Contents

Development Communication

Focus - 3
The marketing of ideas
- M. Savara

Video - 5
Women’s empowerment & the collective
Exploration of the Self
- Anjali Monterio & K.P. Jayashankar

Slogans - 13
Socio-logic of AIDS campaign
- R. Robinson

Multimedia - 17
Hum do hamara ek: The case of Family Planning
- J. S. Apte

Press - 19
Communication Campaign to fight Child Labour
- Gulan Kripalani

Theatre - 24
Cultural intervention through theatre
- A. Mangal

Letters - 2
Resources - 29
Getting Together - 32
Institution - 35
News - 36
Hahaha - 39
Book Review - 40

Managing Editor: Minar Pimple
Executive Editor Mira Savara, Pune, Tel 6683995
Research Coordinator: Madhuri Kamat
Layout: Geminarts, Pune, 624066

Published and circulated by YUVA
(Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action),
52/3, Nare Park Municipal School, Second Floor,
Opp Nare Park, Parel, Mumbai 400 012
Tel: (022) 4155250/4143498 Fax: 413-5314
E-mail: yuva@vsnl.com
Website: www.yuvaindia.org

*The views expressed in Anubhav are
those of respective authors.
*For private circulation only.

Printed at Anita Printers, Pune
Women’s Empowerment and the Collective Exploration of the Self and Body

Anjali Monterio and K.P. Jayashankar
Anjali Monteiro is Reader and Head, K.P. Jayasankar, Senior Producer, AudioVisual Unit, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai.

My odhni
(Odhni is a veil used by Indian Women, to cover their heads and bodies)
three yards long
With its corners four, Four are the sides
Of my world.
The four corners
Of the courtyard
Between every two corners
A wall
Corners walled in
The walls like a veil
Suffocation inside the veil
Life suffocates...

The opening song of the video

The video serves as a reference point for this paper. It establishes the circumscribed space of the veil, its four corners demarcating the boundaries of the domestic space where women are only wives and mothers. The video presents the journey of a group of women, as they go through a process of exploring their self-images and bodies.

This paper attempts to present a parallel journey- an account of how the authors, as producers of media materials relating to women’s empowerment, have renegotiated their identities and perspectives.

The starting point of Odhni was a project to produce a video relating to women and AIDS awareness. With this in focus, the authors initiated a discussion with a group of women who were involved in a process of rethinking of dominant familial norms.

The group included members of a mutual support collective of women litigants, involved in cases of marital disputes in the Family Courts, a social activist working with these women, a professional singer, a researcher and one of the authors. The other author, the only male, was accepted as the cameraperson of the group. This group does not purport to represent ‘Indian women’ in general, nor the video or this paper claim to make any generalisations on this theme.

"Any improvement is possible only if we fight these parents and these in-laws. I feel so angry...feel like stabbing them. Go to his company (husband’s workplace), call him out and stab him! That’s the only alternative left now! I feel so angry...so angry. You play with our lives, destroy us...Are we their toys?"

"They say that only men experience desire, but women also do. A woman might abstain for 3 or 4 years...not for 5 or 10...At least, I don’t think so. I’m talking from my own experience."

Right at the very outset, rather than disseminating information related to AIDS, it
Body mapping involved a collective process of marking out various body parts on a life-size outline of a woman

was decided that more basic issues related to gender, power and sexuality needed to be addressed. After a series of discussions, the group decided to try out the use of video to share, with other women, their experiences of collectively exploring their own feelings of pain, shame and anger, as well as their hopes and desires.

A Three Day Workshop

A workshop was held for a three day period and the entire workshop was recorded on video by the authors. The starting point of the workshop was a game that took participants back into their past lives, facilitating the reliving of difficult moments and a sharing of feelings and experiences relating to sexuality and their bodies.

"As a child, I even played with boys... no restrictions... all day long. My elder brother would say she's a child, let her be. But as I grew up, I was not allowed to go out of the house at all. I would yearn for sunlight."

“When we get married, we have many hopes and dreams, but he [my husband] only thinks of satisfying his own desires. Doesn’t think of my desires... He will never fulfill my desires, that’s what I feel.”

“Some husbands... Now my husband, he would drink occasionally. When there was no one else at home, he would pinch my arm hard. I used to be even fatter and he used to be thin and he would pinch so hard. When I cried out he would beat me. Is this love? He would say that he was doing it playfully, out of affection. But can you call this love.”

Having begun to collectively share their feelings, desires and dreams, the participants felt that they could begin to look at themselves and their bodies anew. Through an exercise in body mapping.

