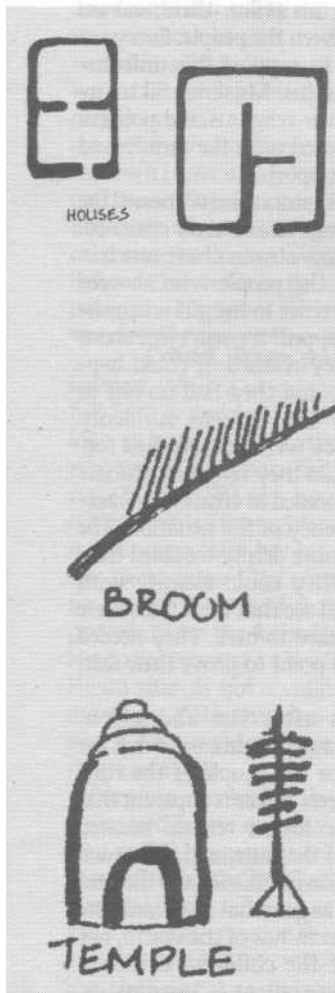


THE ARTS

Communication /Lakshmi Murthy

EDUCATION DOMINATION?

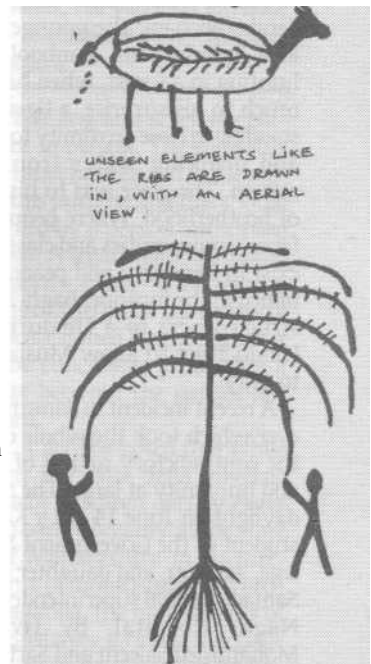
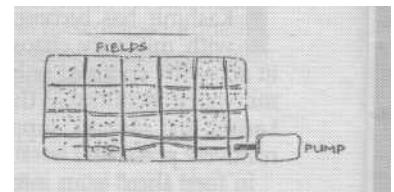
A lack of perspective among material production artists often disconnects a rural audience with its educational material.



Recent work with non-governmental organisations in Udaipur district, Rajasthan, has thrown up many examples of miscommunication where EC materials produced for Information, Education and Communication in areas such as health, literacy, forestry and agriculture, have failed to meet their objectives. Government and NGOs spend large amounts of money on producing EC materials which communicate messages to target audiences, often to non-literate rural based communities. Studying the local people's own visual sketches has helped to shed light on more appropriate ways to designing EC materials. Knowledge in rural Rajasthan has traditionally been disseminated through informal exchanges like song, verse, puppetry folk drama and folk art. Simple wall motifs and paintings are common in most Rajasthani villages. These art forms tell their own stories as understood in the local area. Everyone in the

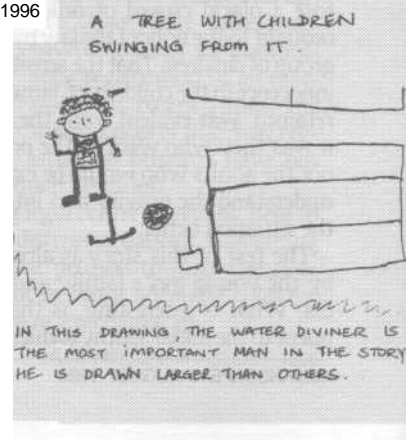
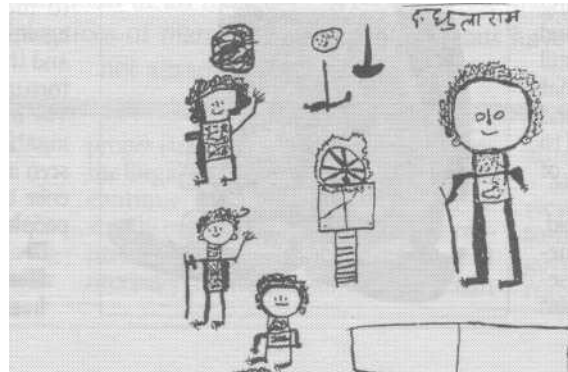
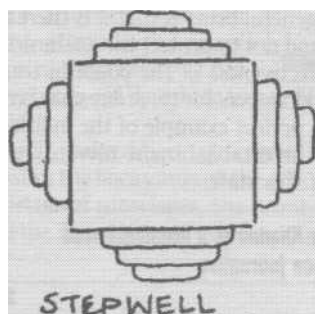
village can read these local art forms which mark festivals, announce births or celebrate marriages. Traditional illustration styles vary from region to region, and affect the way that people understand other visuals.

