A Community Case Study of the Effects of a Radio Soap Opera on Gender Equality, Family Size, and Individual/Collective Efficacy in India*

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Abstract

The present case-study investigates the effects of a highly popular entertainment-education soap opera, "Tinka Tinka Sukh" (Happiness Lies in Small Things), designed to promote gender equality, family planning, and individual/collective efficacy, on a village community in India. The case study involved data-gathering in unstructured personal interviews, focus group interviews, participant observation, and examination of archival records. It allowed the present authors to understand the context of the radio program's reception, including the role of key opinion leaders in engendering strong audience effects.
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The present case-study investigates the effects of a highly popular entertainment-education soap opera, “Tinka Tinka Sukh” (Happiness Lies in Small Things), designed to promote gender equality, family planning, and individual/collective efficacy, on a village community in India. A case study is a descriptive type of research undertaking in which individuals, groups, or systems are interviewed or observed, or various types of archival records are examined, to search for underlying patterns and insights into a phenomena (Williams, Rice, & Rogers, 1988). Case-studies are especially valuable, when the phenomena under study are contemporary and not under the control of the researcher, yet there is a desire to answer “how”, “why”, or “when” questions (Yin, 1984). Previously, communication researchers have mainly utilized quantitative methods to determine whether or not entertainment-education interventions had educational effects. In the late 1990s, when the main question shifted to how entertainment-education had effects, we looked for an opportunity to conduct a case-study.

The opportunity presented itself in Village Lutsaan of India, where the entertainment-education radio soap opera "Tinka Tinka Sukh" engendered strong audience effects. The case study involved data-gathering in unstructured personal interviews, focus group interviews, participant observation, and examination of archival records. It allowed the present authors to understand the context of the radio program's
reception, including the role of key opinion leaders in engendering strong audience effects (Papa et al., 1998).

One of the disadvantages of the case study approach is that the resulting data require more time and skill to analyze. When the data are expressed as verbal impressions rather than in number form, they are more difficult to reduce in the process of data-analysis. Also, results of a case study are not generalizable to a larger population, which may not be a problem when the main purpose is to gain insight about a phenomena, rather than to generalize the results.

The Poster-Letter

In December, 1996, a colorful 21-inch by 27-inch poster-letter-manifesto with the signatures and thumb-prints of 184 villagers, was mailed to All India Radio in New Delhi, then broadcasting an entertainment-education soap opera "Tinka Tinka Sukh" (Happiness Lies in Small Things). The poster-letter came from a village named Lutsaan in India’s Uttar Pradesh State and was initiated by the village tailor, Birendra Singh Khushwaha. It stated: "Listening to "Tinka Tinka Sukh" has benefited all listeners of our village, especially the women....Listeners of our village now actively oppose the practice of dowry -- they neither give nor receive dowry." This unusual letter was forwarded to the present authors by Usha Bhasin, the radio program's director and executive producer at AIR.

We were intrigued and visited Village Lutsaan. The poster-letter suggested that strong effects of "Tinka Tinka Sukh" had occurred in this village. We wondered whether or not the villagers had been able to actually change dowry behavior, a practice deeply ingrained in Indian culture. We thought that the study of these effects in Lutsaan might
help us to understand the process through which entertainment can change audience behavior.

Some months later, in August, 1997, when we approached Lutsaan on the road from Aligarh, the nearest city, we noticed that the village rises some 90 feet above the surrounding Gangetic Plain. Most of the village's approximately 1,000 homes are located on the sides of a small hillock, topped by an ancient fort. The adobe homes neighbor in a dense manner. The population of Lutsaan is about 6,000. A few homes, including those of the pradhan (village chief) and the tailor, are located on the main road, a short distance from the village center. Numerous narrow paths meander among the mud houses. Buffalo are everywhere, and the smell of dung pervades the village. Fertile, flat fields surround Lutsaan, and its farmers travel out to work on them each day.

On arriving in the village, we met first with the pradhan, who described the village as relatively well-off, with 60 radios, 5 television sets, and 10 tractors. Nearly every household owns a bicycle and 25 households possess a motorcycle. Lutsaan has two village schools that offer eight years of education. The ratio of boys to girls in these schools was 90:10, but changed to 50:50 in the past year, in part due to the effects of "Tinka Tinka Sukh."

The village has a Shyam Club (named after the Hindu God Krishna) with about 50 active members. It carries out various self-development activities, including village clean-up, fixing broken waterpumps, and reducing religious and caste tensions in the village. The village postmaster, Om Prakash Sharma (called "Bapu", or respected father, by the villagers) is chair of the Club. He told us that when an interpersonal conflict occurred recently, members of the Shyam Club met with the disputants until a solution was
mediated. In 1996-1997, stimulated by "Tinka Tinka Sukh," the Shyam Club devoted its main attention to such gender equality issues as encouraging girl children to attend school, and opposing child marriage and dowry.

