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Picture Songs

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SUMMARY

Picture songs were invented by a Bangladeshi NGO, Shushilan, during the PETRRA project. Although rooted in traditional song, dance and painting, the songs are new genre, an innovative way of teaching. Combined with conventional extension, the songs motivate people to adopt new technologies such as modern rice varieties, fewer agro-chemicals and more organic fertiliser, which some farmers said helped them to double their yields from about 2 ½ ton per hectare to over 5, while lowering their costs. The songs invite people to bring in samples of pests, diseases, soil and water to the plant health lab. Shushilan encourages women to speak in meetings, to run demonstration farms and to work alongside men on their own land. New information reaches large numbers of women through cultural shows that are a socially accepted form of entertainment. Songs are one of the few ways that people will learn and repeat a message by heart, and enjoy it. If you want people to remember something for the rest of their lives, teach them to sing it.

ACTORS AND NETWORKS

Shushilan means 'good practice', and it is the name of an NGO in the far southwest of Bangladesh, just east of the Indian border and north of the Sundarbans, the 'beautiful forest' of mangroves, shrimp and royal Bengal tigers. Shushilan teaches communities to respect the rights of women, the poor, and the marginalised. Shushilan has a long and rich tradition of using drama, but until they started to work with the PETRRA project in 2000, they had no agricultural programme, and no experience in agricultural extension. Shushilan now does a lot of work in agriculture and has 130 staff members, up from 20 in 1997. They now have projects with CARE Bangladesh, Concern, and other large, international NGOs.

Shushilan organised five farmer co-operatives and works with 150 farmers' clubs in Kaliganj and Shyamnagar upazilas, in Satkhira district. The clubs were started in the 1970s by villagers to deal with sports and local problems. The clubs are deeply rooted in rural society and are receptive to agricultural extension.

Recently, the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) started working with smallholder farmers around Kaliganj to produce quality seed as part of the rice seed network (see Chapter 17). The Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI) breeds the new rice varieties and develops many of the technologies that Shushilan extends. Shushilan is proud of its relationship with BRRI and the DAE.



Before Shushilan and PETRRA, perhaps no one had thought of using dance and picture songs in agricultural extension.

EVOLUTION OF THE METHOD

A touch of romance

Troupes of folk actors once roamed the Old World countries from Britain to China, putting on musical plays in small towns and villages. Bangladesh had several forms of travelling shows. Jari gan was singing and dancing, performed by a small troupe of four to six people. Leto was a musical by a lone troubadour, and jatra was a drama play, long and complex like a movie, with a cast of players. In the twentieth century, radio, movies, TV and videos killed these live, performing art forms.

Wadud Nawaz, advisor of Shushilan, wanted to bring back the jari gan, while some people still remembered how to do it. There is perhaps a touch of romance in trying to save the knowledge of a complex task, of a thing that is too big and too alive to be kept in books. Performing a jari gan is like building a Fijian deep-sea canoe (Balick and Cox, 1996), or sailing from Hawaii to Tahiti by the stars (Finney, 1991). Knowledge of it must live in the heads of a crew, several

people, who know how to act together. Once the skills are lost, they will be irretrievably gone.

Nostalgia aside, there was another reason to try to revive the *jari gan*; it could be a way of teaching people, instead of just amusing them. Live musicals could reach women, because in Bangladesh the men often go to cinemas in town, but women rarely leave their own hamlet (see also Chapters 7 and 9 on video and Going Public). When the travelling shows stopped coming to the villages, a bit of innocent fun went out of the lives of the women.

Art for teaching

Ujir Hossain, Shushilan's cultural director, says he wanted to use folk songs for teaching since the mid 1990s. In July 2000, Shushilan bid for, and won, one of the first PETRRA sub-projects, which used folk songs as an extension method. A year after they had been using songs to teach new rice technologies, Mr. Hossain recalled some of the peep shows he had seen as a kid. A man would bring around a box and people would peer through an opening in it at amusing pictures inside. Mr. Hossain realised that if the pictures were much larger, a whole audience could see them at once. So he drew on another piece of Bengali artistic heritage: paintings on cloth.