Body Mapping

Body mapping, in this case, involved a collective process of marking out various body parts on a life-size outline of a woman, they explored the different areas of their bodies, areas where they experienced pleasure and pain, areas they felt comfortable or ashamed to talk about.

“I drew this because for me, breasts represent the intense relationship between mother and child. The mutual pleasure it affords. It is perhaps the deepest form of intimacy one can experience”

“For me, the place from where the child emerges. At birth, there is a lot of trauma, which obviously is not pleasurable, but when I hold the child in my arms, I feel so happy that I am a woman. I realise the great power that we have, that enables us to create another being out of our own. I find the sexual relationship painful, but when the child is born, I feel good”

“How often do we look at our own bodies? We talk easily about other parts. The head, legs. But when it comes to those parts, we fumble in shame for words. So we are alienated from our own bodies!”

In a social and cultural context, where the notion of a ‘good woman’ involves a denial of
The making of Odhni has been a process of self-critique and redefinition of perspectives on women, sexuality and empowerment.

desire and sexual expression on the part of women and compliance with patriarchal familial norms, the recognition of body and self-hood as a collective experience was profoundly empowering. The women began to experience a new ease, as it were, with their bodies, as they participated in creative theatre and dance, song writing and singing.

Prior to the workshop, we did not have any clear cut idea about the kind of video that would emerge. We had merely decided to record the interactions, and then see what could be done with them.

The Video

At the end of the workshop, we (the authors/producers) were left with 700 minutes of footage, and a feeling of panic. How were we to condense all that went on in those 3 days into a 20 minute capsule? How could we 'tie' it all together in a coherent fashion, given the diverse range of experiences, feelings and activities that were shared? How could we express the specificity of this experience, without attempting generalisations about 'Indian women'?

While the workshop experience had meant intense involvement and exhilaration, the editing process called for a distillation from the material, looking at it in terms of coherence, intensity of expression and production values. During the workshop, we interpreted the metaphor odhni through improvisations using songs and choreography.

This became the unifying metaphor for the video. The introductory game served as a device to structure the presentation of experiences. Once this structure was arrived at, it was easier to work with the material.

After making a preliminary version, we shared it with the group. They felt that many of the activities that they had enjoyed, like singing, dancing and acting, should also have been included in the video—they would have liked a much longer programme.

On the other hand, we, as producers, were concerned with the quality of the final production, with whether it would sustain audience interest, and these considerations had mediated our choice of what to include. And it was we who took the final decisions.

In the video, the end product of the entire process, excerpts from the workshop are interwoven with song and commentary.

Starting with the circumscribed space of the odhni, it uses a game with photographs to structure the retelling of past experiences and the sharing of feelings. This structuring device perhaps makes the workshop appear like a very coherent and intensely focused exercise when, in practice it was much more loosely structured, moving back and forth, with long moments of waiting and silence, as the group struggled to cope with the self-consciousness of being recorded on video.

The second part of the video is organised around the activity of body mapping and ends with a recurrence of the odhni motif. The video attempts to convey both the feelings of empowerment that the collective interaction generated, and at the same time, the

anubhav
May 1999
While the simplistic version of development communication, introduced in the 1960s, fell in to disrepute, in the subsequent years, its newer variants, which speak of people’s ‘participation’ continue to be informed by the same dividing practice.

limits of these, which is an aspect that we will come back to in our concluding remarks.

The making of Odhni marks, for the authors, a turning point in the process of producing media materials related to women, their bodies and sexuality. In many ways, it has been a process of self-critique and redefinition of perspectives on women, sexuality and empowerment.

In retrospect, our notion of woman’s self-image seems rather simplistic: a sort of one to one correspondence between our bodies and ourselves.

For instance, in our anxiety to ‘reach’ women, our emphasis was on producing material that they would regard as ‘useful’. In effect, we chose a theme that had a heavy bias towards presenting information desired by women to help them perform their ‘functions’. These functions are based on the existing images of woman as ‘wife’ and ‘mother’.

On the other hand, our main objective was to question these static images. So while meeting an expressed need, we were at the same time questioning the existing basis of this need [...] In retrospect, our notion of woman’s self-image seems rather simplistic: a sort of one to one correspondence between our bodies and ourselves. To put it crudely, there was an underlying presumption that in criticising existing attitudes to menstruation and our bodies and presenting ‘healthy’ attitudes, we could call women to re-examine their personhood (Monteiro, 1982:28).

The slide show series can be considered as ideologically consonant with the larger projects of ‘women’s liberation’ and ‘development communication’, both of which have undergone a state of crisis in recent years.

