

Riding High on *Taru* Fever

Entertainment-Education Broadcasts,
Ground Mobilization,
and Service Delivery
in Rural India¹

by Arvind Singhal



Conch shells may be blown and drums may be beaten
when a son is born. Women may withdraw behind veils
and wail when a girl is born.

Like it is the *dharma* of the breeze to blow, and the rain to fall,
the *dharma* of the wife is to serve her husband,
her in-laws, and look after his children
– day after day, year after year, one decade after another.

Anees Jung² on the
generalized status of Indian
rural women as they journey
from cradle to grave.



TARU, A RADIO SOAP OPERA, REWRITES GENDER ROLES

In the second year of the 21st century, 2002 to be precise, in India's Bihar state, in village Madhopur, while listening to their favorite radio soap opera, *Taru*, a couple in their late-20s, hears about the celebration of a young girl's birthday in the fictional rural community of Suhagpur. A girl's birthday celebration -- in rural Bihar? While a son's birthday is a cause for celebration, a daughter's birthday is a date not remembered. Boys and girls receive differential treatment in Bihar's rural society. Relative to girls, boys receive better education, nutrition, and care; they have better mobility outside of homes; and are more pampered by parents, grandparents, and community elders.

Inspired by a fictional radio soap opera, the couple decides to celebrate their daughter's birthday. The invitation is sent to all households in village Madhopur, akin to what happened in the fictional drama. As the cake is cut, many young girls in Madhopur tug their mothers' saris, asking when will they celebrate their birthday? The practice spreads. The actions of this couple in Madhopur led to a string of birthday celebrations for girls in Madhopur, complete with balloons, music, sweets, and cakes. This practice then spread to several neighboring villages of Madhopur, where *Taru* was equally popular.

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 issue, create favorable attitudes, shift social norms, and change the overt behavior of individuals and communities.

Taru, broadcast by All India Radio (AIR), the Indian national radio network, during 2002-2003, was an entertainment-education radio soap opera. *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 issue, create favorable attitudes, shift social norms, and change the overt behavior of individuals and communities. *Taru's* purpose was to promote gender equality, reproductive health, caste and communal harmony, and community development.

Taru began broadcasting in Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, and Chattisgarh states in India on February 22, 2002 (and later in the entire Hindi-speaking belt of North India from May, 2002). One episode was broadcast each week on Friday at 8:00 p.m., with a repeat broadcast each Sunday at 3:40 p.m.



Photo: Devendra Sharma.

A *Taru* fever raged in Bihar's villages before, during and after its year-long broadcasts. Members of *Taru* listening clubs organized a wide variety of village events, including theater performances (as shown to the right).



Shailendra Singh, the rural medical practitioner in village Kamtaul, standing next to a *Taru* poster. An avid listener of *Taru*, Singh intervened in a child marriage in the village, and made it his mission to remove caste-based inequities in his village.

Each episode of *Taru* began with a theme song and a brief summary of the previous episode. Each episode ended with an epilogue that posed a question to the listeners, inviting them to write-in their responses to AIR. Thousands of audience letters were received in response.

Located a couple of miles from village Madhopur, on the other side of the main highway, is village Kamtaul where Vandana Kumari, a 17 year-old member of village Kamtaul's *Taru* listening club, also regularly listened to *Taru*. She noted: "We listen to each episode of *Taru* and discuss the episode's content in our listeners' club. After listening to this serial, we have taken decisions to wipe out caste discrimination, teach *dalit* (lower caste) children, and to pursue higher education."

Vandana's father, Shailendra Singh, a rural health practitioner (RHP) in Kamtaul, operates a *Tithy* (Butterfly) Health Clinic, and belongs to a sprawling network of 20,000 rural health practitioners, organized by Janani, a non-governmental organization that promotes reproductive health care services in the poor Indian states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, and Chattisgarh. These four states have a population of about 200 million people; the highest fertility,



A trained woman health practitioner in her clinic with a stock of condoms, pills, and pregnancy dipsticks displayed prominently.

infant mortality, and maternal death rates in India; and the lowest literacy and contraceptive prevalence rates.

A few years previously, Shailendra Singh and his wife, Sunita, underwent a crash course in reproductive health care, first-aid, maternal and child health, and diagnosis and treatment of STIs/RTIs (sexually-transmitted infections and reproductive tract infections) at a Janani training facility in Patna, Bihar's capital city. Janani purposely invited both Singh and his wife for training as most rural Indian women are embarrassed to seek reproductive health services from a male RHP.

Now, with a trained woman health practitioner, female villagers could discuss sex, seek prenatal and antenatal care, and access contraceptives. After registering in Janani's rural health network, Singh's clinic in Kamtaul village began to stock Janani's branded *Mithun* ("Bull") condoms, *Apsara* ("Angel") oral contraceptive pills, and pregnancy test strips.

Beginning in February, 2002, Singh and Sunita's health practice in Kamtaul village became the center of a novel experiment in entertainment-education radio broadcasting, when All India

Radio, in cooperation with Population Communications International (PCI), New York, broadcast an entertainment-education radio soap opera *Taru* (the name of the program's female protagonist). All India Radio and PCI's ground-based partner in the four states where *Taru* was broadcast was Janani. Pre-program publicity for *Taru* was conducted on-the-air by All India Radio and, on-the-ground, *Taru* was publicized by Janani's 20,000 strong network of RHPs (like Singh and Sunita), *Taru* posters, and over 700 strategically-placed wall paintings at major highway intersections.

In several selected villages in Bihar state, folk performances dramatizing the *Taru* storyline were carried out a week prior to the radio serial's broadcasts to prime the message reception environment. Shailendra Singh's Kamtaul village was one such site for the folk performances. Singh and his wife Sunita spread word-of-mouth messages about the folk performance, encouraging hundreds of people to attend.

