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# HIV/AIDS communication through televised public service announcement in the Tamil language

*V.R. Revathy and I. Arul Aram*

Department of Media Sciences,  
Anna University, Chennai, India

revathyce@gmail.com  
arulram@yahoo.com

## Abstract

In HIV/AIDS communication, gender defines how programmes respond to the needs of both men and women. Supportive environments should be created to have enough means of protection against the disease, besides care, when infected. The research methods adopted for this study is discourse analysis of 'Pulli Raja', televised public service announcement (PSA) on HIV/AIDS. The study has taken a televised PSA in the Tamil language, adapted from the Hindi language. In HIV/AIDS communication, televised PSA is an important tool in educating and creating awareness among women. The research is based on 'Pulli Raja' PSA, brought forth on HIV/AIDS in the last two decades. Discourse analysis helps to understand the media text, context, gender, character portrayal, location and the target audience. Health belief model is adopted to understand the psychological health behaviour change.

**Keywords:** Pulli Raja, gender, discourse analysis, communication, message, sex worker

## 1. Introduction

Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS) is a great threat to humanity. The HIV is a type of retrovirus that destroys the immune system of a human. Women in the lower socio-economic status are more exposed to HIV. The HIV has spread across the world since the early 1980s to pandemic levels (IFSW, 2012). Women are more likely to be exposed to HIV. Gender inequities in socio-economic status and patriarchal ideology around sexual practices have to be looked into (Chong and Kvasny, 2007). Gender inequities in abstinence, monogamy, and condom use are important factors in the feminisation of HIV/AIDS that are often overlooked (Ojikutu and Stone, 2005). The social ideology surrounding gender and power relationships is inevitably reflected and constructed in HIV/AIDS discourses (Cukier, Bauer and Middleton, 2004).

The first AIDS patient in India was diagnosed by Dr. Suniti Solomon, a microbiology professor at the Madras Medical College, in Chennai in 1986 (Pal, 2016). In India, heterosexual mode of HIV transmission accounts for 88.2 per cent of HIV positive cases detected, mother-to-child transmission accounts for 5 per cent, infected syringe and needle 1.7 per cent, homosex-

ual 1.5 per cent, contaminated blood and blood products account for 1 per cent, and other causes of HIV infections detected during 2011–12 (NACO, 2012).

## 2. Need for study

Many HIV prevention programmes have been carried out with a gender approach. Still, women do not have equal opportunities to benefit from the programmes. Mendoza (1997, cited in Satpathy, 2003) argues that these programmes are related to gender roles in a society and include sexual norms that limit women's access to information by implying that they are ignorant about sexual matters. Women's economic dependence on men, violence against women and widespread acceptance of male promiscuity has worked against women's chances of protection against the disease. Women are at greater risk of HIV infection from unprotected sex than men as they are often not in a position to negotiate with their partners because of the deep entrenched patriarchy particularly in Tamil Nadu, the southern state in India inhabited by the people mostly speaking the Tamil language. The major thrust of early programmes was promoting ABC – Abstinence, Be faithful to partner, and Condom use. Still CNN – which means Condom use, safe Needles, and Negotiating with partner – is yet to be adopted in

India, which includes the state of Tamil Nadu. In spite of the tradition and moral values one may proclaim, A and B sometimes fail. Giving importance to family relationship and keeping away from premarital and extramarital sex are welcome but not a must when it comes to HIV/AIDS prevention and thinking of the larger social good. Further, CNN goes beyond condom use, and emphasises on safe needles and negotiating with partner as well.

In this context, the media can play a role in creating awareness and thus contributing towards a change in behaviour. This study analyses the influence of 'Pulli Raja' Public Service Announcements (PSAs) broadcast on television in creating HIV/AIDS awareness. One of the most effective means to create social awareness and bring about a change in behaviour is PSA. The HIV/AIDS PSAs are intended to change the public interest, by raising awareness by informing people about HIV/AIDS, on safer sex (condom usage), give up stigma and discrimination, and the importance of testing and counselling. Giving importance to family relationship and keeping off sex workers too are suggested but are not considered a must. The PSAs, particularly on television, are expected to have direct or subtle influence among people and bring down the HIV/AIDS prevalence. A PSA is a public interest message disseminated by the media without any fee, with the aim of raising awareness, changing public attitudes and behaviour towards a social issue. It is a non-profit message distributed voluntarily through the media.