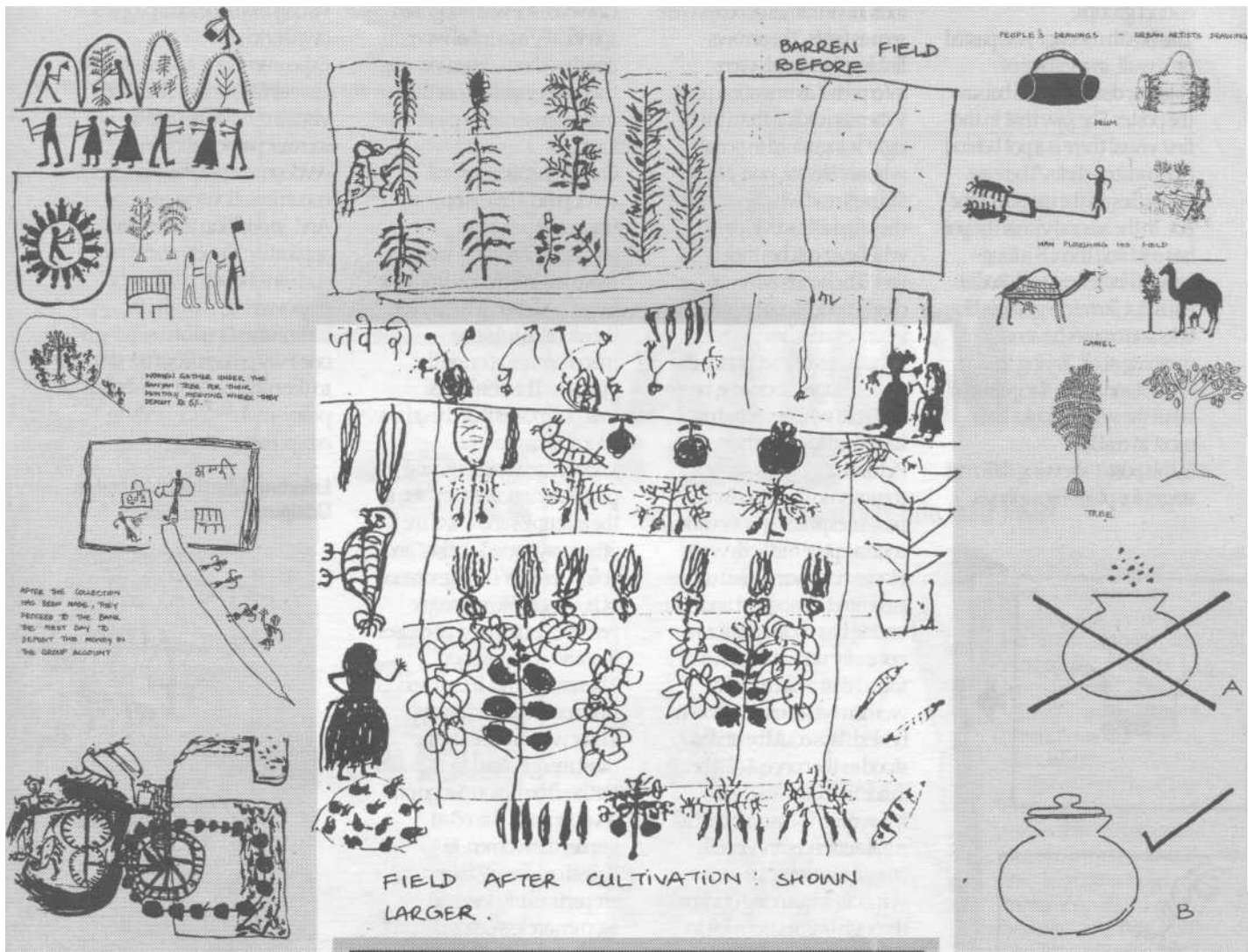
In workshops and as part of documentation, evaluation and training sessions, women and men from remote tribal areas of Udaipur District have been making their own visuals. Those with little exposure to literacy or to urban culture have used different conventions for visual communication. Pictures often simultaneously include aerial perspectives and eye-level perspectives. For example, aerial views of houses will include a chulha (stove), also drawn as if viewed from above, whereas people inside the house may be drawn from an eye-level perspective. Heavy objects are darkened, while large objects are those either with significance in the picture or importance in real life. Animals have four legs coming down



