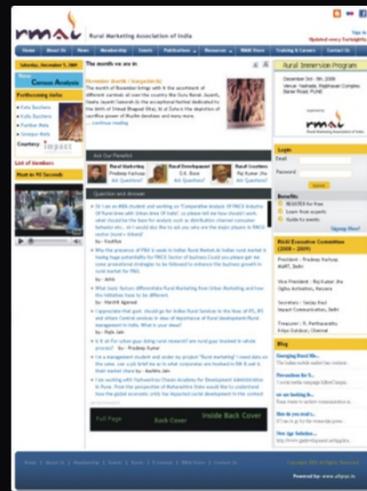


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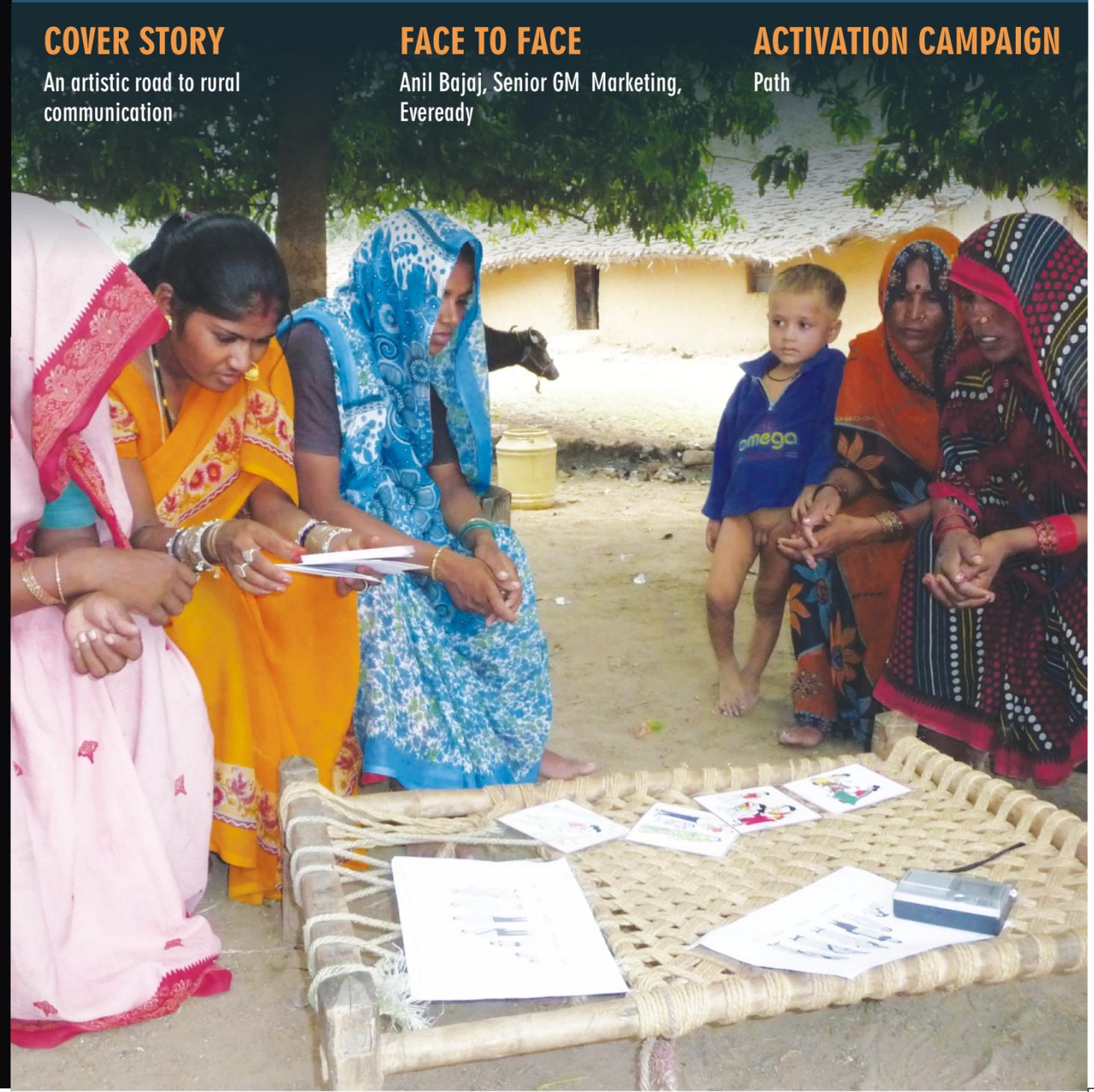
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**COVER STORY** An artistic road to rural communication  
**FACE TO FACE** Anil Bajaj, Senior GM Marketing, Eveready  
**ACTIVATION CAMPAIGN** Path