From Our Story to Odhni

In the early eighties, one of the authors was involved in a project. This project, part of an adult education programme directed at women in the Bombay slums, culminated in a series of 5 slide-sound programmes for women entitled ‘Our Story, the Story of Womanhood’

Our broad objective for the series was to explore existing myths and images of women, to understand how these arise in our social milieu and to pose the problem of alternatives towards more fulfilling self-images and relationships (Monteiro, 1982:2).

The production of the series involved a process of discussion and feedback, through which the slide shows were modified and finalised. It was rated as a popular series, being widely used by women’s groups and other organisations to the present. Along with the ‘success’ of the series, however, came a host of problems and questions.

There was a feeling that the possibilities of the
Thus, the modern urban Indian, elite, while looking up to their Western counterparts, simultaneously treat the traditional rural populace as targets for transformation, attributing their underdeveloped state to an absence of modern attitudes, values and practices. This transformation is regarded as involving the instrumental use of the media.

The very production of development communication lies a fundamental dividing practice, the modern vs. the traditional, the norms of modernity forming the yardstick by which tradition is adjudged as lacking in every respect and as a site for change. This dividing practice, an effect of the relations of power between the First and Third World, is reorganised at the local orders, effecting ever new forms.

Within the discourse of development communication, specific strategies of transformation related to women impinge on their bodies and their selfhood, sexuality and reproduction. Since child bearing and their upbringing are regarded as the exclusive domain of women, the mental and the physical well-being of the child (read the whole society) is eugenically linked to the mother. This necessitates a regime of surveillance, scientific study and control of the domains of female sexuality and reproduction.

In making Odhni, the authors attempted to break with the genre of development communication. Instead of an “us”, making a video to create awareness in a “them”, there was an attempt to embark on a collective journey to interrogate our selfhood, in particular our relation to our own bodies and sexuality. We were inspired by the writings of Michel Foucault

The Discourse on Sexuality

Foucault views sexuality as a product of certain historical conjectures, a construct. This view is opposed to the prevalent notion of sexuality as rooted in the organic, with its bearings in biology.

In the West, it was during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries that sexuality was identified as a potential area for scientific inquiry. Since sexuality has been posited as something inherent in the individual, its pursuance was only in keeping with the objectives of investigating the ‘individual’, so as to facilitate more effective strategies of administration and societal control. Apart from this, this inquiry was also aimed at comprehending and constituting the individual and providing him/her with a biological identity, soon to emerge as a way of exercising domination by specifying mythical structures that impinged upon the individual and the collective.

These centuries also saw a spurt in more open discourses about sexuality. Sexuality came to enjoy, more than ever, the status of being a part of the every-day. But at the same time, linking these powerful drives to the irrational, the rationale for its harnessing was also strengthened, sexual drives as a given biological
fact that need to be controlled if 'reason' had to prevail.

In the Third World context, the scientific study of sexuality was related to the imperatives for fertility control, which was tied up to economic aid packages from the First World (Du Bois).

These concerns were impelled by the fear of a burgeoning Third World population and its alleged impact on the environment and natural resources. More recently, this net has been widened to include possible threats from HIV and the need to contain its propagation. This has spawned a number of studies and programmes for the control and administration of AIDS.

This video was intended as a part of a larger study sponsored by a First World agency. The stated objectives of this study were to address the following questions:

♦ What are women's behaviours with regard to their sexual and reproductive health?
♦ What socio-cultural factors affect their sexual and reproductive behaviours?

The perspective informing the video was different from these objectives, seeking to study the sexual and reproductive practices of Third World women. This presented a peculiar problem: In the absence of any homogenous, well-defined modes of expressing one's own sexuality, how could one possibly talk about preventive measures against AIDS?

In India, for both men and women, the gender relations of power, work with a repertoire of forms of self-definition that include the rites of passage and roles, aphorisms and proverbs, prescriptions and taboos. So we decided that we would try to explore, sexuality, to question these relations of power. This act, we thought, would strengthen the on-going practices of resistance, particularly because other groups of women could 'use' this video for organising similar workshops.

**Odhni as Resistance**

What could be the expressed modes of this resistance? Would the act of sharing collectively one's feelings amount to it? The negation of traditional modes of control of sexuality has led to new forms of control and resistance that are more subtle. The modernist conception would see the act of 'talking openly about sex' as an act of liberation; the 'sexual revolution' of the 1970s is a case in point.

Foucault sees these apparently transgressive discourses as only rooted in an act of confession, euphemistically put as an act of self-reflection, and hence, the powers of emancipation assigned to these discourses as grossly overrated.

Foucault argues against the portrayal of truth as extraneous to power, and of liberation as a position outside the equations of power. In the domain of sexuality, the presupposition that truth is extraneous to power takes the form of the thesis that the history of sexuality has been history of gradual repression.