Transistor radios with a sticker of *Taru's* logo were provided to groups who correctly answered questions based on the folk performance. These groups were formalized as *Taru* listening clubs. Each group received an attractive notebook (with a *Taru* logo), and were encouraged urged to discuss the social themes addressed in *Taru*, relate them to their personal circumstances, and record any decisions, or actions, they took as a result of listening to *Taru*.

RHP Shailendra Singh's daughter, Vandana, her younger sister, a cousin, and two friends formed the young women's listening club in Kamtaul village. A *Taru* fever raged in the Singh household. Discussions of *Taru* inspired the Singh family to undertake several new initiatives: They stopped a child marriage in Kamtaul village, launched an adult literacy program for *dalit* (low-caste) village women, and have facilitated the participation of *dalits* in community events, including in a wedding.



A 15 by 8 feet wall-painting with the *Taru* logo, an announcement about the time and day of broadcast of *Taru*, the name of the local rural medical practitioner, and the name of the sponsor, Janani's *Titly* (Butterfly) Center.



Some 800 people gathered near Abirpur village to watch a folk performance about *Taru*, prior to the broadcast of the radio soap opera. These pre-broadcast performances stimulated audience interest in listening to *Taru*, helped establish listening clubs, and served as locations to distribute *Taru* posters, stickers, and pamphlets.

Further, during the one-year time period that *Taru* was broadcast, Singh's sales of *Mithun* condoms and *Apsara* pills jumped 400 percent.

What explains such ground-breaking social changes in Singh's Kamtaul village?



Members of a young women's *Taru* listening club receiving a clock with the *Taru* logo.

As per Shailendra Singh and his family, social transformation was catalyzed in Kamtaul as a result of the on-air entertainment-education broadcasts of *Taru*, the on-the-ground mobilization through local opinion leaders and *Taru* listening groups which, in particular, acted as informal organizing units for social deliberation and local action. Janani's network of rural health practitioners provided the ground-based service delivery. Each component complemented the contribution of the other.

THE TARU NARRATIVE, MODELING NEW POSSIBILITIES

Taru was a 52-episode entertainment-education radio soap opera, broadcast from February, 2002 to February, 2003. The story of the radio serial revolves around Taru, a young, educated

woman who works in Suhagpur village's Sheetal Center (patterned after Janani's Tity center), an organization that provides reproductive health care services and carries out village self-help activities. Taru is idealistic, intelligent, and polite, and works to empower rural women. Taru is a close friend of Shashikant, who like Taru, is educated, intelligent, and involved in social work at the Sheetal Center. Shashikant is a the *dalit* (lower-caste), and is subject to discrimination by the high caste people in the village. Taru likes him for his sincerity, and he, in turn, is supportive of Taru's ameliorative efforts. While there is an undercurrent of romance between the two, they have not yet explicitly expressed it, given that Shashikant is mindful of his lower caste status (Taru belongs to an upper caste family).

Taru's mother, Yashoda, is highly supportive of Taru, whom she sees as an embodiment of her own unaccomplished dreams. On the other hand, Mangla, Taru's rogue brother, derides Taru's social work, and ridicules her friendship with the lower-caste Shashikant. With the help of Aloni Baba (a village saint) and Guruji (a teacher), Taru and Shashikant fight multiple social evils in a series of intersecting storylines, including preventing a child marriage, and encouraging girls to be treated on par with boys. In one episode, Taru and Shashikant organize a community-wide birthday celebration of a young girl, a practice hitherto unprecedented.

A subplot involves Neha, a close friend of Taru, who is newly married to Kapileshwar, the son of the local *zamindar* (landlord). Kapileshwar starts out as a controlling husband, restricting Neha's mobility outside of the home. But Neha wants to lead a meaningful life and begins a school for *dalit* (low-caste) children.

Taru, patterned after a long tradition of entertainment-education soap operas in Latin America, strategically employed media role models to promote socially-desirable behaviors, and to dissuade socially-undesirable behaviors.

Photo: Arvind Singh

The principles of media role-modeling were distilled by Professor Albert Bandura at Stanford University, who in the early-1960s conducted the famed Bobo doll experiments. Young children watched a film of an adult role model beating a plastic Bobo doll, weighted at its base. The model punched, kicked, and hit the Bobo doll with his fists and a mallet. When hit, a Bobo doll falls backward and immediately springs upright as if offering a counter punch.

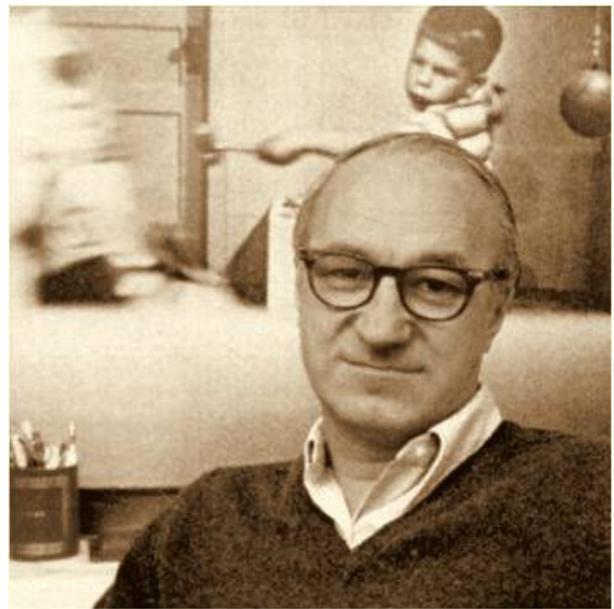
Children were let into a play room with several attractive toys including a Bobo doll. Interestingly, children who watched the film imitated the media model's behavior: They punched, kicked, and hit the Bobo doll. Bandura suggested that when exposed to a violent televised model, children were likely to exhibit the aggressive behavior they had observed.

