

Community Radio in Breaking Taboos among Santal Community on Menstrual Health: A Case Study of Nityananda Janavani 91.2 FM, Purulia, India

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Abstract:

This study examines how Nityananda Janavani 91.2FM, a community radio station in Purulia addresses stigma and taboos prevailing in an essentially patriarchal Santal society. A qualitative case study based approach is adopted which includes on- field observations, content analysis and a series of interviews with the representatives of the radio channel and the local Santali people. Attempts are made to understand the impact of the programmes of Nityananda Janavani along with the perception of local Santali people on these programmes. Also, this study attempts to understand the strategies adapted by the community radio station to reach out to the marginalised conservative Santali villages and challenge the deep- rooted socio-cultural beliefs on menstrual health and hygiene.

Keywords: Community radio stations, Menstruation, Participatory communication, health literacy, Nityananda Janavani.

Introduction:

Menstrual health and hygiene have been recognised as an important public health, gender and human rights issue. Initiatives have been taken to raise awareness on menstrual hygiene on the global stage, but this particular issue has been surrounded by stigma, myths, socio- cultural taboos and many misconceptions. The situation is no different for the tribal population of Purulia. The menstruation is not treated as a normal biological process in the Santal society, it is often perceived as ritualistic impurity which imposes restrictions on the mobility of women, their participation in religious and social activities. Most importantly, there is a sense of secrecy and fear of social exclusion among tribal women. In such situation, community radio plays a crucial role as a participatory communication tool to eradicate such taboos and misconceptions. A community radio station named Nityananda Janavani 91.2 FM in Purulia, through frequent participatory broadcasting coupled with narrowcasting campaigns, has attempted to fight against the socio- cultural taboo and stigma on menstruation prevailing in the Santali society.

Aims and Objectives:

The aims and objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the existing myths, and socio-cultural taboos related to menstruation among the tribal community in the Puncha Block of Purulia.
2. To analyse the role of Nityananda Janavani FM as a participatory communication tool to disseminate information on menstrual health and hygiene.

3. To explore the communication strategies of Nityananda Janavani FM, including broadcasting, narrowcasting, and community outreach programmes, to create awareness about healthy menstrual practices.
4. To assess the effectiveness of community radio in addressing this issue and to understand local's perspective on Nityananda Janavani's role in addressing menstruation.

Nityananda Janavani and the Tribal Demography of Purulia:

The parent organisation of Nityananda Janavani 91.2 FM is a Purulia based NGO called Manbhum Ashram Nityananda Trust (MANT). The registration number of MANT is S/3863 of 1959- 1960. (Source: The Website of MANT; Link: <https://mant.org.in/our-history/>) This community radio station started its journey in 2010 and is the only one in the district of Purulia. Purulia has got a scheduled tribe population of 18.45%. The 5 major scheduled tribe communities in Purulia are Santals (60%), Bhumij (18%), Sabar (7%), Munda (6%) and Bihor (1%). Santals are the largest tribe in the Purulia district (Sinha Babu & Basar, 2025). Nityananda Janavani is located in the campus of Ramananda Centenary College at Laulara village in Puncha block of Purulia. Out of 123, 855 people living in Puncha block of Purulia, 30,641 are from scheduled tribe category. (Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011) The scheduled tribe literacy in Puncha block is 58.81%. A massive gap in literacy can be witnessed between scheduled tribe male and female population of Puncha block. ST males have a literacy rate of 72.92% while female literacy is only 44.85%. (Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011) (The above numbers are based on 2011 census) Nityananda Janavani broadcasts its programmes in Bengali and Santali. Their Main focus is to cater the communication and development needs of the underprivileged Santal community of the neighbouring villages.

Research Methodology:

A qualitative research method is adopted to conduct this study. After analysing the contents of Nityananda Janavani, an interview of Smt. Srimanti Hembram, a Radio Jockey of the community radio station is conducted on 19th November, 2024. It was followed by another interview on the same day with Dr. Chandidas Mukherjee, the Director of MANT. Apart from that, a detailed field investigation on 27th May, 2025 was conducted to complete the study.