The plot of "Tinka Tinka Sukh" centered around the daily lives of a dozen main characters in Navgaon (New Village), who provided positive and negative role-models to audience individuals for the educational issues of family planning, female equality, and HIV prevention. Shyam Club members told us that the Navgaon village in "Tinka Tinka Sukh" was much like their own village, progressive but yet traditional, and with a cast of characters much like the ones portrayed in the radio soap opera.

Listeners to the radio soap opera in Lutsaan said they were “emotionally-stirred” by Poonam’s character in “Tinka Tinka Sukh”. Poonam, a young bride, is beaten and verbally abused by her husband and in-laws for not providing an adequate dowry, the payment by a bride's parents to the groom's parents, in whose home she lives after marriage. In recent decades, dowry payments in India became exorbitant, usually including cash or gold, a television set, or a refrigerator. If the dowry payments are inadequate, the bride may be mistreated by the husband's family. In extreme cases, the bride is burned to death in a kitchen "accident," called a "dowry death". In the radio soap opera, Poonam was humiliated and sent back to her parents after incorrectly being accused by her in-laws of infidelity to her husband. In desperation, she commits suicide. Lutsaan’s poster-letter noted: "It is a curse that for the sake of dowry, innocent women are compelled to commit suicide. Worse still....women are murdered for not bringing dowry. The education we got from 'Tinka Tinka Sukh', particularly on dowry is significant....People who think
 differently about dowry will be reformed; those who practice dowry will see the right way and why they must change."

"Tinka Tinka Sukh" also opposed child marriage. In the soap opera, Kusum is married before the legal age of 18, impregnated, and dies in childbirth. While child marriage is illegal, it is common in Indian villages. Equal opportunity for girls is stressed in the radio soap opera. The poster-letter stated: "In comparison with boys, education of girls is given less importance. Even if some girls wish to develop themselves through their own efforts and assert their individuality, their family is not supportive....Whenever girls were given equal opportunities for educating themselves, they have done as well as the boys." Family planning/population size issues were stressed in "Tinka Tinka Sukh". The poster-letter stated: "Our society has to take a new turn in their thinking concerning family size. As the cost of living rises, having more children than one can afford is inviting trouble....This message of 'Tinka Tinka Sukh' comes across very clearly."

Individual efficacy was emphasized in the radio soap opera. Individual efficacy is an individual's perception of his/her capability to deal effectively with a situation, and his/her sense of perceived control over the situation. A young bride, Sushma, takes charge of her life after her husband leaves her, by starting a sewing school. She is rewarded in the storyline for this efficacious behavior. Efficacy is also demonstrated by Sunder, a drug abuser, who gets clean and then obtains a job. Ramlal, a pampered son and male chauvinist, represented a negative role-model in the early episodes of "Tinka Tinka Sukh." Later he becomes a development officer, leading Navaon village in a variety of progressive activities. The village tailor in Lutsaan identified with this transitional role-model, as he stated in the poster-letter: "I saw myself, in fact many of my anti-social ways,
reflected in Ramlal who is also reformed." Such parasocial involvement with a transitional role-model is one way in which entertainment-education affects behavior change.

Parasocial interaction is the seemingly face-to-face interpersonal relationships which can develop between a viewer and a mass media personality like a television performer.

Collective efficacy is also stressed in "Tinka Tinka Sukh," as Navgaon village displays collaborative spirit in solving its problems. Collective efficacy is the degree to which individuals in a system believe that they can organize and execute courses of action required to achieve collective goals. For example, the village constructs a new hospital, rejecting government assistance and raising the needed funding themselves. As the poster-letter stated: "The problems of the village are tackled collectively, and in the event of any major problem, the matter is put before the panchayat [village council] for resolution."

The Tailor and the Postmaster

One reason for the relatively strong effects of "Tinka Tinka Sukh" in Village Lutsaan traced to two villagers, the tailor, Birendra Singh Khushwaha, and the postmaster, Bapu. While they are a generation apart in age, they have much in common. Both are in occupations that bring them in contact with many villagers on a daily basis. Both the tailor and the postmaster are sparkplugs for social change in Lutsaan.