Changing the strategy of AIDS awareness campaign prevalent in 2003, the Population Services International (PSI) embarked on 'Pulli Raja' campaign focused on using a condom every time Pulli Raja decided to have extra-marital sex particularly under intoxication, but the follow-up campaign focuses on how a unfaithful husband could be the single largest donor of the AIDS/HIV virus to wife, unborn children and lover. The PSI is a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) and it addresses health problems of the low income group and the populations lacking access to resources in developing countries.

Men in the lower economic strata were the target group of the entire programme, Tamil Nadu being identified as one of the six high HIV prevalence states of India. Out of the total 111 608 AIDS cases detected in the country till 2005, Tamil Nadu has a vast share of 52 036 cases, accounting for nearly 46.62 percent (NCAER, 2005). The idea of the PSI was to reach men and target them as in the power equation they had the say over use of condoms or when to have sex. The PSAs tried to break the myth that if a person was healthy he/she could not contract HIV/AIDS. The PSAs created openness in discussing issues related to AIDS in public.

Sex workers catering to the mobile population are normally either from the neighbouring villages coming to the halt point during the day time or local tribe women, slum dwellers from the industrial towns located nearby, migrants or daily wage labourers from the construction sites, vegetable or fruit vendors at the halt points, etc. (NACO, 2006). Of late, sex workers are more aware of HIV/AIDS and they necessarily use condoms with their clients. Key populations with higher risk for HIV include overcrowded low-income areas such as slums and labour classes. Hence, there is a need to study the influence of HIV/AIDS PSAs used as part of major campaigns on television in Tamil Nadu where even sex education in schools is till date a taboo. The study has taken a televised PSA in the Tamil language, adapted from the Hindi language.

The objective of the study was to analyze the content of 'Pulli Raja' televised PSA on HIV/AIDS in the Tamil language in terms of its potential effectiveness and biases to promote HIV/AIDS awareness among the intended population, including men and women in low-income categories using discourse analysis methodology.

### 3. Review of literature

The review of literature revealed that innovative approaches have to be tried out to trigger behavioural change. The use of mass media as a tool to promote HIV/AIDS awareness has been used extensively (Noar, et al., 2009). Although practitioners are now more realistic about the outcome of media use, it remains attractive to health practitioners due to its wide reach, appeal and powerful nature alongside its cost effectiveness (Randolph and Viswanath, 2004). Myhre and Flora (2000) confirm that the use of television in HIV and AIDS campaigns often resulted in higher message exposure in developed countries, whereas the developing countries have often used a mix of low cost media such as radio and print materials. According to Singhal and Rogers (2003), communication strategies represent a key 'social vaccine' against HIV. Communication is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for preventing HIV/AIDS, and for augmenting care and support programmes. Dillard, et al. (1996) found that fear appeals such as those used in HIV/AIDS campaigns do much more than scare people; they evoke a variety of affective responses that have separate and unique effects on persuasion. To construct effective public health messages, campaign designers must begin to give explicit attention to the affective outcome of their persuasive appeals. Approaches that effectively combine both behavioural and message design theories are more likely to be successful than those that use one without the other (Noar, et al., 2009). Go, et al. (2003) on a study about HIV prevention messages and gender

norms in slums of Chennai found that there is a direct linkage between marital violence and women's ability to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS.

#### 4. Theoretical framework

The HIV/AIDS PSAs come in various forms to cater to the needs of various audiences. This study tries to find out if the new trends in PSAs should replace older strategies, by examining the 'Pulli Raja' PSA text. The study uses Health Belief Model (HBM). The HBM is a psychological model developed in the U.S. in the 1950s that explains and predicts health behaviours by focusing on the attitudes and beliefs of individuals. The key variables of the HBM are presented in Figure 1 (Rosenstock, Strecher and Becker, 1994).