by Neha Bahl

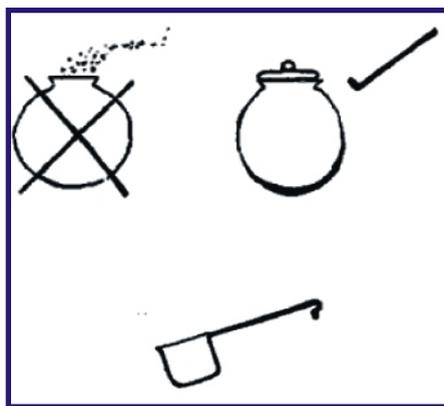
# AN ARTISTIC ROAD TO RURAL COMMUNICATION

*A graduate from NID, Ahemdabad, Rajasthan-based graphic designer and artist LAKSHMI MURTHY was hardly understood by her target audience when she set out to design symbols and posters for social messaging in rural Rajasthan. She thought it to be their ignorance but later realized that the mantra for a mass dialogue lies in being simpler and talking to them in their language. She traces her journey as an artist and sheds light on some finer aspects of rural communication.*

**T**ake these images and symbols out of context and they lose their meaning. Poster design and illustrations for health issues, has always dominated my design work. Initially when I started, my “target” audience was largely non literate rural people. The female literacy figures in Southern Rajasthan then was a mere 16%, with male literacy at 40%. I was surprised when much of the communication material I designed was not being understood by this audience. Initially I got frustrated because people did not understand what I was designing and I easily dismissed this as: “non literate rural people do not know”. As I made more and more pictures, I realized that I was making one mistake after the other. There was a visual language that I was using, which was completely alien to my audience and **I was the one who did not know!**

My first mistake can be traced back to this visual. I made this simple

illustration in 1987 to communicate for “Cover the water pot to protect it from flies.” However this was how it was interpreted: “The water pot is behind 2 branches of a tree. There is a water scoop next to the pot.”



The hathey walla lota or water scoop used in our filed area looks like this. It was not surprising for the “tick” to be mistaken for a scoop. The lesson I learned here was that ticks and crosses are concepts learned in school and for someone not familiar with reading and writing - the symbols do not hold any significance. And it may be surprising to understand but this example is relevant even today - when



I take this picture to test in certain field areas, I get the same answers. There exists a myth that images and symbols are universal.

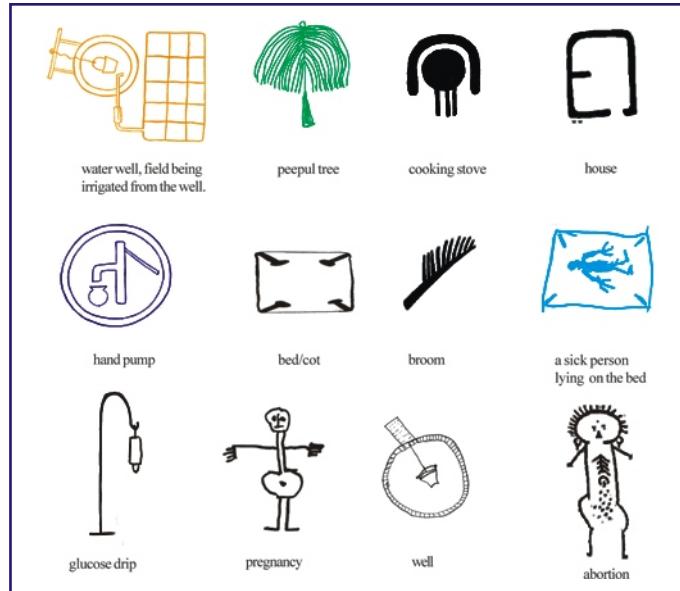
I made more mistakes in my work. This simple illustration to communicate for equality is often interpreted in different ways. “The girls these days are faster than boys”. “The children are running to the local grocer’s shop to buy something.” The weighing scales symbolise “banya ki dukaan” for certain audiences. I was of course totally off the mark!

