

Communication in Rural Health Care

Tea Shops as a Channel

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A GRADUAL increase in the number and popularity of 'tea-shops' has been observed in the rural areas of Delhi. Such shops appear to be patronised by a cross-section of rural community for whom a visit to such shops perhaps provides with a diversion and diversified opportunities to pass time, meet co-villagers, exchange information and interact on matters both of local and metropolitan importance. This interactional situation assumes important dimension in a rural setting as these shops often function as focal point for receiving and transmitting information in a rural community. Tea shops as such can provide with a vital venue to establish meaningful rapport with a rural community and assist developmental agencies in channelising the dissemination of information in rural areas. This paper presents the findings of an exploratory study conducted to know the potentialities of such shops as a channel of communication for introducing new information on community based health programmes in rural areas.

The data required for the study was collected from ten tea shops situated in or around five villages under the area covered by the Rural Health Training Centre, Najafgarh, New Delhi. 'Observation' was the method of data collection. Keeping in view the nature and scope of the study, gatherings of villagers in or around such shops at different times of days were observed by a team of observers over a period of 15 days. The observers did not participate in the discussions taking place in these tea shops but confined themselves to observing and recording their observation about the attendance, nature of discussions and communication behaviour of people in and around such shops.

The Findings

The findings of the study are presented below:

Type of shops: In all the five villages there were a total number of 22 shops, of which seven were what might be termed as "general shops" with the provision of selling seasonal vegetables, pulses, jaggery, bidi, cigarettes, match boxes, etc., five were vegetable shops and the remaining were tea shops. It may be indicated that while all the tea shops had the provision of selling tea, milk, bidi, cigarettes, biscuits, sweets and saltish preparations to their customers, three had also

made arrangements to sell sorts of cold drinks during summer.

Location of tea shops: Of the ten tea shops, only one was located within a village, six were at the outskirts of the villages near bus stops and the remaining three were situated outside the villages at busy road crossings or bus junctions.

Timings of tea shops: A variation in the timings of the functioning of tea shops was observed depending on the locational factor. Tea Shops situated at bus stands and road junctions were observed to start functioning from early mornings (around 6.0 a.m.), shops situated inside villages opened only around 7.30-8.0 a.m. Further, whereas tea shops at bus stands and road junctions remained open till late (around 10.0-10.30 p.m.) shops inside villages were usually found closed by 8.00 p.m.

Ownership of tea shops: Almost all the shops were found to be owned by villagers residing in the villages. The owner of one shop, however, was an outsider who was daily coming to his shop from an adjoining urban area.

Facilities available at tea shops: Villagers were observed to be drawn to these shops to utilize a multiplicity of facilities which included:

a. Newspapers: Two shops were receiving Hindi and one Urdu daily newspapers. The daily newspapers were observed to be an added attraction to the customers of these shops. A number of villagers were found to be visiting these shops and spending considerable amount of their time in reading these dailies.

b. Radio: Four shops were having radio/transistor sets which were found to be tuned to 'Vividh Bharti' or 'Haryana' programmes most of the time except for the duration during which 'news' was read on the air. People present in and around the shops at such hours were found to be attentive to the news items which often stimulated discussions, occasionally heated ones, amongst the participating villagers.

c. Hookah smoking: The popularity and practice of hookah smoking especially among younger generation is showing a downward trend in preference to bidi/cigarette smoking; it still remains popular amongst older people. In the area three shops were observed to be extending the privilege of hookah smoking to its 'privileged and selected' customers.

d. Drinking water: All the tea shops had made some arrangements of drinking water for their customers. Two of the six shops which were

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situated at the road/bus junctions had also hand-pumps installed nearby for the benefit of their customers and one had a well nearby.