#### 5. Methodology

The research methodology followed is discourse analysis. The researchers carried out the analysis keeping in mind the mental outlook of the targeted population. In discourse analysis, interpretation arises from an act of reading or analysis which makes meaning of a text. Interpretations are based on contextualizing the text to social and historical realities. According to Fairclough (1995), interpretation focuses on three dimensions of discursive practice: (i) its manifestation in linguistic form (in the form of 'texts'); (ii) its instantiation of a social practice (political, ideological and so on); and (iii) a third dimension which focuses on socially constructed process of production, distribution and consumption

which determine how texts are made, circulated and used. This study examined the message factors such as theme, appeal, PSA characters, target audience, target message, female characterisation, social reality and gender. Rogers (2003) and subsequent 'diffusion' studies concluded that the media was very important for increasing awareness but that interpersonal communication and personal sources were crucial in making decisions to adopt innovations (Waisbord, 2001).

#### 6. Analysis and interpretation

For the purpose of this paper, one of the HIV/AIDS PSAs, 'Pulli Raja' has been analysed in depth. 'Pulli Raja' is one of the most popular PSAs brought forth on HIV/AIDS in the last two decades. The PSA had extensive reach as it was first to shake the cultural taboo of not talking about sex in the Tamil society. More so, it became popular as it was in public arena for a longer period of time, and in multiple media including large hoardings.

Background: 'Pulli' usually refers to an important person. But it could be anybody who is as small as a dot (ordinary person in the society). 'Pulli' in the Tamil language is also a full stop or an end for something. The message is that anyone could be infected by HIV. Pulli Raja is a representative of normal men, but also an important person with bad habits like consuming alcohol and visiting brothels. 'Raja', meaning King in the Tamil language and in other Indian languages as well, is also a common name in all strata of society. To start with, Pulli Raja's identity was not revealed. The name

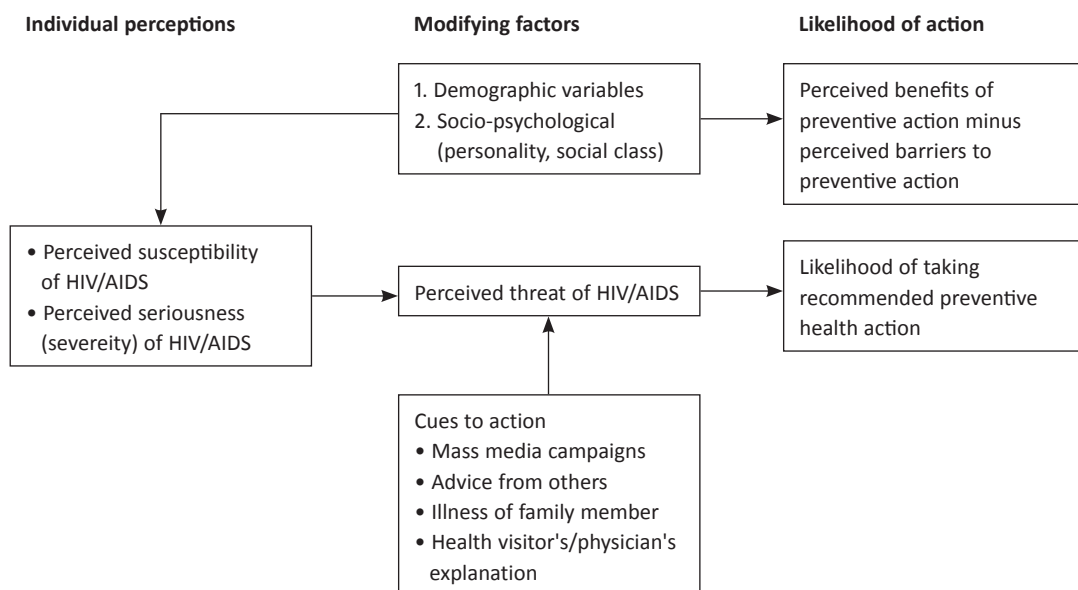


Figure 1: Theoretical Propositions of HBM (adapted from Rosenstock, Strecher and Becker, 1994)