As a communicator I was looking for solutions. Then, I took my drawing

board to the field and made the “field” my teacher. Gradually I had some answers which I later applied to my work. In this narration, I share some of my media design experiences when working with rural communities.

**At the start**

As a first step pictures made by the community are collected (the community that we need to design the material for). This pictiography forms the foundation upon which all media materials rest.



Abortion”. The nine months of gestation are shown as the black ball in the stomach progressively increasing. Lines below the visual communicate for the corresponding month of pregnancy. After month 5, a thick black line divides the picture. The left side of the image shows a woman lying on the bed having had a safe abortion. The right half shows an empty bed, suggesting that the client will not be admitted as it is beyond 5 months, both medically unsafe and illegal. The doctor raises both hands indicating cannot do, will not

How many of these visuals would have been recognized in an urban context?

**Applying from the pictiography**

Images from the pictiography are then used to string together messages in the media product.

These are Take Aways given to clients accessing a Mobile Health Van in Uttarakhand (NRHM). They cover ANC (Ante Natal Care) danger signals

before delivery and immunization.

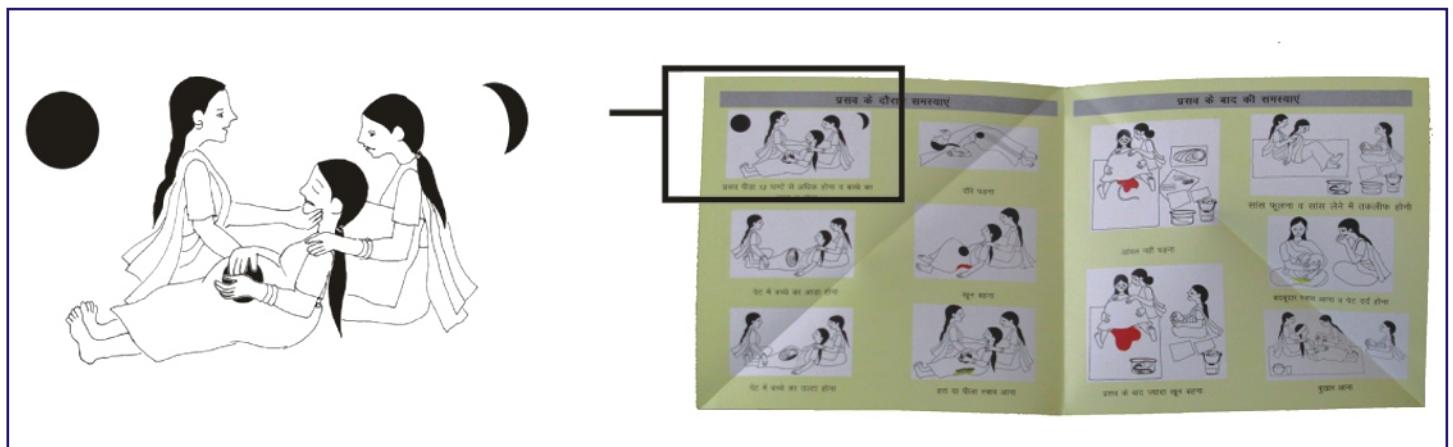
The Take Away uses imagery that people understand. The highlighted image communicates for “Prolonged labour , from morning to night , is a danger signal. Take the woman to the hospital immediately”. Pregnancy is shown as a round ball in the stomach, morning to night shown as sun and moon.