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paralelly from their bodies, while people have out-stretched arms. Trees always have roots drawn in, and temples are drawn with a tree alongside. Village drawings often include details such as dung when animals are shown.

A women's group spent two days recalling the details of a four-year vegetable cultivation programme and recorded their experiences through pictures. The women were asked to draw their fields before the start of the cultivation programme and after. The 'after' picture was drawn larger and surrounding the 'before' picture. A male farmer drew a hant, the traditional water wheel. The perspectives were mixed so that all relevant information could be included. For example, the pots are actually below the surface of the water and cannot actually be seen. The top-view is used in some places to include maximum information, although people and animals are

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Artists' and policy-makers' own ignorance of how non-literate people perceive visuals is what causes the miscommunication.

shown in profile. Interestingly, two sets of bullocks are shown to indicate the motion of the two animals going round and round. Repeating visuals to show motion is very common in traditional Rajasthani art. While farmer's in this group all followed the same logic, in a different area they thought that because the well was so deep, two pairs were required to lift the water! This second group was more formally educated and exposed to urban culture.

A women's group documented the foundation and functioning of their savings committee with their own visuals. They put all the visuals together for a flip-chart which was made for them to keep and use to share their

experiences with other savings groups. Another group of women involved in a significant struggle to save their sagwan or teak trees were asked to illustrate their own posters. The story: timber contractors were cutting down trees from

their hills. Everyone in the village was worried. They beat drums and collected all the villagers to decide what to do. A meeting was held. They blackened the faces of the contractors, drove them out of the villages, and finally they were sent to jail. The illustration has a sequence but all the events are shown randomly in the same picture. Yet, the drawing was understood by women from nearby villages. Many EC materials produced by organisations to disseminate knowledge to rural people are misunderstood. Comparisons between local people's artistic efforts with those of urban artists show that a different visual language is being used by the two

distinct groups. This health message was pasted on a wall, in a village of Udaipur district. Rodhibai saw the poster. She saw that in the first visual there is a pot behind two bamboo sticks. There are house flies on the mouth of the pot. In the second visual the pot has a lid and there is a long-handled ladle next to it. Rodhi Bai is not literate. Symbols like ticks and crosses have no meaning at all. Trying to understand them, she guesses at what the symbol looks like most in real life. In this poster showing different stages for planting saplings,

individual frames or boxes were seen as fields. The arrows linking the visuals were interpreted as irrigation pipes. Where as reading from left to right is ingrained in people who are literate, non-literate farmers read whichever visual they find attractive, or whichever catches their eye first. The hands were not clearly understood because they were not attached to a body. When the same set of pictures was arranged clockwise, people first read whichever picture happened to catch their eye. Pictures of a uterus are common in family planning posters explaining how various contraceptive methods work. However, a disembodied uterus is completely abstract and field testing has shown that it is not easily understood. A trial found that a picture of a woman with a uterus shown behind flaps could be understood as the concept of it being inside the body was clear. It is wrong to assume that all rural audiences are visually literate. Conventions such as symbols, sequencing of visuals through frames from left to right, top to bottom or clockwise, drawing a faraway object small, are all learned. Artists take for granted that these conventions are understood, and have no idea of the confusion that can actually take place. Even where the visual is understood, the message taken from a picture may be completely different than the one intended. A picture of a woman in a family planning poster was recognised.