itself suggests that he is a mischievous character. But such mischievous characters may look normal to the outside world. So first the question, “Will Pulli Raja get infected with AIDS [meaning HIV]?” followed by visuals of people from different walks of life under the same caption. Depicting people of different walks of life in the ‘Pulli Raja’ campaign implies that if you indulge in unsafe sex you will also contract HIV. Different people who repeat the same question in the PSA include common men from all walks of life. It serves as the reflection point for each man drawn from the different strata of society that everyone is susceptible to this deadly infection if he is not careful about his moral behaviour, especially if he is a habitual drunkard and has unsafe sex with the sex workers. It is also implied that no individual should think that HIV infection would not affect him but only others. This ‘you’ appeal is to dispel the feeling even among the so-called respected people that they are immune to HIV infection.

### 6.1 Text of the televised PSA

Location: Local bar

Opening shot: Two men sitting across a table facing each other. They consume alcohol and are laughing. A message is given by a man who drinks in the bar. He is portrayed as a participant, not as an observer or an outsider. A waiter places water on their table.

Man 1: *Will Pulli Raja get infected by AIDS?*

Who is Pulli Raja? Is he a friend, an acquaintance?

Man 2: [Looks at him] *If he is like you, he will get infected.*

The person he is addressing is careless, easily gets drunk and visits brothels.

Man 1: [Moves to the edge of the seat in eagerness] *Uh! How do you say?*

He is nervous and tense; he is uninformed but concerned.

Man 2: *If he gets totally drunk like you and goes after a woman, being too drunk to forget wearing a condom even once, he might get infected by AIDS.*

[Fear appeal]

It implies that this character does it often. It also implies that persons like him will also have the same feeling.

Man 1: (A close-up shot of a shocked and guilty face)

Guilty face denotes that he himself has indulged in such activities.

Man 2: *What? Did you understand?* [In a scolding and advising manner]

This is the manner adopted by film heroes too. In Tamil films, heroes are idolized. Their advice and their style of advice are taken seriously. The voiceover uses an interrogative. A voiceover is usually a voice of conscience. A third person is used for the voiceover. The viewers are asked to question themselves.

Voiceover: *Does Pulli Raja wear a condom each time?*

The message is not to avoid wrong relationships completely but to be safer and protected in such relationships. The message is incomplete and makes the target audience to find an answer and decide. Will Pulli Raja get infected by AIDS?

### 6.2 Discourse analysis

In the ‘Pulli Raja’ PSA, viewers learned about the need for using condoms while going for sex.

Theme: Warning for drunkards, who would look for sex with sex workers!

Appeal: Emotional appeal of fear

PSA characters: Proximal characters

Target audience: Drunkards and sex workers

Target message: If you forget to use condom when you are drunk and have sex with sex workers, you may get AIDS [HIV]. If your drunkard behaviour has led you into unprotected sex with a sex worker or an unknown woman, then there is every possibility that you may get AIDS [HIV].

Female characterization: No woman is visually portrayed in this PSA, but it warns the drunkards verbally that if you go after unknown women, you may get infected with HIV. The PSA is trying to reaffirm the Tamil societal value system that it is always the woman about whom a man should exercise caution in spite of the fact that he himself is drunk and morally wrong. Here a stereotypical gender divide is constructed, which is pro-man. Discourse can be conventional and reproductive, accustoming people to accept it as common sense or fact; or creative and transformative, awakening people to realize alternative truths.

Social reality: The reason to portray a local wine shop could be that the men may not be conscious of their

behaviour when they are drunk, and to emphasize the probability that men meet each other there and socialize over a drink. It is like giving them a warning about their probable undesirable actions when drunk.

**Gender:** Sex workers are indirectly referred to as various women. Gender balance is like men are portrayed as drunkard and women as sex workers. According to Chong and Kvasny (2007), empowering HIV/AIDS prevention messages would, therefore, start from women's daily life experiences, lead women to question their original understandings about their own identities, and leverage the authoritative nature of the discourse providers to challenge ideologies that may heighten women's risk for contracting HIV.