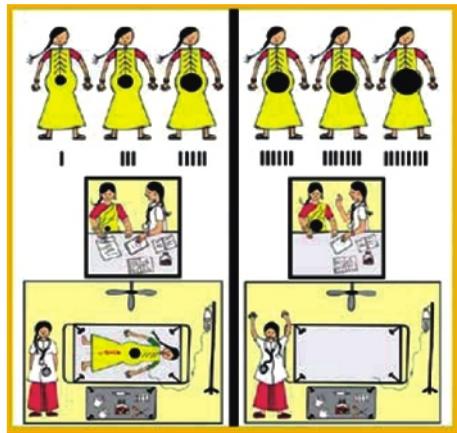
This is an image from a Training Book. It communicates for laws on “Safe

be possible.

**Getting the text right**

Language is critical - using of simple everyday language that people can relate to. For example, *kanooni and gairkanooni* can be replaced with *sahi and galat* and *sahmati* by *razi*. *Pait wali mahila* is a more commonly used than *garbhwati mahila*. *Mahwari* is not as easily understood in some communities so replace with words like *kapda or gaaba*.





Population Council Training Book : Safai Ki Jankaari

What commonly happens is that text is planned in English and given to a Hindi translator, who is often not familiar with “field” language. Typically the accompanying text ends up being very “heavy” and unsuitable even for literate audiences. Many people who have studied up to class 8, often lose reading and writing skills as they grow older, so material with difficult language stands ignored. A visual may have been designed with care, however, there is scope for a standalone image to be interpreted in many different ways depending on the way it is perceived. In Take Away or take home material like pamphlets, accompanying text designed in short & simple sentences, leaves little room for confusion or misinterpretation.

**Making sure that the media is culturally appropriate**

Apart from using visuals that people understand, cultural appropriateness of media is very crucial. Communicating for reproductive health is one area that needs extra care. How does one ensure that images are not misinterpreted as



pornography? This aspect is even critical, when working with adolescents. Let's say that we need images for communicating for parts of the body (anatomy). In such instances what has worked is communicating information in stages, from covered (clothed) to uncovered (naked) and then back to Covered (clothed).

The *Kaavad*, a wooden box is used to



illustrate “Changes in our body as we grow”. The *Kaavad* has many doors that can be opened and closed,

revealing layers of information as each door is opened.

Communicating for Sexually Transmitted Diseases, Condom Use, HIV and other sensitive subjects are managed in different ways. The format is designed to fold away the sensitive pictures into a very small size (2 and half inches). The idea is to enable women to tuck this away into a blouse and young men to fold the information into their back pockets of their trousers , away from prying eyes.

This is a contraception box, with all the options that the “client” needs to see and know. Used by health workers, the box packs up to a size that can fit easily



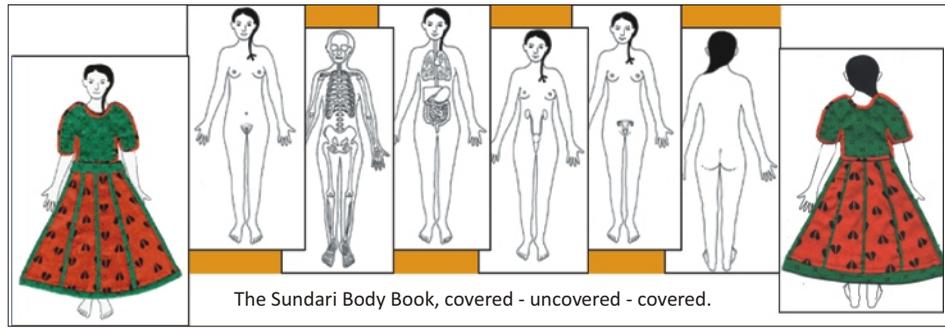
into a hand bag. It opens out like flower with actual samples of contraception. The workers when demonstrating condom use, pick up the simple PVC pipe that has been provided.

The pipe is used in place of an actual penis model, which many times causes embarrassment and therefore remains unused.