Bandura's experiments also showed that audience members learn models of behavior as effectively from televised models as from ones in real-life.³ If media models could promote aggression and other anti-social behaviors, there was no reason their power could not be tapped for pro-social purposes. Bandura's principles of role-modeling were creatively employed in the mid-1970s by Miguel Sabido, a creative writer-director-producer at Televisa, the Mexican national television network, to produce a series of entertainment-education *telenovelas* (television novels or soap operas). Between 1975 and 1982, Sabido incorporated Bandura's principles of role-modeling in seven entertainment-education *telenovela* productions.

All of Sabido's *telenovelas* were ratings hits, and evaluations suggested that they were effective in meeting their educational goals. Sabido's work in Mexico provided a systematic and codified methodology to produce entertainment-education soap operas, both for television and radio. This method then spread rapidly to other nations in

BANDURA'S BOBO DOLL

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Al Bandura (foreground). A child beating a Bobo-doll (background).

Africa, Asia, and Latin America where it was adapted to local needs and conditions. Further, several home grown entertainment-education initiatives got underway (e.g. *Soul City* in South Africa, *Sexto Sentido* in Nicaragua, and Breakthrough programs in the U.S. and India), informed by on-site sensibilities and championed by local writers, producers, and directors.

RESEARCHING TARU

The research on the audience effects of *Taru*, conducted under the guidance of the author, Singhal, and a team of co-researchers at Ohio University and Michigan State University, exemplified methodological triangulation, the use of multiple research methods (both quantitative and qualitative) to measure the same phenomenon.

Data collection methods included:

- (1) Personal interviews with key officials involved in the production of *Taru*, including its executive producer, director, and writers;
- (2) a pre-post random sample survey of 1,500 respondents each, including both listeners and non-listeners, in a sentinel research site in Begusarai District, Bihar state, India;
- (3) a pre-during-post, four-group, panel design quasi-experiment study to gauge the additive effects of the influence of
 - (a) field orchestration activities such as folk performances, establishment of listening groups, and diary recordings;
 - (b) pre-program publicity of *Taru* through posters, stickers, and flyers by the RHPs; and
 - (c) reproductive health service delivery through the presence of a Titly Center RHP and his spouse;
- (4) a content analysis of a sample of listeners' letters in response to *Taru*;
- (5) a content analysis of the educational themes and character portrayals in the 52 episodes of *Taru*;
- (6) monthly collection of point-of-referral data on the sales of condoms, pills, and pregnancy test strips from Titly Centers in our research sites; and
- (7) a longitudinal design of four rapid surveys to assess the degree of audience exposure to *Taru*, conducted at two-month intervals during the broadcasts of *Taru*.

TARU'S IMPACTS

Previous qualitative research has suggested that an E-E program typically sparks the process of social change by drawing listeners' attention to socially desirable behaviors. When listeners develop parasocial relationships with the characters of an E-E program, they may be motivated to consider changes in their own behavior. E-E programs can stimulate peer conversations among listeners, which can create opportunities for collective efficacy to emerge as people consider new patterns of thought and behavior. However, existing power structures resist the process of social change, and often people have to “negotiate” their actions with their intentions.

Was there evidence for these processes in the villages of Bihar where our present investigation of *Taru* was based?

Parasocial Interaction with *Taru*

Parasocial relationships are the seemingly face-to-face interpersonal relationships that can develop between a viewer and a mass media personality.⁴ The media consumer forms a relationship with a performer that is analogous to a real interpersonal relationship. When a parasocial relationship is established, the media consumer appreciates the values and motives of the media character, often viewing him or her as a counselor, comforter, and model.

Incredibly, some audience members even talk to their favorite characters (that is, to their TV or

PARASOCIAL INTERACTION represents the seemingly face-to-face interpersonal relationships that can develop between a viewer and a character in an entertainment-education program.



Photo: Devendra Sharma.

Sunita Singh (standing right), who was inspired by Neha, a friend of Taru in the radio serial, to begin an adult literacy class for lower-caste women in Kamtaul village.

radio set) as if the characters were real people. Soni, an avid listener, in village Abirpur exemplified this intense involvement and identification: “I love Taru. She is so nice. I also like Shashikant. When Taru is sad, Shashikant makes her laugh. When Taru is sad, I am sad. When Mangla asks her to not see Shashikant, and Taru feels bad, I feel bad.” Audience members view their favorite characters as close personal friends, and become emotionally upset when certain characters face difficult personal situations.

In village Kamtaul, Sunita Singh, the wife of Shailendra Singh, the village rural health practitioner, greatly admired Neha, a friend of Taru in the radio serial, who establishes a school to educate *dalit* (low-caste) children. Inspired by Neha, Sunita launched adult literacy classes for 20 lower caste women in Kamtaul’s Harijan Tola (lower-caste settlement).

It is highly uncommon in an Indian rural setting for a high-caste woman to interact with women of lower castes. “If Neha could do it, so could I,” Sunita Singh noted.

PARASOCIAL INTERACTION MAY BE so strong that audience members adjust their daily schedules to listen to the radio program to maintain an ongoing relationship with their favorite characters.

Parasocial interaction may be so strong that audience members adjust their daily schedules to listen to the radio program to maintain an ongoing relationship with their favorite characters. As Dhurandhar Maharaj, a male listener in Abirpur village, noted: “Every Friday at 8 p.m. I have to be close to my radio. They come into my home. It’s like meeting friends.”

Usha Kumari, a college-going girl in Abirpur is indebted to Taru for making her strong and inspiring her to implement her dreams: “There are many moments when I feel that Taru is directly talking to me. ‘Usha you can follow your dreams.’ I feel she [Taru] gives me encouragement.”

Conversations and Sense-Making

Our research in Bihar provides numerous examples of how *Taru* stimulated conversations among listeners, creating a social learning environment for social change.

Soni Kumari, a member of the young women’s listening club in Kamtaul village noted: “Almost 50 percent of the girls in our High School [out of a total of 300] listen to *Taru*. In fact, we have even painted a wall in our school to promote the listening of *Taru*. Every Monday in School, during the break, we meet to discuss the episode broadcast the previous day.”