One way of accounting for this gradual repression is to link it to the growth of capitalism, which, it is argued, programmatically aspires to negate sexuality, viewed as a deterrent to the interests of production. Eros is viewed as incompatible with the tenets of the capitalist order; sexual repression as a form of exercising domination is the predominant consequence.

Since the repressive hypothesis posits sexual repression as a fall-out of the capitalist order, it also projects sexual liberation as a significant expression of subversion and resistance, for open discourses about sexuality are ascribed a subversive political potential, a threat to the
The idea was to put forward a collective resistance without portraying these experiences in a voyeuristic manner. There are many reasons for the ready acceptance of such a notion of power in the present-day discourse. The philosopher/social scientist/activist conveniently situates him/herself outside these forms of power and assigns a privileged revolutionary potential to his/her discursive practices, dishing out promises of new order beyond these power equations.

Odhni as a Metaphor

The motifs of female sexuality, we have seen, are intrinsically linked to the modes of subject formation, offering a site of resistance and hence, any interrogation of the issue has to confront the question of selfhood.

For female-subjects, these modes of power effect a repertoire of forms of self-definition that include the rites of passage and roles, aphorisms and proverbs, prescriptions and taboos.

"These swear words [about the private parts of a woman] reflect the tendency to make us feel ashamed of our bodies, inferior. The purpose of such words is to instil a sense of shame. Those parts of a woman's body are equated with shame whereas for men, the corresponding parts are associated with their valour, their strength. This difference is obvious"

The workshop and the video attempted to initiate a process of questioning of gender identities and the relations of power that produce and sustain them, resisting the temptation of positing an 'utopia' of ideal identities and relations, with the realisation that there is no moment of liberation, no teleological passage to truth beyond power.

"As we accepted our bodies, we experienced a new shakti within ourselves. It is not that we were freed from all constraints; Experiencing our own power helped us in raising a critique of what we are, of what we are supposed to be"

The idea was to put forward a collective resistance without portraying these experiences in a voyeuristic manner. This again presented a peculiar dilemma: how does one talk about sexuality and yet remain incognito from the voyeur.

In other words, we wanted to control the use of the video, to 'protect' the identities of the participants, which was a double-bind situation. This dilemma was particularly acute while editing the video: we wanted to produce a programme that would be used by bonafide audiences; a programme that would sustain 'interest', a programme that is not voyeuristic, a programme that would, above all, subvert constituted identities and yet, protect these identities!

This was the point where, the fundamental dividing practice of development communication, made a reappearance. With a few exceptions, there was a qualitative difference in the sharing of experiences on video by the 'us' (consisting of the authors and the middle-class resource persons) and the 'them'. We tended to theorise and generalise about experiences and feelings, to be conscious of the probable implications, for our identities as 'good women', of our recorded discussions.
That is how we stumbled on the dual connotation of odhni: as a marker of tradition, oppressive and claustrophobic; the other as a comforting metaphor of security and shelter, home to our constructed identities.

At the same time, we expected them to switch to a confessional mode for the camera, enabling them, in the process, to question the formation of their identities. Many of our statements were intended to commit them to this process. On the other hand, off-camera interactions, which went on till late in the night, witnessed a breaking down of these dividing practices, as we shared our most intimate experiences and feelings with them.

The camera became, as it were, a marker of the dividing practices that we employed for creating our own identities. By and large, we did not dare to step beyond the bounds of the circumscribed spaces of our metaphorical odhni. Paradoxically, they, who did not theorise about liberation and empowerment, and who, in their everyday lives, might use odhni were the ones to cast them away, coming perilously close to subverting their constituted selves.

That is how we stumbled on the dual connotation of odhni: as a marker of tradition, oppressive and claustrophobic; the other as a comforting metaphor of security and shelter, home to our constructed identities. Is there a moment of truth beyond these metaphors of power?

The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating, it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them (Foucault cited in Carroll, 1987.53)

A Collective Exploration of Ourselves, Our Bodies Odhni: A Collective Exploration of Ourselves, Our Bodies, [VHS(PAL), English, Hindi, 23 min, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Bombay, scripted and directed by Anjali Monterio and K. Jayashankar] was produced for the project 'Understanding Sexuality: Ethnographic Study of Poor Women in Bombay', which was a part of a larger programme on Women and AIDS, sponsored by the International Council for Research on Women.

References

Foucault, M.,(1986), Afterword: The Subject and Power, in Dreyfus, H.L. and Rabinow, P., Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics, Sussex Harvester Press.
Young, R.,(1981), Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader, London: RKP.