Pictures and media have to “tell” their stories in comfortable ways. The minute something is uncomfortable, the message is lost.

**More examples of products**

Pop up story book: This book was a part of an interactive communication



The Sundari Body Book, covered - uncovered - covered.



package for low literate married women who used stories and imagery that were derived from the field areas of Bengal and Andhra Pradesh.



Products developed as part of the MacArthur Fellowship:  
Sanitary Napkin,  
Demonstration doll,  
Menstrual wheel (to understand the science of menstruation)

Media does not have to be restricted to print. It can take other forms. The sanitary napkin is one example that evolved as we were working with adolescent girls in early 2000. The design covered many factors

- Easy to wear (buttons to underwear, attaches to drawstring tied around the waist).
- Easy to make (designed for hand stitching, most girls do not own sewing machines).
- Adjustable and adaptable (for girls of different ages and sizes).
- Hygienic (white or light colored cotton cloth).
- Economical (locally available material, found in most households)

- Reusable (washable)
- A rectangular plastic sheet placed at the bottom of the white cloth, to prevent leaks.

This is a reusable adult diaper, similar to the sanitary napkin design. Designed for patients who are bed ridden, the product can be easily stitched at home.



### Communication is serious business

Design and communication has traditionally been viewed and continues to be viewed as an extension of a development program. Always the spare wheel, in reality communication should be the driving force. When visual communication is employed, it is never seen from the perspective of community. Designers create one-size-fits-all messages, and communication managers follow professional communication strategies.

However, there is a blatant disconnect between the sender of visual messages and the receiver of the message. There is a need for group, age, gender-specific communication material for different contexts.

There are many reasons why communication commonly fails. The

following pointers summarize the basic weaknesses of communication programs:

- ◆ Minimal time spent in planning for communication. Seen only as an after thought and many times left to the artist who is requested to come up with something!
- ◆ Assumption that awareness automatically leads to action. Make IEC material - that is the common instruction! (If a shampoo had to be sold think of the amount of research that goes into the final campaign).
- ◆ One-size-fits-all messages neglect the diversity of the audience.
- ◆ Complete lack of systematic pre-testing.
- ◆ Lack of methodology. Programmes use communication formats irrelevant in field situations.
- ◆ General arrogance, we know better attitude of media planners and managers of programmes.
- ◆ Disregard for indigenous ways of communicating, simply because it is not understood

When media material development follows a participatory route, the chances of failure are minimized:

- Rough sketches are made corresponding to the message that needs to be communicated.
- Attention is paid to visual grammar of the community, who will finally

use the product and locations where product will be used.

Different drawing styles and formats (models, books and paper folds) are used

These are then field tested with small focused groups

Opinions are gathered at the field test. Image preferences and comprehension, colours in the media, the format of the media, the language used are discussed with the audience.

Modifications to the media are then incorporated.

Second level of field testing is conducted to rule out misinterpretation.

The final prototype is field tested before it goes into the duplication phase

**And finally responsible design: when products are duplicated, the material used must be “cradle to cradle”. Too many campaigns have used plastic and flex materials that either takes decades to degrade.**

**So for all those communicators who wish to establish a dialogue on the rural grounds, it is time to pick your board and head for the field.**

Lakshmi has innovatively used her skills as an artist and graphic designer to promote communication for social change. Lakshmi, who manages the Vikalpdesign studio in Udaipur,

Rajasthan, ([www.vikalpdesign.com](http://www.vikalpdesign.com)) specializes in designing and training in a diverse range of communication and social change projects. Her niche area is health communication.

She has collaborated with Government NRHM programmes and NGOs. Health material produced by Vikalp Design has been distributed across India through the networks of NRHM, UNFPA, CHARCHA, the State Resource Centre, Jaipur, and a number of NGOs.

Lakshmi is Country Director (India) for the International Rural Network and is a trustee of two NGOs, Aajeevika Bureau and Jatan Sansthan.

Vikalpdesign studio also offers training for craft and graphic design students on subjects such as the role of design in the development sector and supports an internship program.