TARU STIMULATED CONVERSATIONS among listeners, creating a social learning environment for change.

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.

Kumari Neha, a listening group member in Abirpur village, noted: “Our discussions of *Taru* have given us strength and confidence. Now I am not shy of speaking in front of my parents. *Taru* taught us that one should always speak sweetly and politely. When you mean well, who can oppose you? Even the devil will melt. We have all told our parents that we will like to go to college, and we will not marry in a household which demands dowry.”

In Kamtaul village, family-based conversations between RHP Shailendra Singh, his wife Sunita, and their two younger daughters and a niece (the latter three are members of the young women’s listening club) led to a debunking of several traditional practices that humiliated lower-caste villagers. For instance, when Singh’s elder daughter got married in June, 2002 (four months after *Taru* had begun its broadcast), Singh purposely invited the village’s “untouchables” to attend the wedding.

Some of the lower-caste people helped with the wedding arrangements, and some even served drinks to the guests. Singh noted: “Several people refused⁵ the drink, but most people accepted. I made sure that the servers were properly groomed and wore clean clothes. For those who confronted me later, I told them that I am a ‘doctor’ and my profession does not allow me to discriminate.”

Collective Efficacy Stimulated by *Taru*

Discussions, dialogue, and conversations among audience members regarding the content of

a media program can clarify doubts, overcome inhibitions, and provide a sense of collective efficacy to act. *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. Collective efficacy helps to promote meaningful social change because such change is embedded within a network of social influences.

Collective efficacy is concerned with people’s confidence in their joint capabilities to accomplish set goals, and to withstand opposition and setbacks. For this process to begin, people need to believe that they can solve their mutually-experienced problems through unified effort. Members of a community can collectively feel efficacious to solve a social problem that cannot be dealt with on an individual basis.

There were dozens of instances of *Taru* inspiring collective efficacy and community action to solve social problems. In Abirpur village, young female and male members of *Taru* listeners’ groups, after seven months of discussion and deliberation, started an open-air school for underprivileged children, inspired by the character of Neha in the radio serial. Some 50 children regularly attended school, meeting six days a week, from 4 to 6 p.m. by the village well.

Four young women, all avid listeners of *Taru*, teach these children. Young men helped convince the parents to send their children to school and help with the operational logistics. Establishing the school was a collective act of both young men and women in Abirpur. Such mixed-sex collaboration is highly uncommon in Indian villages.

Another example from Abirpur village demonstrates how an individual’s rise in self-efficacy can subsequently spur collective action. After listening to *Taru*, Dhurandhar Maharaj, a

17-year-old Hindu male listener, questioned the caste and religion-based discrimination that was prevalent in Abirpur, and decided to do something about it: “When I heard Mangla [Taru’s rogue brother] insult Shashikant for his low-caste, I was furious. Then I realized I myself did not mix with the Muslim students in my class. It took me two-three days to muster enough courage to sit next to Shakeel Anwar, who is Muslim. Now Shakeel is my best friend, and all his friends are my friends.”



Children in Abirpur attending an open-air school.

Dhurandhar soon realized that Shakeel’s younger sister stopped going to school after the eighth grade. Her parents were reluctant to send her to the neighboring town’s school without an escort. Dhurandhar, Shakeel, and their half-a-dozen closed friends discussed this problem, and decided to take turns escorting Shakeel’s sister. Once this plan was implemented, six other friends of Shakeel’s sister, who also had stopped going to school for a similar reason, resumed their schooling.

Dhurandhar noted: “Now they go in a group and it does not even matter if we can’t escort them on certain days.”



Taru-inspired Collective Action in Abirpur village where an open-air school was launched by four young women (above), all avid listeners of Taru.

Power and Resistance in Social Change

While there was clear evidence that exposure to *Taru* stimulated interpersonal discussions about educational issues and motivated some listeners to engage in collective action to solve community problems, our data also suggested, consistent with our previous findings of the effects of E-E soap operas, that social change seldom flows directly and immediately from exposure to an entertainment-education media program that prompts parasocial interaction.

Instead, audience individuals who are exposed to the program may create a social learning environment in which new behavior options are considered but they discover that change often proceeds in a circuitous manner.

What works for a media character may not work so easily in real-life situations in which there is community resistance to new behaviors. Certain community members may develop a sense of collective efficacy in solving a social problem, but the solution they devise may not be effective. Although a person may say that they believe in performing a certain action, these beliefs may not reflect his or her actions.

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 listenership of between 20 to 25 million
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One may argue that all such intentions in support of behavior change are important, even if that talk is not always supported by subsequent action. Thus, a mother who talks to her daughter about gender equality may influence her daughter to further her formal education, even though the mother still acts under patriarchal dominance. Neeraj Kumari, a family listeners' group member in Abirpur village, who plays the role of a traditional *bahu* (daughter-in-law), tending to the needs of her in-laws, husband, and two young children, noted: "My life is the way it is. But my children will marry whom they want....we will not give or take dowry."

Gudiya, a young listener in Madhopur said: "I don't know how life will turn out for me, but I will definitely make my daughter like Taru."

Quantitative Impact Assessments of *Taru*

In addition to a variety of qualitative methods, our *Taru* research project employed various complementary techniques of quantifying the reach and audience effects of *Taru*.

Obtaining a Robust Measure of Degree of Exposure

In order to have a highly robust measure of "degree of exposure" to *Taru*, which is the key independent variable of interest to an E-E researcher, four tracking surveys with a screened sample were completed every two months after *Taru* began broadcasting in February, 2002 in our sentinel research site of Begusarai District in Bihar (i.e., during April, June, September, November, 2002).

