

# Public advocacy and people-centred advocacy: mobilising for social change

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*Public and people-centred advocacy are shaped by the political culture, social systems, and constitutional framework of the country in which they are practised. It is the practice of advocacy that determines the theory, and not vice versa. If advocacy is not rooted in grassroots realities and is practised only at the macro level, the voice of the marginalised is increasingly likely to be appropriated by professional elites. However, the very credibility of advocacy practitioners depends on their relationship with mass-based movements and grassroots perceptions of what constitutes desirable social change.*

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## Introduction

'Public advocacy' has become a bandwagon that everyone is clambering on to. But hardly anyone seems to know what it really is. The bandwagon is certainly very appealing. The 'fast-food' toolkits on the streets of the development market find a ready-made clientele. But they turn the ideas and action required for long-term social change into trivial, quick-fix tools for 'scaling up impacts'. In the process, public advocacy becomes a victim of the bandwagon syndrome. Many people claim that they are promoting or doing advocacy without really thinking about what they mean by this. How many of its proponents know that it is about actions that are rooted in the history of socio-political and cultural reform? Few seem to go beyond the bandwagon syndrome to redefine the concept and practice of advocacy in promoting social change.

As a form of social action, the nature and character of both public and people-centred advocacy are very much shaped by the political culture, social systems, and constitutional framework of the country in which they are practised. And they are influenced by the ways in which decision making and public policies are influenced by public-interest or social-action groups in different contexts. It is the practice of advocacy that determines the theory, and not vice versa. The trouble is that 'public advocacy' is used to signify a broad sweep of practices, ranging from public relations, market research, and report-writing to lobbying, public-interest litigation, and civil disobedience.

Public advocacy can be considered from three perspectives: political, managerial, or technical. While effective public advocacy integrates all three, the emphasis will depend on the beliefs and background of the proponent. For instance, a social or political activist will perceive public advocacy basically as a political process, which may involve some professional skills or technical understanding of the appropriate methods. But someone with a managerial background may see it as the effective use of technical devices, skills, and professional practices, with or without much of a political component. Hence the need for a long-term political and historical perspective on the concept and practice of public advocacy and people-centred advocacy, and their relevance for advancing a more humane, just, and equal world.

## Understanding advocacy: a political perspective

Public advocacy is a set of deliberate actions designed to influence public policies or public attitudes in order to empower the marginalised. The main difference between it and people-centred advocacy is that such actions are undertaken in ways that empower people, particularly the marginalised. In a liberal democratic culture, public advocacy uses the instruments of democracy and adopts non-violent and constitutional means. It is perceived as a value-driven political process, because it seeks to question and change existing unequal power relations in favour of those who are socially, politically, and economically marginalised. In the Indian context, grassroots organisation and mobilisation are used to generate an awareness of and assert one's rights as a citizen, and lend credibility, legitimacy, and crucial bargaining power to public advocacy.

Advocacy therefore involves the following:

- Resisting unequal power relations (such as patriarchy) at every level, from the personal to public, from family to governance.
- Engaging institutions of governance to empower the marginalised.
- Creating and using 'spaces' within the system, in order to change it.
- Strategising the use of knowledge, skills, and opportunities to influence public policies.
- Bridging micro-level activism and macro-level policy initiatives.

In India, one of the major thrusts of public advocacy is the implementation of existing social-justice legislation and social-security programmes. Progressive legislation such as the Equal Remuneration Act, the Dowry Prohibition Act, the Bonded Labour Prohibition Act, and the Prevention of Atrocities against Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Act is often honoured more in the breach than in the observance. This is principally because we lack the political will and administrative efficiency to put the legislation into practice, but also because of the incompatibility between libertarian or liberal constitutional values and traditional socio-cultural practices (like caste) and religious values (like fatalism).

Since, in a liberal democratic framework, public policies play a vital role in determining the directions of social justice, political and civil liberties, and the long-term interests of the environment and the general public, the primary focus of advocacy is to influence policy formulation, change, and implementation. But public policies are a function of the dominant political equation at a given time. Hence, in order to influence public policies, it is necessary to influence the prevailing power relations in favour of the marginalised.