In 2001, the singers commissioned a local artist to paint them a pot. The Bengali-English Dictionary defines pot as:

1. cloth, screen, veil, canvas, garment.
2. painting, canvas, painted piece of cloth, picture (Ali et al., 1994).

Shushilan calls their new genre a 'pot song', but here we call it a 'picture song' to avoid confusion with the English word 'pot'.

THE PICTURE SONG METHOD

The singers on stage

The barefoot dancers sing boisterously as they swagger into the room, circling the stage. They wear dark yellow uniforms, but some of them have a bright red sash tied around their heads. They play simple music on traditional instruments: an organ that slings over the neck, a drum and some cymbals. It is a catchy tune that the audience might find themselves humming as they walk home from the show.

Two of the dancers are women, and one of them is dressed in a floor-length skirt and pants. Her eyes sparkle with enthusiasm as she sings and whirls around, stopping to reach out her arms to her audience, engaging them. Lija Hossain's voice has a good-natured urgency.

Two of the dancers hold a large canvas, scrolled over two poles. They keep singing

even as they set the scroll upright. Smiling and swaying with the beat, they unroll a picture larger than a giant screen TV.

The performers are part of Shushilan's Cultural Department. Some of them are full-time employees, but some of them are part time. One of the singers is a barber and another has a village shop.

The stage is a meeting room with a cement floor, under a roof, but open to the breeze on three sides. It is part of Shushilan's rural training centre, a teaching farm with cows and chickens, tree nurseries, a library and lab near the small town of Kaliganj.

When they hear the music, the neighbours drift in to see the show that they must have all seen before. And that's the point: it's fun. Handsome people belting out a contagious tune, rolling out a scroll of bright drawings, and lively dancing: it's supposed to draw people in and hold their attention, and it does. The troupe often performs upon demand of local organisations, their show taking place in the open air, or in large meeting rooms.

Although Shushilan calls the performance a song, some parts are more like an opera. The picture song lasts for 45 minutes, half as long as a movie. And like a movie, the picture song has enough time to convey a lot of information.

The message

Shushilan promotes modern, high-yielding varieties (HYV) developed by BIRRI and promoted by DAE. But the ballad urges listeners to use organic fertiliser such as cow dung and balanced chemical fertilisers (see also Chapter 8).

The song tells farmers not to abuse insecticides, that insect pests have natural enemies: toads, ladybird beetles, and spiders. Later on, Liza Parvin sings about improved methods for preserving seed in a pot (see also Chapters 3 and 7). The multiple topics addressed indicate the cross-fertilisation that has taken place between various sub-projects.

The song ends by inviting farmers to come to Shushilan with samples of crop pests,



diseases, soil and water to see if their pond water is right for rearing shrimp. Shushilan will analyse the samples and give people a written recommendation on fertiliser, water, or how to control their rice pests. Shushilan keeps a database of the samples, the results, and the written recommendations.

Plant health lab

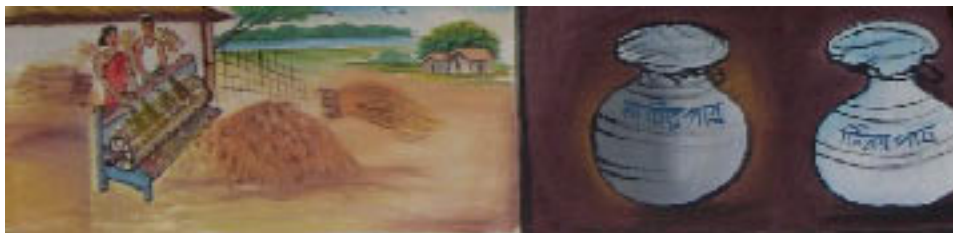
Shushilan never tried to use the picture songs as their only extension method. They combine songs with other genres. A picture song may motivate a farmer to take



The picture song encourages farmers to apply cow manure to their fields (left), and to apply urea three times and compound fertiliser once during the rice-growing season (right).