Overall, from our four rounds of rapid exposure surveys, we estimate that about 10 percent of all households in the general

Longitudinal Assessment through Rapid Exposure Surveys in Begusarai District, Bihar

Assessment Dimension	Rapid Survey 1* April 2002 (N=369)	Rapid Survey 2 June 2002 (N=457)	Rapid Survey 3 September 2002 (N=521)	Rapid Survey 4 November 2002 (N=371)
Percent of <i>Taru</i> listeners in surveyed households	15%	10%	12%	13%
Listeners' perceptions of how similar <i>Taru's</i> characters are to them	30%	48%	37%	45%
Listeners' intentions to change their behaviors as a result of listening to <i>Taru</i>	61%	80%	50%	83%

*Broadcasts of *Taru* began in late February 2002, and ended in February 2003. The rapid surveys were conducted regularly at two-month intervals.

population in Bihar, and 24 percent of households in the target population (those who owned a radio and were regular listeners) listened to *Taru*. An extrapolation of these numbers suggests that *Taru* may have a listenership of between 20 to 25 million people in the four Indian states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Chattisgarh, whose combined population is about 200 million people.

If these listenership numbers for *Taru* hold in other Indian states (where *Taru* began broadcasting in May, 2002), the listenership of *Taru* in the entire Hindi-speaking region of North India, which has a total population of 625 million people, may range from 60 to 75 million people.

The four rounds of rapid surveys further indicate

- (1) that audience members liked *Taru* very much, with an average score of 4.55 on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 5 being highest),
- (2) that audience members perceived *Taru's* characters as being highly similar to them,

with an average score of 3.26 on a scale of 1 to 4 (with 4 being highest), and

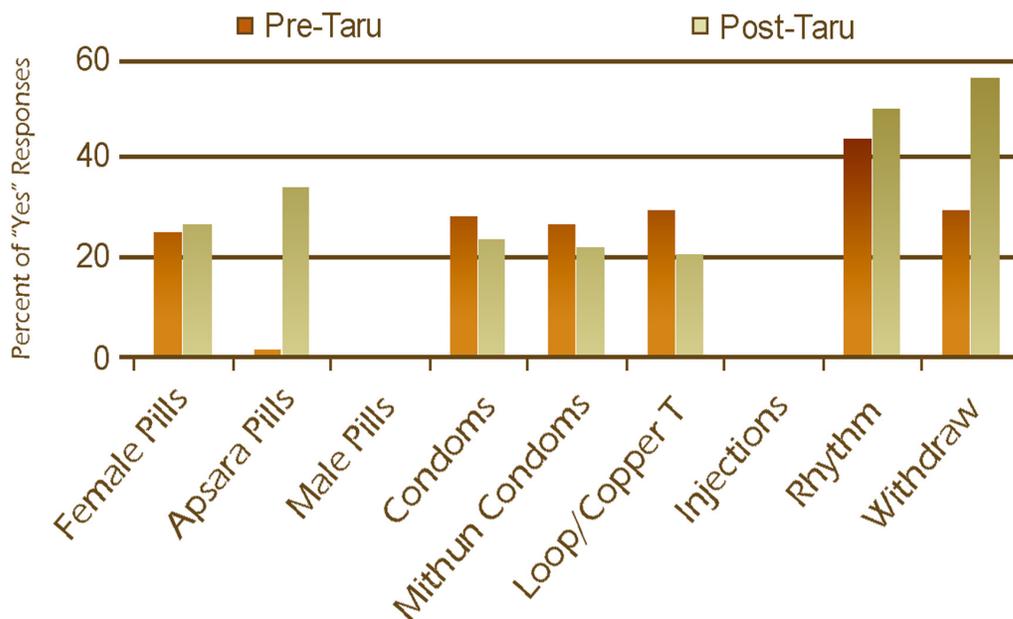
- (3) that audience members strongly considered behavior change as a result of listening to *Taru*, with a mean score of 4.56 on a scale of one to five (with five being high).

Sentinel Site Surveys

A sentinel site survey was conducted with 1,500 households surveyed before *Taru* began (baseline survey) and 1,500 households surveyed after *Taru* ended (impact survey). The site for pre-post sentinel site surveys was District Begusarai in India's Bihar state, chosen to represent an "average district" in Bihar.

Our results show that before *Taru* aired, respondents in the sentinel site area had significantly weaker beliefs about gender equity and family planning, and perceived greater barriers to achieve gender equity and small family size.

Adoption of Family Planning Methods: Do You Currently Use...?



Fewer people used certain family planning methods, and fewer people felt that their friends and family members approved their use of family planning methods. However, respondents in the sentinel site area one year after the broadcast of *Taru* displayed significantly stronger gender equality beliefs.

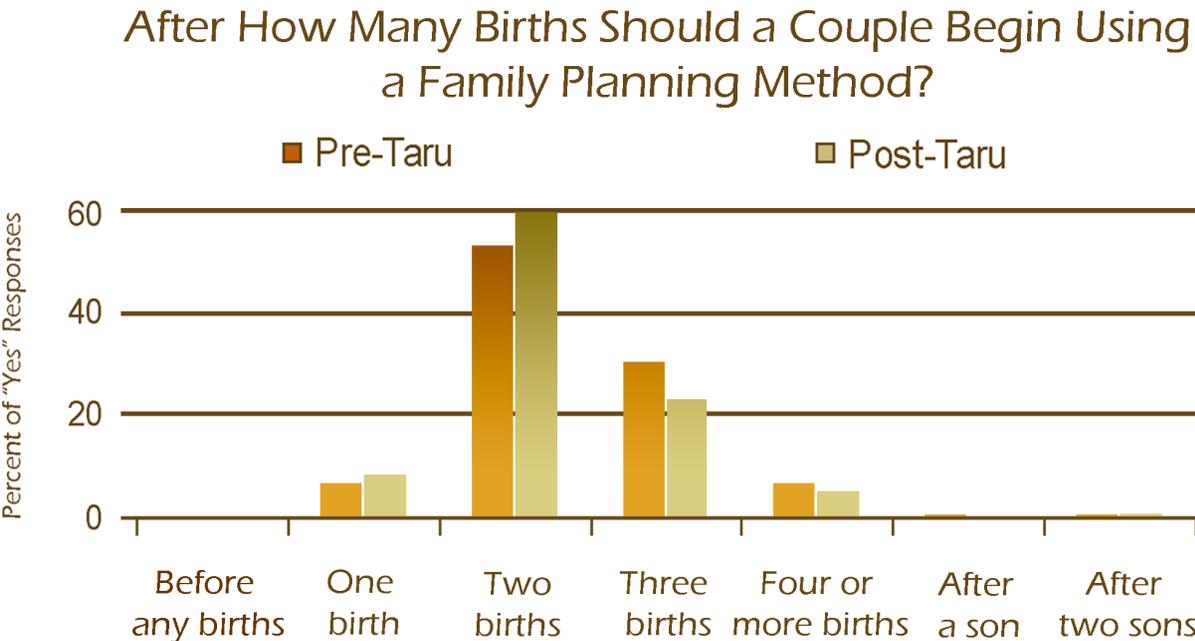
Another goal of *Taru* was to increase modern family planning method usage and associated beliefs and attitudes. Awareness of various modern family planning methods increased significantly after the year-long broadcast of *Taru*. After *Taru* aired, perceived approval from friends on family planning issues increased.