Influencing power relations is a complex process involving confrontation and negotiation among different interest. To do this effectively depends on having other sources of power. In the context of public advocacy, there are six major sources of power:

- the power of people, or citizens' mobilisation
- the power of information and knowledge

- the power of constitutional guarantees
- the power of direct grassroots experience and linkages
- the power of networking alliances and solidarity
- the power of moral convictions.

Advocacy does not depend only on having information, but on being able to transform such information into knowledge by interpreting it with reference to specific values.

## Advocacy in India

India has seen public advocacy on issues such as environmental degradation, the rights of *dalits* and tribal peoples, women's rights, civil rights, and many others. While voluntary organisations and activist groups have focused on social, developmental, and political interventions at the micro level, their efforts to influence the formulation or implementation of public policies have tended to be fragmented, with little national impact. Even so, successful advocacy campaigns like the Silent Valley Movement in Kerala (described below) and the amniocentesis campaign in Maharashtra illustrate the potential of organised advocacy in exerting pressure to enact progressive legislation.

As the lives of ordinary Indians are increasingly affected by economic liberalisation, so there is a growing realisation among social-action groups of the need to empower the people to influence public policies. The isolated 'murmurs of dissent' can be amplified and channelled through advocacy efforts. Clearly the methods and approaches that are adopted must be grounded in the Indian context. It is also necessary to understand the limitations of public advocacy, as well as its potential for achieving social change in India. In many of the more effective advocacy campaigns, mass mobilisation, improvised forms of non-violent protest and persuasion, public-interest litigation, pressure for legislative change, lobbying of public officials, and media work were strategically and simultaneously used to build up an effective public argument.

Advocacy without mobilisation is unlikely to achieve much. The credibility and socio-political legitimacy of advocacy efforts largely depend on the means and the ends being consistent and compatible. In the Indian context, grassroots support rather than professional background is what most determines a lobbyist's credibility. A major challenge is therefore to safeguard and extend the political space in which to advocate for the cause of the marginalised, resisting the agendas set by others, whether the multinational corporations or various kinds of fundamentalism.

For practical as well as ethical reasons, then, public advocacy needs to go beyond public policy to the larger arena of influencing societal attitudes and practices so as to transform an oppressive value system into a more just and humane one. Public advocacy cannot be undertaken in a vacuum. Issues of deprivation, injustice, and rights violation are its impetus. Without an issue, what would one advocate for? The second part of this article therefore considers the question of communication in creating the momentum for people-centred advocacy for social change.

## People-centred advocacy

People-centred advocacy seeks to challenge and change unjust power relations at all levels: people are the alpha and omega. Though focused on public policies, the larger purpose of people-centred advocacy is social transformation such that all people realise their human rights, including civil, political, economic, and social rights. It seeks to promote social and

economic justice, equitable social change, and sustainable development. Public-policy change is one means of achieving these goals.

Social-change communication is central to people-centred advocacy, seeking to inform and educate a large number of people in such a way that they are enabled to change or redefine their attitudes and values and become more socially responsible and empowered citizens. In the past 20 years, there have been concerted efforts to build effective communication strategies on issues such as human rights, women's rights, development, and ecology. While these strategies helped to increase the outreach and efficiency of information dissemination, a big question mark hangs over their effectiveness in terms of bringing about attitudinal change.

Communication is ideally a sort of communion or sharing or exchanging the same set of thoughts, feelings, and attitudes. Creativity, communication, and community are what distinguish human beings from other living species. Language and symbols make for an organic and dynamic interplay between human creativity, a primordial urge to communicate, and the need for community living. One of the crises of the post-modern condition is that these organic linkages have broken down. Language and symbols have become subservient to highly mechanised tools for disseminating information. Hence MTV, Star New, Zee TV, BBC, Doordarshan, the Internet, etc. all have their own language and symbols. When the content is determined by the medium, the act of communication becomes increasingly alienated from real communities. Even if such media do give rise to imagined or virtual communities who feel connected through them, these individuals are not organically connected to each other.