Birendra Singh Khushwaha, the tailor, is a hyperactive fan of All India Radio, listening eight to ten hours a day, and writing to AIR an average of five letters per day! He keeps a stack of postcards at hand in his tailor shop, so that he can jot down a comment to a radio program on the spur of the moment. He has 20 different name stamps which he uses to address the letters to his favorite AIR program or to sign his name on the postcards (he stamped the 1996 poster-letter about dowry with three different stamps). He
says that he has written 12,000 postcards and letters to AIR over the past seven years. In the poster-letter, he told how he became a fan of AIR (explained at the top of this chapter). The tailor had personally experienced in his life certain of the educational issues in the radio soap opera, and related to the characters, especially Ramlal who changes his stripes from being a vicious village bully to become a development change agent. In the poster letter, he stated:

For the past ten years I had lost my way but 'Tinka Tinka Sukh' showed me a new path of life.....I used to be delinquent, aimless, and a bully. I harassed girls....one girl reported me to the police and I was sent to prison. I came home unreformed. One day I heard a program on radio.... After listening to the drama, my life underwent a change....I started to listen regularly to All India Radio[AIR]....One day I learned that 'Tinka Tinka Sukh', a radio soap opera, will be broadcast from AIR, Delhi. I waited expectantly. Once I started listening to the radio program, all my other drawbacks and negative values were transformed.

The tailor's shop is located centrally in the village, and its door is always open, with the radio on. Several people are usually in the tailor shop, gossiping, listening to All India Radio, and discussing the program. The people-traffic through the tailor's shop provided a convenient way for the tailor to get signatures and thumbprints on the poster-letter.

Om Prakash Sharma (Bapu), the 55-year old postmaster of Lutsaan has a home-cum-office. He is a village opinion leader with high credibility. Credibility is defined as the degree to which a source or channel is perceived as unbiased and trustworthy. The postoffice is located in one room of Bapu's home. He is a Brahmin, one of the few high-caste individuals in Village Lutsaan, which is dominated by the Jat farmer caste. He has the only telephone in the village, which he allows others to use. Bapu is known for his
altruism. He has a small buffalo corral in the courtyard of his home. Villagers bring their sick buffalo here for treatment. Bapu barter's the cost of the drugs in exchange for milk. Bapu, like the tailor, was a devoted fan of "Tinka Tinka Sukh," often delaying his evening meal in order to listen. He says that: "Six months later, we still talk about 'Tinka Tinka Sukh.'" Often, Bapu listened to the radio soap opera and then discussed the episode with his friends. He knew the names of each character, and could describe what they were like. Bapu's son, Prem Shankar, aged 30, got married a month before our visit to Lutsaan.

Bapu would not accept dowry from the bride's parents. Prem volunteers his time as Secretary at the all-women dairy cooperative in Lutsaan, maintaining their financial ledgers. He told us that his inspiration is Suraj, a positive role-model in "Tinka Tinka Sukh", who volunteered his time for community development activities.

One week before our visit to Lutsaan, a 14-year old girl was married, suggesting that "Tinka Tinka Sukh" was not completely effective in changing the village norms. This child marriage meant that she had to drop out of school. Her father, a low-caste community member, told us that he knew that child marriage and paying dowry were illegal in India, but he did not expect the police to interfere. Bapu, the postmaster, while visibly angered by this recent marriage, shrugged it off as being a problem with the lower caste. This child marriage in Lutsaan suggests that an entertainment-education program can only do so much.

Why was "Tinka Tinka Sukh" so effective in stimulating social changes in Lutsaan? Exposure to the radio soap opera was higher in Lutsaan than elsewhere in North India. Prior conditions in the village helped magnify the effects of this entertainment-education radio program: A hyperactive radio listener (the tailor), a highly-respected village leader in
the postmaster, group listening to the radio episodes, and the activities of a village self-help group.

Our experience in Village Lutsaan, during hot summer days in India in 1997, enriched our understanding of the potential and the limitations of entertainment-education.
Notes

1 The present case study draws upon Singhal and Rogers (in press).

2 Entertainment-education is the process of purposely designing and implementing a media message to both entertain and educate, in order to increase audience members' knowledge about an educational issue, create favorable attitudes, and change overt behavior.

3 Some members of our research team – Ms. Saumya Pant and Mr. Mumtaz Ahmed – revisited Lutsaan in July, 1998, a year later. The effects of the radio soap opera continued and were perhaps magnified by the impact of our previous visit. Radio listening clubs had been organized for a follow-up entertainment-education program, “Yeh Kahan Aa Gaye Hum” (Where Have We Arrived?), about preserving the environment. Several large hand-painted signs appeared in the village, stating “After ‘Tinka Tinka Sukh’ listen now to ‘Yeh Kahan Aa Gaye Hum’, broadcast from All India Radio”. Members of the listening club donate a dollar per month toward the cost of radio batteries, for paint and poster supplies, and to purchase tree seedlings (the radio program promotes reforestation). The tailor continued flooding All India Radio with letters, many now containing the conclusion of listening club discussions. Bapu was arranging the marriage of his second son, refusing to accept dowry.
References