Of those who had “ever used” the methods described above, the chart below shows users of specific methods. Of particular interest are the *Apsara* Pills findings – the broadcast of *Taru* appeared to have a very strong and significant effect on use of *Apsara* Pills when comparing pre-*Taru* to post-*Taru* respondents.

Similarly, the use of modern family planning methods (with the exception of vasectomy) significantly and consistently increased after the one-year broadcasts of *Taru*. Perceived barriers to family planning methods were significantly and consistently lower across several items after *Taru* aired as compared to the previous year.

Respondents were asked after how many children should they begin using a family planning method. The chart below shows that after *Taru* aired, respondents thought they should use family planning after having fewer children (one or two) as compared to what they thought pre broadcast of *Taru*, where respondents thought they should have three or four births.

There was a significant difference between pre-*Taru* (53.7%) and post-*Taru* (60.3%) respondents for respondents saying one should use family planning after two births. Talk with one’s spouse about family planning issues was high both pre and post-*Taru* (pre-*Taru* = 85.6%, post-*Taru* = 86.3%), with no significant difference.



However, after the broadcast of *Taru* there were significantly greater reports of talk with a family elder as compared to before *Taru* (mother/father, mother-in-law/father-in-law) (pre-*Taru* = 55.4%; post-*Taru* = 72.3%). Further, after *Taru* aired there was greater talk about family planning issues with friends as compared to pre-*Taru* (pre-*Taru* = 68.2%; post-*Taru* = 83%).

Service Statistics at the Point-of-Sale

The main method of measurement employed in the pre-post surveys for *Taru* was the audience survey. Respondents were asked questions about the effects of *Taru* on their knowledge, attitudes, and overt behavior. These self-reports, however, may be overestimates if the respondents believed that they are expected to report strong effects. Hence it is reassuring to an investigator to gather other types of data that provide a check on the accuracy of survey self-reports. One approach is to gather data from new adopters of a behavioral change emphasized in the educational content of the E-E intervention.

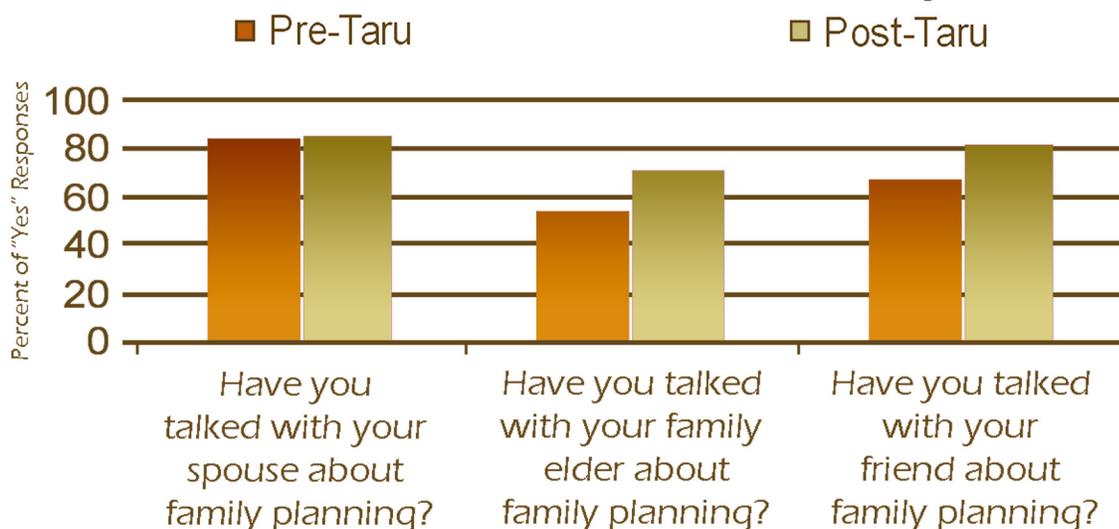
An example is to obtain data from new adopters of family planning methods at clinics or at other service-providing sites. Researchers and policy-makers usually regard such point-of-sale service statistics as highly credible.

One of the advantages of such clinic data is that they are usually gathered at the time the individual adopts, so there is no problem of inaccurate recall of past decisions. Further, these exit interview data are not self-reports, but are generated by actual observations of overt behavior.

Our research on *Taru* tracked service statistics over the duration of the soap opera (and three months after it finished broadcasting) in four village communities.

Overall, sales of Mithun condoms increased over 227 and 680 percent, respectively, in Abirpur and Kamtaul villages (in Madhopur and Chandrahatti, condom sales increased significantly during the first nine months of *Taru's* broadcasts

With Whom Have You Talked About Family Planning?