### 6.3 Health Belief Model

The following analysis is based on the HBM.

**Perceived susceptibility:** In a conversation in 'Pulli Raja', the drunkard assumes his chances of getting infected and asks indirectly, "will 'Pulli Raja' get infected by HIV"?

**Perceived severity:** The other person says that if he is like you, he will get infected by HIV. He moves to the edge of the seat (exhibiting the anxiety of probably getting infected with HIV) and asks "How do you say?" (Consequences).

**Perceived benefits:** Even if they are not able to avoid having sex with sex workers, if they use condoms they can avoid getting infected by HIV.

**Perceived barriers:** The close-up shot of shocking and guilty face shows the psychological barrier whether he will be able to stop the drinking habit, or he will be able to use condom, if he is drunk and unconscious.

**Cues to action:** After talking about the use of condom the other person will ask in a screaming, advising manner, "Did you understand?" This is a reminder for others to follow.

**Self-efficacy:** The final voiceover asks, whether Pulli Raja always uses condom? This builds confidence in one's ability to use condom to avoid getting infected by HIV.

**Consequence:** There was a sudden spurt in condom sales and use due to (at least partially) the high-recall of the 'Pulli Raja' campaign which screamed from billboards, bus panels, television screens and cinema halls. The campaign had by then started moving into the villages as well.

The campaign, which was undertaken by the government in association with the PSI, did come in for criti-

cism from some quarters. A few women's organisations had objected to 'Pulli Raja' advertisements saying that the PSAs were in bad taste and depicted women as immoral. But the PSAs were in response to the sexual habits of men and women in south India.

The PSI based its concepts on studies which revealed that one in every three men in the HIV/AIDS vulnerable group had more than one sexual partner. In an attempt to stem risky behaviour, it warned of the risks of having sex with sex workers if you are not protective and advised not to have sex with sex workers without using condom. It promoted condom use rather than abstinence or being faithful to the partner. But then, it is not talking about morals when the society has gone a particular way and there is a need for action as a matter of emergency. The need to behave as a responsible human being or citizen is more compelling than being a morally good person. Sometimes, people who hold so-called high moral values slip from their moral standing by oversight. It can lead to disastrous consequences particularly in the context of sexual morality and HIV infection. This is because if self-righteousness is so high among people, they do not think of using condom when they have pre-marital sex or extra-marital sex. Hence, the direct condom promotion in PSA campaigns is much needed to break adverse mind-set against the use of condoms. 'Pulli Raja' remains faceless throughout the campaign. He is every man, his conscience. He is an idea. This abstractness makes it easier for those in the target group to identify themselves with him. Showing the character's face will lead people to develop associations and reject bad similarities with him.

## 7. Conclusion

The PSA characters make the viewers identify with the characters. If the identification is stronger and messages clear enough, intended communication happens. Poor women are doubly discriminated – they are 'the other of the other'. They are neglected and disempowered first since they are poor, and second because they are women. Women who are victims of sexual violence are at a higher risk of being exposed to HIV. The lack of condom use means that women are immediately more likely to be exposed to HIV infection. Abused wives face increased HIV risk based both on the greater likelihood of HIV infection among abusive husbands and elevated HIV transmission within abusive relationships.

The PSA challenges the thought that men indulging in occasional sex outside marriage may not be at risk of being infected by HIV. Particularly in a Tamil society which sets a supposedly high moral standard, men having sex outside marriage normally do not have condom readily available for use. The PSA insists on not for-

getting condom use even if a man gets drunk and goes after a stranger for sex. The final voiceover asks, “Does Pulli Raja always uses condom?” This rhetoric instils on a man to have self-efficacy to use condom to avoid getting infected by HIV.

The study undertook a discourse analysis of the media text supplemented with HBM with the perception of the people in the state of Tamil Nadu in mind on the issue of HIV/AIDS communication, but it did not go to the intended population to know the impact of the PSAs.

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