Attendance at the tea shops: Studying the attendance at tea shops it was observed that comparatively larger number of people visited such shops during morning and afternoon hours and smaller number of villagers visited these shops during evenings. During morning and afternoon, depending on the location of these shops, an assembly of 3-15 persons could easily be seen to be present in or around these tea shops. Tea shops situated at bus stands and road junctions attracted larger numbers of villagers.

Characteristics of customers: The characteristics of villagers visiting tea shops in the rural area was found to differ during morning, afternoon and evening hours. During morning hours usually people in service or villagers going out of the villages come to such shops, or assemble near it and wait for the buses. During this period they exchange pleasantries, share information, comment on matters of common interest and glance through the daily newspapers, if such dailies are available in the shops. During this period they are often in a hurry and normally they are not able to afford sufficient time to enjoy a cup of tea or involve themselves in long and extended discussions. Their stay during this period is short depending on the arrival and departure of their means of transport.

During afternoon hours, a large proportion of customers of tea shops usually are farmers—both old and young—who, after completing their work in the fields, come to such shops to pass their time. As they are comparatively free at this time (except during sowing and harvesting seasons) they remain at or around such shops for considerable long periods of time. It is during this period that they usually pass their time by playing cards and interacting on matters of common interest with their co-villagers. During afternoons, gatherings at such shops also consist of school teachers who, to or from their schools, come to such shops for taking tea or to wait for buses. An exchange of pleasantries, information on various subjects of current importance and common interest do occur between teachers and farmers present in the shops. Further, at this time some inquisitive farmers seek some information from school teachers which the latter were observed to be providing to the best of their knowledge. This interaction between teachers and farmers might be considered as an important characteristic of tea shops.

Evenings are again a repetition of the scenes of morning hours with an important difference—during the evening, villagers return from their place of work and while passing through such shops they informally pass on new information to them, which they might have acquired from various sources including their co-passengers in buses. This new information, or part of it, in turn,

is interpreted, discussed and commented upon by the shopkeepers and villagers who happen to be present in the shops thus ensuring its diffusion by word of mouth in a face-to-face situation in the rural communities.

Another important observation recorded about the customers related to their leadership status in the rural community. It was found that both types of leaders, i.e., formal leaders such as village panchayat members, village sarpanch and informal leaders were visiting such shops. It was, however, observed that higher the sphere of influence of such leaders, the shorter was the duration of their stay at such shops. This observation may perhaps be explained by the fact that the influential persons are frequently sought after by a large number of villagers for help and assistance in matters pertaining to their dealings with different governmental and non-governmental agencies both in and outside the area, as such they have to divide their time between various such engagements, as a result of which they are unable to spend much time at tea shops.

It was further observed that very few women visit tea shops and occasionally when they do, it is when they have to accompany their male-folks or to wait at bus stops or have to pass through such shops at bus junctions or road crossings. Even on such occasions they prefer to sit in a secluded corner of the shop maintaining a perfect isolation and not participating or interfering with any of the activity going around them in the shop.

Average Time Spent

During the observation period it was found that about one-fifth of the total customers were regular visitors and used to spend 2-3 hours per day at tea shops. The remaining customers, such as office-goers, travellers, etc., were spending, on an average, about half an hour at tea shops.

Scope and Nature of Discussions

Studying the nature and scope of discussions taking place at such shops, it was observed that a wide range of topics were discussed at tea shops. Villagers were found to be involved in sharing information, expressing opinions and debating issues and in discussing topics of wider perspective in and around such shops. While local issues such as panchayat elections, functioning of village panchayats and various governmental agencies in the area, crop prospects and day-to-day happenings in villages were often commented on in such places, customers have also shown their interest and inclination in discussing and commenting on matters which fall beyond the purview of local affairs such as national political affairs, international developments, price rise, etc. In this context, the communication behaviour of the shopkeepers was found to be an important factor in initiating such discussions.