E-E RESEARCHERS & POLICYMAKERS usually regard point-of-sale service statistics as a highly credible measure of audience effects.

and then dropped down to about the original baseline levels). Also, sales of Apsara pills increased over 200, 580, 400, and 420 percent, respectively, in Abirpur, Kamtaul, Madhopur, and Chandrahatti villages. Finally, sales of pregnancy test strips increased 167, 600, 400, and 200 percent, respectively, in Abirpur, Kamtaul, Madhopur, and Chandrahatti villages.

In sum, our triangulated approach to researching *Taru*, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, allows us to say with confidence that exposure to *Taru* engendered strong audience effects in promoting gender equality, small family norms, and adoption of contraceptives.

METHODOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS IN TARU PROJECT

The *Taru* Project included various methodological innovations in the conduct of entertainment-education research.

Video Testimony

We conducted video documentation of the *Taru* project, a new methodological approach in entertainment-education. Audiotaped testimonies privilege the spoken and written word but fail to capture the affective, non-verbal, and spatial domains of listeners' responses. For instance, audiotapes, or their transcribed text, cannot capture the emotions of poor *dalit* village women, who, for the first time in their life, are learning to read and write. Nor can textual descriptions fully capture the open-air atmosphere of a village school, or the enthusiasm of the young men and women who

established it. In conceptualizing the *Taru* Project, we envisaged our role (and responsibility) as being more than simply summarizing and interpreting the views of the "others."

We provided our respondents a means to speak for themselves, in their own space, accompanied by such emotions as joy, anger, frustration, and resolve. Two dozen oral testimonies of *Taru* listeners were videotaped in Abirpur, Kamtaul, Madhopur, and Chandrahatti villages.

Over 20 hours of video were recorded, including shots of listeners' group discussions after listening to a *Taru* episode, and activities undertaken (such as the adult literacy program in Kamtaul village). Careful about not just privileging the voice of men or the social elite, which can happen in E-E program evaluations, our video testimonies consciously focused on the voices of poor women, the most "muted" social group in Bihar.

Participatory Photography

To gauge the influence of *Taru* on audience members, we employed participatory photography, drawing inspiration from the work of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal,⁶ who argued for handing over the means of production to the people.

As opposed to asking people questions, and thereby constraining the nature and scope of their word responses, we handed out eight disposable cameras to *Taru* listeners in Abirpur, Kamtaul, Madhopur, and Chandrahatti, and asked them to capture *Taru's* influence on them (or their community) through the language of images.

When we asked our *Taru* listeners to "shoot back" (in images) the influence of the radio serial in their lives, we ended up with over 200 photographs. Mukesh's (22 years, Abirpur village) photo of two girls helping each other to ride a

bicycle emphasized the gender equality message of *Taru*, including certain changes in young women's behaviors in his Abirpur village.



photo: Arvind Singhal

Mukesh's photo of girls riding a bicycle in Abirpur as a sign of changing gender norms.

Mukesh noted: "These girls are trying to learn to ride a bike. After listening to *Taru*, girls are changing. By listening to radio these girls learn of new ideas and act on them."

Participatory Theater

A few months after the *Taru* broadcasts were over, our project team members⁷ returned to Bihar to organize participatory theater workshops for members of *Taru* listening clubs from four villages.

The week-long workshops were designed to empower each group and its members to develop participatory theatrical performances to capture their individual and group listening experiences in relation to *Taru* and their concomitant attempts to secure political and social reform in their respective villages. These folk performances were then staged for village members to bring participants' narratives into the realm of public discourse. Participants were encouraged to use the tools of

theater to acquire new ways of knowing reality and sharing that knowledge with others.

Our participatory theater efforts were in the same mold as Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed, where theater is a form of "rehearsal" for people who want to give voice to their experiences and discover new ways of fighting against oppression in their daily lives. By rehearsing, and potentially accepting or rejecting, solutions to articulated problems, participants have opportunities to "try out" counter-narratives.

During the theater workshops, participants developed skills in script writing, character development, costume and set design, voice projection and body control, and acting and singing. The workshops were followed by two days of public performances. No professional actors were used in the performances; instead, participants served as cast members and as directors and set managers. Performances were promoted in advance through word-of-mouth, capitalizing on the contacts of the local RHPs, as well as family members and friends of the workshops participants. Live folk and popular songs were played on the loudspeaker to bring people to the performance site.



photo: Devendra Sharma

Rehearsals during the participatory theater workshop with *Taru* Listeners.

Each play was publicly performed in each of the four villages for audiences that ranged in numbers from 300-500 people. Interspersed with the plays were a folk dance, some songs, and a poem—all initiated and created by the participants. In each village, we situated the performance site in an open area that was easily accessible to residents. We strategically positioned women at the front of the audience, with men clustered behind them, and, in so doing, subverted the dominance usually exerted by men on such occasions. Many women who were not allowed to leave their home (e.g., young married women) watched from the terrace of their home. When space ran short, onlookers perched themselves on trees or terraces to view the performances.

Strong social networks were created among participants through this participatory theater project, networks that have remained intact and grown stronger since we left Bihar.

IN CONCLUSION

The *Taru* project represented a watershed in systematically and strategically integrating on-air entertainment-education broadcasts with on-the-ground mobilization of opinion leaders and local service delivery. It provided an unprecedented opportunity to triangulate various quantitative and qualitative research methods to more deeply understand the effects that E-E programs have, and also the mechanisms through which such effects occur, are maintained, and can be enhanced. The *Taru* project experimented with a variety of interactive and participatory research approaches, including use of video testimony, photography, and theater. By handing over the means of producing knowledge to respondents, a deeper, richer, and more nuanced audience-centered perspective emerged in our sense-making of E-E interventions.



A *Taru* participatory theater performance in a Bihar village where dozens of spectators were perched on bicycles, rooftops and even trees.

