have seen are very encouraging. I would like to reemphasize that the time has come for us to upscale our efforts. Because the other side—the oppressors, exploiters, violators—have upscaled their efforts. They are using the mass media, technology and whatever available means for their purpose. And today NGOs, government organizations that care, smaller institutions should come together in using technology and resources. Through technology you can get across to anything between eight hundred to eight million households instantly. If you refuse to recognize this fact we will never be able to do justice to the good work that is being done in this country.

I would be very happy to answer any questions and I would be even happier if any of you comes to me and says I would like to work for you.

Thank you.
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