Percentage of time spent in discussing topics related to

Time	Characteristics of majority of customers	Localite importance	Metropolitan importance	Agriculture	Various agencies	Listening to radio & newspaper reading	Card playing
Morning	Service class people, villagers going out of villages	25.0	15.0	30.0	—	30.0	—
Afternoon	Farmers, School teachers	23.0	7.0	40.0	9.0	15.0	6.0
Evening	Villagers returning from their place of work	30.0	35.0	15.0	5.0	8.0	7.0

The information provided by shopkeepers influenced, to a considerable extent, the nature and direction of such discussions. How far the outcome of such discussions affected the behaviour of the participants and their community members could not be included in the scope of the present study.

A disturbing observation recorded in the study related to the discussion on health programmes at such shops. Whereas the developmental activities of community development block were found to be discussed at tea shops, no such discussion of health programmes ever occurred at such places during the period of the study.

Approximate time spent in discussing various topics during different hours of a day at tea shops is shown above.

Aggregate of time spent in discussing various topics during morning, afternoon and evening hours at such shops is shown above. It would be observed that discussions on topics relevant to local conditions and problems constitute an important part of tea shops.

Summary and Conclusions

The study, exploratory in its nature, was conducted to know to what extent 'tea shops' in rural areas, which are emerging as important discussion and gossip centres, can be involved in programmes designed to promote better understanding about community-based health programmes. Reviewing the findings of the study, it is observed that such shops in the area, where the study was conducted, are generally situated at the outskirts of villages, at road junctions and bus stops and are mostly owned by local villagers. It was observed that such shops are visited by a large number of villagers, local influentials who often spend some of their time here and discuss and comment on day-to-day happenings of the area. It would thus be seen that such shops present a situation that can be utilised by health workers in gaining general understanding of local area, its problems and power structure and in establishing a purposeful rapport with the local community members.

On the basis of the available information it is difficult to infer whether formal educational programmes can be organised effectively at tea shops. The constraints to such an effort are likely to be twofold: it may be perceived as a deterrent to the normal functioning of tea shops by the owners and even by some of the customers and since, as observed, most of the villagers, especially during morning and evening hours, are able to spend only a short period of time, they may not be able to spare sufficient time to participate in such formal instructional programmes. However, as such shops are visited by a considerable number of villagers, attempts can be made to expose them to various health programmes being carried out in the area with an imaginative use of simple and attractive visual aids which can be displayed in and around such shops. Considering the observation that the communication behaviour of shopkeepers is an important factor in initiating discussions on various aspects/topics amongst his customers, an encouragement to such shopkeepers to include discussions on health, prevention of disease and family welfare may perhaps yield results in the direction of enlightening the rural community about the need and importance of such programmes.

DONATIONS

October-December 1982

General Fund: Miss T. Thomas, Indore Rs. 20; Miss S. V. Damle, Thane Rs. 30; Miss I. B. Ganpathi, Mysore Rs. 101; Miss A. E. Cantem, Nagpur Rs. 100; Mr. P. S. Bazray, Ranchi Rs. 25; M.I.B.E. Sch., Indore Rs. 100; SNA Unit, Dist. Hospt, Akola Rs. 25; Miss H. E. John, Jaipur Rs. 30; Miss T. K. Adranvala, Lonavala Rs. 100; Mr. Nathi Ram, Norway Rs. 500. **Nurses Welfare Fund:** Miss S. V. Damle, Thane Rs. 90; Miss B. Sorenson, Mursan (U.P.) Rs. 250; Mrs. I. V. Kulkarni, Kalyan Rs. 51; Miss T. K. Adranvala, Lonavala Rs. 100. **Staff Welfare Fund:** M.I.B.E. Sch., Indore Rs. 100; Miss T. K. Adranvala, Lonavala Rs. 100. **Flood Relief Fund:** Mrs. Susan Martin, Bruinei Rs. 1000. Miss T. K. Adranvala, Lonavala Rs. 50. **Building Fund:** M.I.B.E. Sch. of Nag., Indore Rs. 000.