Literature Review:

The idea of menstruation is surrounded by stigma, myth and secrecy among several different tribal groups in India. The Santal tribe is not an exception from all these menstruation- related taboo, misconception, stigma and secrecy. A part of the reason is the relatively lower literacy rate of the Santali women population in Purulia. In this district of West Bengal, 60.46% (according to the 2011 census) Scheduled Tribe women are illiterate. Education and health literacy are integrally related. De Walt et al. (2004) have pointed out that, the literate people are more likely to take preventive measures in case of a medical emergency than their illiterate counterparts. WHO (2013) has described, health literacy as the cognitive and social abilities that increases individual's capacity to make informed decisions to support and improve health.

Studies on tribal women in all over India show the deep rooted cultural stigma and taboo associated with menstruation. Dixit's (2025) study on Bhil and Bhilala tribes in Madhya Pradesh reveals that, there is silence and secrecy among these tribes during talking about this particular issue. According to the result of that study, majority of the respondents have faced fear, embarrassment and confusion during their first menstruation. From the religious and cultural standpoint, the women are being perceived of religious impurity and restrictions. The systematic reviews by Mittal et al. (2023) have found out that, the tribal women in India have inadequate healthy menstrual hygiene practices and those require immediate medical attention. A study by Bar et al. (2025), after examining the menstrual practices of Santali tribe in Hoogly

district, have found out that, more than half of the respondents of their study have reported dysmenorrhea. Also they follow the traditional food restrictions which include avoiding sour foods. From the above analysis, one thing can be clearly visible here

Under such circumstances, community radio stations play crucial role in promoting health communication to the marginalised communities. World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) has stated, the primary objective of community radio is to fulfil the communication needs of the community that it is serving. AMARC has further noted three essential elements of community radio are non-profit, community owned and act as a tool for development. (Pavarala & Malik, 2007; 16) Fraser and Estrada (2001) have defined community radio as a type of public broadcasting that is dedicated to 'serve and benefit' the community. Similarly, Louis Tabing believes community radio stations should be all about a medium 'in the community, for the community, about the community and by the community'. Fraser and Estrada (2001, p. 1) have emphasised on 'enthusiastic consensus' and 'willingness of cooperative works' in order to form a sense of community. They have further stated that, the community should understand their 'common goal' and the communication needs.

In this context, the idea of participatory communication becomes essential to understand the effectiveness of community radio. Paulo Freire has rejected the idea 'banking model' of education where students are basically passive participants in the teaching and learning process, instead he emphasised on the participatory 'problem posing approach' of education where dialogical communication gets priority. Without having a dialogue with receivers of a message, it is literally impossible to impart knowledge, break stigma of a society. Community radio presents a participatory communication platform to the marginalised Santal community for dialogue about the beliefs and debunk stigma, fear associated with menstruation. This forms the basis of explaining Nityananda Janavani's role in menstrual health awareness in Purulia.

Apart from that, Nityananda Janavani has its own social media page and YouTube channel where they regularly post updates of their programmes. They have uploaded two dedicated social media live programmes respectively in 2021 and 2022. Both those episodes were in Santali.

Analysing the Contents and Field Observations:

In Santali society, menstruation is viewed more as a ritualistic impurity rather than a regular physical process of women. However, during this period women are barred from participating in any kind of religious ritual. They are often not allowed to touch the objects of worship. (Das et al. 2015) Even in some cases, Santal women are not to perform their household chores during menstruation due to the perception that they would be impure. Although, these rituals vary from one Santal village to another, but these practices and beliefs have impacted the lives of Santali women.

During the field visit in Purulia, it was witnessed a major misconception in the villages of Pancha block is the fact that the Santal society views menstruation as a disease. Nityananda Janavani through their YouTube channel has posted a few audience testimonial videos describing the kind of taboo and misconception prevailing among the Santal women and how listening to their video has helped to be informed about healthy menstruation process. In those videos, women from local Santali community like Moumita Hansda and Parul Soren have described how the community radio's programmes helped to understand the hygienic practices of menstruation including safe disposition of sanitary napkins. The audience testimonial videos reveal that, the programmes broadcasted by Nityananda Janavani has helped to break the popular notion that bathing in the pond helps to be hygienic during menstruation. However, during the field interaction with the Santali women in Pancha block, it can be witnessed that, they were reluctant to talk in public, particularly with a stranger. Laxmimani Tudu, a tribal woman from Samakata village has mentioned, the programmes of Nityananda Janavani have helped to build consciousness among women about menstruation.