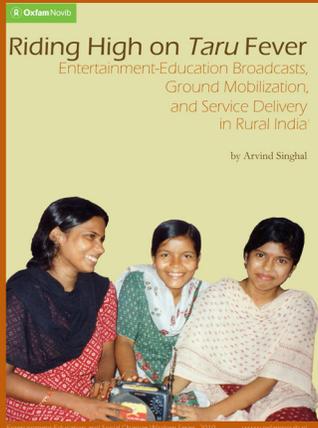
ENDNOTES

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While the present author (Singhal) served as the principal investigator of the *Taru* research project, the “authorship” of this publication rightfully belongs to dozens of colleagues, collaborators, and field researchers, and our thousands of respondents, who helped us better understand how *Taru* influenced their lives. This publication draws upon the dozen or so publications that were generated by our research team: Arvind Singhal, Kim Witte, Nithya Muthuswamy, Desiree Duff, P.N. Vasanti, Michael J. Papa, Lynn M. Harter, Devendra Sharma, Saumya Pant, Akhilesh Kumar Sharma, Tracy Worrell, Mumtaz Ahmed, Alok Shrivastav, Chetna Verma, Yogita Sharma, Nagesh Rao, Ketan Chitnis, and Ami Sengupta (2004). *Effects of Taru, a Radio Soap Opera, on Audiences in India: A Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis*. New York: Population Communications International; Arvind Singhal, Mike Cody, Everett M. Rogers, and Miguel Sabido (eds.) (2004). *Entertainment-Education Worldwide: History, Research, and Practice*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; Arvind Singhal and Everett M. Rogers (1999). *Entertainment-Education: A Communication Strategy for Social Change*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; Ami Sengupta, Lynn Harter, and Arvind Singhal (2008). The Socio-Spatial Dynamics of Identity Construction in a Gender and Development Communication Initiative. *Journal of Creative Communications*, 3(3): 279–304; Arvind Singhal, Lynn Harter, Ketan Chitnis, & Devendra Sharma (2007). Participatory Photography as Theory, Method, and Praxis: Analyzing an Entertainment-Education Project in India. *Critical Arts*, 21(1): 212-227; Arvind Singhal, Nagesh Rao, & Saumya Pant (2006). Entertainment-Education and Possibilities for Second-Order Social Change. *Journal of Creative Communications*, 1(3), 267-283; Arvind Singhal, Michael J. Papa, Devendra Sharma, Saumya Pant, Tracy Worrell, Nithya Muthuswamy, & Kim Witte (2006). Entertainment-education and Social Change: The Communicative Dynamics of Social Capital. *Journal of Creative Communications*, 1(1): 1-18; Desiree C. Duff, Arvind Singhal, & Kim Witte (2005). Health Literacy and Mass-Mediated Interventions: Effects of *Taru*, a Reproductive Health Soap Opera in India. *Studies in Communication Sciences*, 5(2), 171-182; Lynn M. Harter, Devendra Sharma, Saumya Pant, Arvind Singhal, and Yogita Sharma (2007). Catalyzing Social Reform Through Participatory Folk Performances in Rural India. A chapter in Larry Frey and Kevin Carragee (Eds.) *Communication and Social Activism* (pp. 285-314). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press; Arvind Singhal, Devendra Sharma, Michael J. Papa, and Kim Witte (2004). Air Cover and Ground Mobilization: Integrating Entertainment-Education Broadcasts with Community Listening and Service Delivery in India. In A. Singhal, M. J. Cody, E.M. Rogers, & M. Sabido (eds.), *Entertainment-Education and Social Change: History, Research, and Practice* (pp. 351-376). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

2. Anees Jung (1987, paraphrased). *Unveiling India: A Woman's Journey*. New Delhi: Penguin.
3. Albert Bandura (1977). *Social Learning Theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
4. D. Horton and R. R. Wohl (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction. *Psychiatry*, 19, 215-229.
5. In India, many continue to believe that the touch of an “untouchable” is impure and inauspicious.
6. Paulo Freire (1973) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. NY: Continuum; Augusto Boal (1979) . *The Theatre of the Oppressed*. New York: Urizen Books.
7. Led by Devendra Sharma, Saumya Pant, and Yogita Sharma – all, at that time, doctoral students in communication at Ohio University.

Entertainment-Education and Social Change Wisdom Series



How can the popular entertainment media be strategically harnessed to engage audience members about topics such as gender equity and justice, health and well-being, and sustainable livelihoods?

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In this publication, *Riding High on Taru Fever: Entertainment-Education Broadcasts, Ground Mobilization, and Service Delivery in Rural India*, the *Taru* radio soap opera project in India's Bihar state is analyzed. Broadcast during 2002-2003, *Taru* inspired listeners to

stop child marriages, celebrate birthdays of girls, launch literacy programs for poor children and *dalit* (low-caste) village women, and integrate *dalits* in community-wide events to reduce marginalization.

A triangulated approach to researching *Taru*, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods, including pre-post sentinel site surveys, quasi-experiments, rapid exposure assessments, point of sale service statistics, listeners' diaries, in-depth and focus group interviews, and a variety of participatory methods—sketching, photography, and theater—allows us to say with confidence that exposure to *Taru*, coupled with on-the-ground mobilization, engendered strong audience effects on gender equality, family size, and adoption of contraceptives. Over the duration of the broadcasts, in a sample of interventional villages, sales of condoms increased between 227 and 680 percent, sales of contraceptive pills increased between 200 and 580 percent, and sales of pregnancy testing strips, increased 167 to 600 percent.

Taru's strong audience effects resulted from an integration of on-air entertainment-education broadcasts with on-the-ground pre-program publicity and mobilization through local opinion leaders and *Taru* listening group members—which acted as informal organizing units for social deliberation and local action. Further, a partnership with Janani's rural network of 20,000 village-based clinics in Bihar ensured service delivery of reproductive health products for listeners who sought them locally. Each programmatic component complemented the contribution of the other, demonstrating the value of synergistically and strategically integrating the entertainment-education strategy in social change interventions.

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