When communication ceases to be grounded in communities, it is reduced to a dehumanised form of conveying information or entertainment. The absence of dynamic symbols and language that connect communities and communication has a negative effect on human creativity, particularly aesthetic creativity. The bewildering perplexity and anarchy of many of the 'music albums' disseminated through MTV or V channels illustrate the phenomenon. Fragmented and frozen images stare and laugh at you in the cacophony of sound and fury. Where does this leave us? How do social-change communicators locate themselves in this jangle? Why is it that we can inform people but somehow fail to change their attitudes and beliefs?

A recent example of this 'mal-communication' is the AIDS-awareness campaigns intended to educate people and to change their attitudes and behaviour. The international aid agencies imported sophisticated communication frameworks and mandarins to develop communication strategies and implementation channels. Millions of dollars were spent on five-star workshops and five-star consultants. But at the end of the day, the exercise had created more 'buzz' about AIDS than actual changes in people's attitudes about the socio-political implications of being HIV-positive, or more informed attitudes towards sexual choices. Even among the better-run campaigns on environmental protection or women's rights, information was transmitted and received, but without producing much change in attitudes. Partly, this is due to the inability of dehumanised forms of communication to touch people's hearts. In the proliferation of methods to disseminate information, values, feelings, and cultural ethos get marginalised or completely lost.

Furthermore, even the best of modern communication strategies generally fail to get beyond a middle-class audience; even if the information does reach relatively marginalised people in urban slums or rural areas, the message is often received without being digested. In the case of India, this means that the vast majority of people are either alienated from or simply not reached by post-modern communication tools and strategies. The lack of ethical clarity or political positions tends to produce ambiguous messages. So on the question of people who are HIV-positive, WHO has one stand and UNDP has a different one, though both of them are in the business of popular communication about the issue. The result is that ambiguous messages get lost in the labyrinth of tools and strategies.

## Medium in search of a message

Many social-change organisations are like a medium in search of a message. This is further complicated when the communication process is guided by institutional interests or by project priorities, rather than by conviction in the message. In the enthusiasm to create new methods, the conviction in and clarity of the message for social change somehow get lost. One of the major obstacles to changing people's attitudes is the gap between communication that is mediated through media such as television or the Internet, and socially mediated communication. The former tends to treat people as 'targets' and 'objects' that can be influenced or acted upon.

By contrast, in socially mediated or community-oriented communication, people participate in the process. Hence, they themselves become the medium and own the process. This makes it impossible to remain indifferent to what is being communicated. In the formal or technically driven media, the message is treated like a 'product' to be delivered to a 'target' audience. Indeed, focused information dissemination is almost like shooting at a target, so its communication strategies tend to emphasise 'packaging' the 'product' to make it more saleable. In socially mediated and community-oriented communication, it is the interaction that matters, and involves either the entire community or its 'opinion formers'.

Interactive communication not only helps to ensure that a message is delivered, but enables the recipients to analyse and interpret it in the language and cultural ethos that define their collective identity. In other words, it leads to an interpretative process that is capable of changing attitudes. Modern communication tools are highly efficient for broadcasting or for mass dissemination, but remain relatively dehumanised. Hence, they are unlikely to change people's attitudes. The socially mediated communication methods are rather slower and best suited for narrow-cast or community-based communication. The advantage of folk communication is that it is a creative and humanising community-based process.

## The medium is the message

I myself experienced the effectiveness of community-oriented communication in the social-change campaigns initiated by Kerala Sasthra Sahitya Parishat (KSSP) in the early 1980s. Through a series of low-cost, community-oriented communications, involving thousands of young people, KSSP was able to change people's attitudes in a very significant way. The best example is that of the Campaign against the Hydroelectric Project in the Silent Valley, popularly known as the Silent Valley Campaign. In the late 1970s when the campaign began, almost all the political parties, trade unions, and newspapers were either against it or indifferent to the cause. People were by and large indifferent to environment issues. But the situation dramatically changed over a period of two years, as large numbers of ordinary people began to support the campaign. There were processions and popular participation in almost all parts of Kerala. The campaign triggered off a debate on the effectiveness of the development models and paradigms. It emerged as one of the most effective people-centred advocacy campaigns for environmental protection and sustainable development.