These names look Bengali, but they are actually English. Among these beneficial animals, the insects are labelled (clockwise, from upper left) carabid beetle, ladybird beetle and mirid bug. Farmers have their own names for many insects, but learning these and their meaning is harder than it seems.



This detail urges the audience to thresh rice seed separately, and to store it in a plastic pot, or an earthen one, treated to absorb less moisture, and covered with plastic.



Suriya Sultana (left) and Shahina Parvin (right) run a soil sample in the small lab in Shushilan's Agricultural Service Centre in Kaliganj district. Farmers want not only their soil and water analysed, but also want to learn which pests and diseases affect their crop and what to do about it.

training courses from an extensionist in her village, visit demonstration plots, or Shushilan's agricultural service centre in Mahadpur village, where she has access to quality agricultural inputs and advice, take a soil, water, or plant health problem to their laboratory.

Shushilan analysed 842 samples this year (221 of soil, 216 of water and 405 pests and diseases). The main rice plant health problems farmers brought in were badami dag (brown spot), khol pora ('sheath burn' i.e. sheath blight), pata pora ('leaf burn', bacterial leaf blight), mazra poka (stem borer) and gandhi poka (stink bug).

While at the lab, farmers can read in the library.

Despite it being a new initiative, the librarian Suriya Sultana says she has about 25 visitors per week. Bentley and Boa (2004) tell a story about another community-based laboratory or plant health clinic in Bolivia.

Face-to-face method

Picture songs are like Going Public (see Chapter 9) a face-to-face method for reaching large audiences, but the scope to interact with the audience is smaller. The troupe has performed its agricultural opera hundreds of times, and has created some on other topics:

- Agricultural technologies
- Gender
- Human rights and good governance
- Natural calamities including climate change
- Alternative dispute resolution
- Natural resource management
- Environment

Shushilan emphasises three things: 1) reaching women farmers, 2) organised in authentic farmer clubs established years ago by the communities themselves, and 3) culturally appropriate extension.

Writing, rehearsing, validating

Shushilan decides the themes for their songs based on consultation with extension agents, farmers' co-ops and clubs and women's organisations. Shushilan's singer-

songwriter Uzir Hossain grew up on a small farm, and although he went to college he is still in touch with his roots. After he writes a song, he teaches it to the troupe. They rehearse it and put it on for the leaders of Shushilan, some of the staff and friends and neighbours from nearby villages. The audience comments on the show; Mr. Hossain edits it, and the troupe starts performing it for the communities. In Chapter 5, also Van Mele and colleagues stress the need to thoroughly pre-test videos.

Impact

About 25,000 people have seen the picture songs. Shushilan has planted 501 demonstration farms with local people, including 347 women.

We met with four farmers' clubs and asked the members what they had learnt from Shushilan. They said they had learnt to space their rice systematically, 18 by 20 cm, in lines, so they use about half as much seed as they used to. By analysing their soil they knew how much chemical fertiliser to use, so now they harvest more rice, using less insecticide. So their yields have sometimes doubled and their costs have gone down. One group said that they harvested 8 or 10 mon per bhiga (between 2.2 and 2.9 ton per ha) before the project, but afterwards their rice yield rose to 18 or 20 mon per bhiga (between 5.2 and 5.7 ton per ha).

When we asked them how they learnt these things, first they mentioned training in the villages by extension agents, followed by the picture songs in second or third place. The picture songs do not replace conventional extension, but they help to capture attention and reinforce messages. An extension programme could probably not be based only on dance numbers. But song and dance opens people's minds to a message that they can then learn in courses, demonstration plots, field days, videos and other methods.