To spread awareness on menstruation, every year Nityananda Janavani celebrates Menstrual Hygiene Day on 28th May every year. Apart from that, regular programmes are broadcasted in Santali language by Santali women RJs to create more impact among the Santali women community. Nityananda Janavani used their broadcasting to create awareness on hygienic menstruation practices and safe disposal of sanitary napkins.

Nityananda Janavani uses narrowcasting to reach out to the Santali women in the neighbouring villages and provide them a space to ask questions on the healthy menstruation practice and break the shackles of misconceptions and taboos regarding this topic. They even reach out to local schools to raise awareness amongst its students as there is a tendency among Santali women of not attending school due to societal pressure, restriction and shame. While discussing on conducting awareness based programmes on menstruation in Nityananda Janavani, RJ Srimanti Hembram has mentioned, although in the initial phase, the tribal women often hesitate to open up about their problems but once they are given a safe space of discussion, particularly during narrowcasting campaigns, they tend to open up about their problems. After a series of discussions, the community radio station's employees understand the problems, prejudices and taboo that are prevailing in the Santali society. Along with it, as majority of the employees of Nityananda Janavani are from local Santali community. The linguistic and cultural proximity help them to understand and get to the root of the problems.

Understanding the Possibilities and Challenges:

The findings of the study reveal that, community radio acts as an effective participatory communication tool particularly among the underprivileged media- dark areas. However, Nityananda Janavani, despite playing a crucial role in disseminating information on menstrual awareness, this community radio station shows significant possibilities to challenge the long- standing menstrual taboos and to improve health literacy amongst Santali women. The major challenge that Nityananda Janavani has to endure is the deeply rooted cultural beliefs prevailing in the Santal community. The content analysis of Nityananda Janavani reveals that, women during menstruation are not allowed to go to agricultural works and continue their household chores. The Santali women are often advised by their older generation to use cloths instead of sanitary napkins and they are often advised to bath in the ponds for cleanliness. Srimanti Hembram has mentioned that, the traditional beliefs, irrespective of how wrong those are, generally takes a long time to change. According to her, the deep rooted cultural beliefs on menstruation in Santal community cannot be changed overnight. It requires conducting regular broadcasting and narrowcasting on these issues to raise awareness among women. She believes, Nityananda Janavani's initiatives have helped to improve the situation on menstrual hygiene in the villages of Pancha block.

As it has been mentioned earlier, during field visit, it was observed that, Santali women were reluctant to speak about this issue which indicates the hesitation, shame and taboo surrounding this issue. Paulo Freire (1970/2005, pp. 30–34) has spoken about the 'culture of silence' where marginalised community often show reluctance in speaking due to long standing oppression. The tribal women in Purulia, due to their low literacy rate, form a separate marginalised community within an already marginalised community. It resonates with the idea of Nancy Fraser's idea of 'Subaltern Public Sphere'. Nancy Fraser (2013, pp. 60-61) has differed from Habermas's idea of Public Sphere as she believes that it is not inclusive. Public sphere, historically never allow the marginalised communities to participate. The excluded marginalised groups form a parallel 'counterpublics'. The formation of women based community within the tribal community testifies that the society can have multiple 'publics' and rejects the idea of identifying the entire population of a society as one massive homogenous group.

Conclusion:

Nityananda Janavani has to face several hurdles such as financial and operational challenges. Interview with the Director of MANT, Dr. Chandidas Mukherjee, has revealed that, Nityananda Janavani faces financial challenges due to irregular grants from government and non-government bodies. The advertisements are inconsistent and irregular. In these circumstances, it becomes extremely difficult for Nityananda Janavani to manage the operational expenses. Despite these problems, Nityananda Janavani is playing an effective role in disseminating information and awareness on healthy habits during menstruation along with several other practices for development in the local region. However, it can be said here, despite the fact that, the tribal women residing in the Pancha block still have a great degree of hesitation and secrecy on the issue of menstruation, Nityananda Janavani has ensured to disseminate information on healthy practices.

The participatory communication approach of Nityananda Janavani is an effective way to address deep rooted cultural taboos and to promote behavioural change among the marginalised communities. Strengthening the financial and operational capacities of this kind of community radio station would help to contribute in public health awareness along with other development projects.

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