There was no imported framework, no communication mandarins, no *swadeshi* (local) or *videshi* (foreign) funding, no big institution. What made the difference was people's participation in a communicative process and communicative action: the community-oriented folk methods clicked; they drew people into debates and discussions. This did not give people much space for indifference. Communication took the form of grounded debates at the grass-roots. The issue was discussed and debated in the local teashops with the morning cup of tea and newspaper. The press could not afford to ignore an issue that had become the focus of

such interest. As student activists, we made posters, wrote songs, and performed street plays to build up a public debate and discourse. No one told us what the strategy was, but we knew what the message was. We were emotionally and intellectually involved. We had a language and a song on our tongues. We had grown up with the symbols of folklore. We were from the people. Many of us were at our creative best. We were the grassroots. Without learning any theory of communication, I instantly realised the organic linkages between creativity, community, and communication.

Fifteen years later, when I studied the Silent Valley Campaign from the perspective of public advocacy, I was keen to know what exactly had changed public perceptions. Then I realised it was the active involvement of four poets and five poems that played a major role in drawing young people to the campaign. Poetry, *Sanmskarika Jathas* (cultural processions), street plays, indigenous and spontaneous poster campaigns, village-level debates, and pamphlets were all extensively used. But the major factor was the conviction in and clarity of the main message. The message preceded the medium, tools, and strategies. There were no institutional interests or communication framework to mediate between the people and the message. People became the medium, and the message travelled across drawing rooms to back yards, to tea-shops, to schools and colleges, to the countryside and city streets. There was no television or newspaper advertising. But there was a lot of poetry and lots of people. It played a major role in my own and many others' formative years of convictions and activism.

I have also experienced the power of socially mediated communication in the villages of Mizoram. Mizoram has a unique press culture, hosting scores of newspapers of different shapes and sizes. There is a culture of discussion and debate on issues of social importance. The Young Mizo Association (YMA) makes use of songs and community-level discussions. When communication gives rise to action, it creates a social momentum with the power to influence people's attitudes. The key is in the organic linkages between the process of communication with popular collective action. Communication without potential action is a passive exercise. The best examples of such linkages can be seen in the ways that religious leaders such as Buddha or Christ and reformers like Thukkaram and Kabir communicated. Parables were powerful ways for communicating with the people. The messages were clear, simple, and straightforward. Messages were for action. That linkage changed people's attitudes, and it changed history. The songs of Kabir do not need any 'extra' music; they go straight to the heart.

## Reclaiming 'public advocacy'

There is a time for everything: a time to make words and tools, a time to market them, a time to consume them, and a time to discard them in the development garbage bin. Those who would promote and defend the use of 'public advocacy' to bring about social change need to go back to the people to (re-)learn their language, symbols, and ethos. We need to be clear about the message before we define the strategies or reach for the tools. We need to become equal participants in social communication, rather than playing the role of highly paid experts travelling around with our ready-made toolkits and frameworks for prescribing the best communication medicine. A real danger of professional advocacy is that the real issues become diluted or marginalised in the labyrinth of strategies, tactics, and skills.

If public advocacy is not rooted in grassroots realities and is practised only at the macro level, the voice of the marginalised is increasingly likely to be appropriated by urban (or international) elites who have the necessary information and skills. Conversely, the credibility of advocacy practitioners is on the line if they become alienated from mass-based movements, seduced by their own influence and co-opted by the power structure, lost in a maze of vested-interest

politics. We need therefore to reclaim the organic linkages between creativity, communication, and communities, bridging the vast gap between technical *communications* and social *communication*. We need to be more clear and convinced about the message of social change. If we ourselves don't believe in what we say, people are not going to listen, even if we use the very latest strategies and tools. Let us create the message, and let us become a medium for inspiring and rejuvenating the barren lands of imagination and social action.

## The author

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