In two of our meetings, men listened politely while thoughtful, articulate women did most of the talking. They said that until recently, women did not go out at all. Now they start going to the village market, and working in the rice fields, so the household saves money that would have been spent hiring labourers (see Box 10.1).

KEYS FOR SUCCESS

- Be entertaining



One must be able to hold the public's attention: it can be jokes, riveting speeches, demonstrations or even a certain tone of tenderness and sincerity. Agriculture is performance (Richards, 1989), and so is extension.

Box 10.1
Teach Your
Husband Well

- **Have something to say**
- **Blend the old and the new**
- **Use realistic, naturalistic drawings.**

Box 10.1 Teach Your Husband WellFazila, wife of Rafiqul Islam of Gobindapur Chashi Samity, Kaliganj says, "I received training from Shushilan in early 2001. I tried to apply the technique in our 30 decimal (1,200 square meters) plot during boro (dry season). The variety was BRRI dhan 28. I planted 1-2 seedlings per hill instead of 5-8, which was what we used to plant. I also used the recommended dose of fertiliser, far less than what we were using. Influenced by some neighbours, my husband came home furious and started beating me, 'you _____, how dare you keep our whole family fasting all year long! You take the risk of planting so few seedlings and use less fertiliser; everybody says the crop will be a damn failure'. He drove me out of the house. I went straight to Shushilan and came back with Mr. Tapan Kumar Biswas, the agriculture supervisor and coordinator, Md. Mostafa Akhteruzzaman. Both of them tried to convince my husband, but he was unyielding. At last, he agreed to keep half of the plot under the new cropping system and the rest his way. After 20 days the story changed, and after harvest the yield turned out to be more than double: the production was 250 kg in the traditional system, but 550 kg in the improved one. My husband was regretful and he accepted the new techniques. Now both of us cultivate our land together, under the improved system."

Gobindapur, Kaliganj, November 2003

DIFFICULTIES, RISKS AND ASSUMPTIONS

Live entertainment in extension needs a message that matters and an institution that supports it with materials, transportation and salaries.

The Shushilan songs have the right mix of message and music. The songs, dances and drawings have to be entertaining, but they have to have a message every step of the way, otherwise the singers are just competing with the TV.

People everywhere inherit their past and then reinvent it. Shushilan took folk tunes, and old-time road shows, but added educational lyrics and big pictures. They haven't brought the jari gan back to life, but used it as inspiration for something new. Adding agriculture to their existing cultural expertise could be done at low cost.

SCALING UP

Shushilan will keep working with farmers' clubs and co-operatives (see Box 10.2). Although Shushilan developed the picture song for PETRRA's Women-Led Cultural Extension sub-project, they now also perform picture songs for various other projects, such as fish and shrimp projects, supported by the World Fish Centre and others. The troupe is often asked to sing for NGOs like UTTARAN, Concern,

PETRRRA has made a lasting impact on Shushilan that goes way beyond the picture songs. Before PETRRRA, Shushilan did not work in agriculture or with extension. Both of these are now major parts of their work. PETRRRA activities helped them to get exposure to other donors and attract projects. In 2004, Shushilan employed 130 staff members, up from 20 in 1997.

Box 10.2
A Lasting
Impact

IDEAL and Nokshikatha, with audiences of 1,500 or more in each show. The DAE also invites them to farm communities in Kaliganj. Shushilan now considers agriculture as an integral part of community development. Whenever they perform a show on social issues, they include the picture song with the theme on agricultural technologies.

CONCLUSION

The first rule of extension is 'Thou shalt not be boring'. All extension must be interesting, even if it need not all be in dance numbers.

A recent article in *Natural History* suggested that humans sing instinctively. People in all countries and all cultures sing: at celebrations, at sporting matches, in the shower, after waking up in a good mood. Learning is about repetition, like reciting the multiplication table over and over until we know it. But the more we repeat a message, the more boring it gets. Songs are one of the few ways that people will learn and repeat a message by heart, and enjoy it. If you want people to remember something for the rest of their lives, teach them to sing it.

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