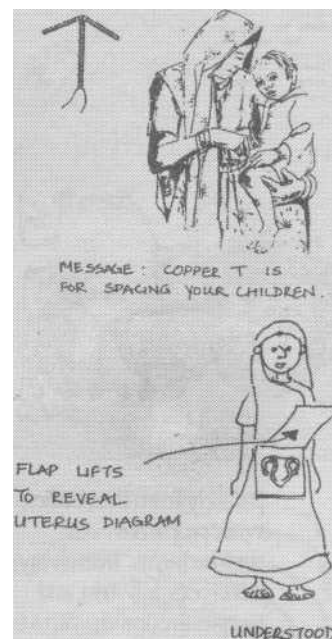
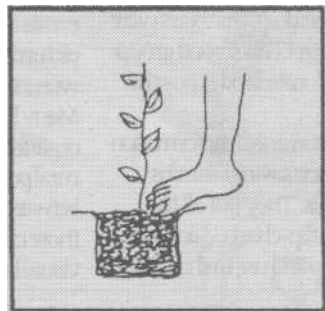
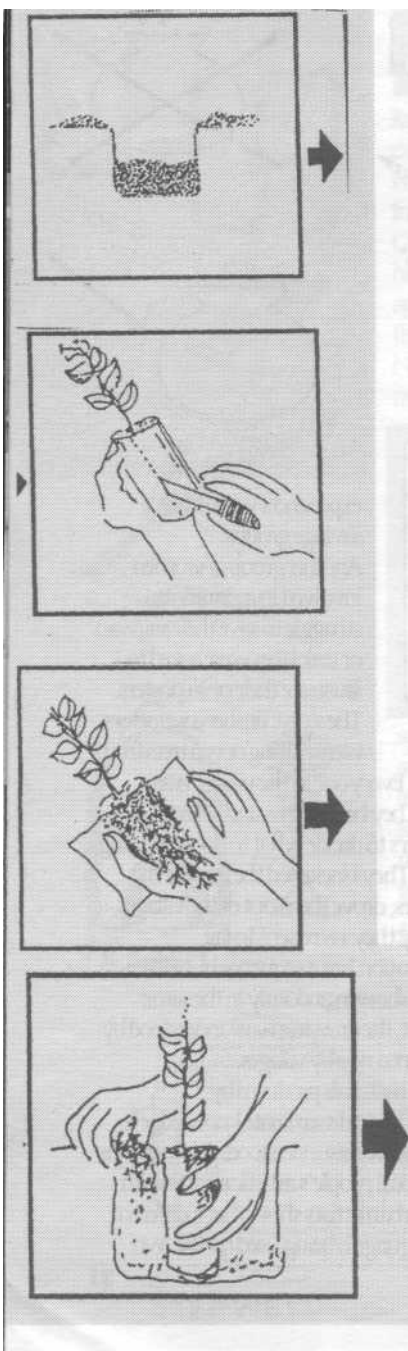
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However, she was recognised specifically as a tribal woman, and the other women viewing the poster insisted that the message was not applicable to them

Communication in rural development has become an uncreative process of producing inappropriate materials in isolation from the target audience. It is easy for the educated to blame miscommunication on the villagers. This reinforces misconceptions that the urban educated have all the knowledge, while the rural people are ignorant. In fact, in the examples above it is the other way round. Artists' and policy-makers' own ignorance of how non-literate people perceive visuals is what causes the miscommunication. The result is that IEC materials reach only the least needy. Those who are already the most marginalised are excluded further from information on development. This often implies the women. In Rajasthan, female literacy rates are particularly low and women are less exposed than men to urban culture, which the men are more exposed to when they migrate to urban centres for work. As an alternative starting point, urban artists need to re-examine their role in communicating when working with non-literate and rural groups. They need to take on the role of facilitator and act as a catalyst in encouraging people's own visual expression, finding common visual languages and deriving final

visuals from the local people's own sketches. Experiments in Udaipur district have already shown that such visuals can also be used to increase participation in development programmes, from documentation to evaluation. And, in addition to the practical application already discussed, such artistic processes can be empowering. It is time for communication to cease being a one-way process from the urban to the rural, and for artists and policy-makers to be ready to accept past mistakes.

Lakshmi Murthy is based in Udaipur.



Ntr UNDERSTOOD

