

# Cassette technology and rural development : hints of a talk

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Hints Of A Talk**

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Cassette Technology and Rural Development : Hints of a Talk :-  
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Talking Book Libraries

It was one hundred years ago this month that Thomas Alwa Edison first reproduced spoken words by phonograph, that is to say, it was a hundred years ago this month that someone first heard spoken words, not when they were being spoken, but when they were not being spoken, when they had already been spoken. That is to say, time stopped for the first time for speech to get off and stand on the platform and wait to say hello to people who had yet not arrived. Now, suppose Edison had come out with his phonograph, not a mere century ago in the New World, but five thousand years ago in the very old world of the Indus Valley, Egypt or Babylon or wherever civilization and history began. Would it then have occurred to anyone to invent writing perhaps it would. Writing has many things to recommend it, but if there had been any other way of preserving spoken communication than memory, that would have made writing unnecessary for its essential purpose which is diachronic communication and absentee communication, which is the basis of civilization, culture, history.

We cannot imagine civilization without language. And language is speech. But speech is a unidimensional, purely temporal phenomenon. Speech can be experienced only as a sequence in time, as time, as time itself it can go only one way, forward. And it has no cumulative life at all. It vanishes with the moment. But society survived and grew by accumulated experience. And experience could be accumulated only in memory. It was first accumulated in a single memory and then in other people's memory. But was there any other way of accumulating experience? Any other way than spending days and days of laborious memorization at the feet of the gurn? The answer to this question was writing.

The inventor of writing, most probably, invented it for himself. He, or she, invented it first as a means of enabling himself to talk to himself across time from the past to the present. Then he realized its value as a means of communicating with his children when he was no longer alive, and/or no longer present. But if he had hit on the phonograph he would not have troubled himself to invent writing because writing depended on the receiver's knowledge and training in its code while with recorded speech, the receiver's knowledge of the code could be taken for granted so long as they spoken the same language.

And this is where we come to our theme of rural development. We cannot wait to train our illiterate millions in literacy before rural development can start, training in writing and reading is far too complicated and time consuming. And we have no trainers in large enough numbers. And now that we have got tape recorders, audio as well as video, our culture and civilization need not depend on literacy. Indeed, we in India did develop a culture of a very order and produce a body of the highest thinking, without the mediation of writing.

Now what is the rural development that we envisage? To most people in cities, rural development suggests doling out small favours to our helplessly impoverished millions of the villages, while we ourselves enjoy the conveniences, comforts, and luxuries of the cities which we well deserve. But this is not rural development. Nor is it a matter of going back to the golden days of a projected past, which never really existed. Rural development means making living in a village as rich, full, noble and worthwhile as the best kind of living we have ever known. This kind of living will be far superior to the life most people live in our present day cities, which are ugly, dirty, cancerous growths on the beautiful body of mother earth, and therefore ought to disintegrate as speedily as rural life develops. The exodus from the villages to cities should stop, and an exodus from cities to the village should begin as a result of planned rural development.



Present day cities are the result of an obsolete technology, the technology of mechanization. Current technology as is well known is electronic and cybernetic. It is a technology of communication, telecommunication, not of travel and transport. Transport brought people from villages to the cities, in search of experience. But electronic communication can take experience where people are, as professor Daniel Boorstin has pointed out. And while transport can move people at speeds measurable in terms of sound, communication can now take experience to people at speeds measurable in terms of light. The villager can now see a football match or a Prime minister, a filmstar or a foreign dignitary in the comfort of his home on the TV screen without going anywhere. without even opening his door. So why should he come to the dirty city?

Technology now exists that can make it possible for a village teacher to dial a library in London and see the pages of an encyclopaedia technical journal or a rare manuscript on a screen at a telephone receiver. So there is no reason why a village teacher should be any worse off than a city professor. Technology can also make it possible for a rural doctor to get a city specialist to show him how to do an emergency operation. Transport is therefore necessary only to move goods. Men need not move beyond walking distances. And walking is healthier, especially in the fresh air of sophisticated unpolluted electronically functioning villages. Now, here are some questions to which the answers ought to be 'Yes'. If they are not yes, the sooner we make them yes, the better.

I hear that in Britain there is a talking book library for the blind, and it has fifty thousand members. The books are audio cassettes or records. Have we got a talking book library for our rural non-literate, but often wise and highly cultured village citizens? Have we got listening rooms apart from reading rooms in our village community centres? Have these listening rooms got tape players so that any citizen comes, borrows a tape cassette, plays, listens, returns the tape to the library assistant and leaves? Have we got cassettes on which agricultural and manufacturing processes are carefully explained on programmed instructional lines so that the farmer or the home based manufacturer can listen to the instructions, points by point, and improve his production? Have we got video cassettes that the village teacher or self employed farmer or manufacturer can view experiments, actualities etc., with his pupils assistants or family at his conveniences? Have we got tape exchanges at which the old tapes can be erased and new materials can be recorded? Have we got frequency modulated broadcasts off which the villagers can record up to date information for reference at his need or convenience?

The Americans have recorded books, the motorists reading companion. Have we got any farmers and agricultural workers reading companion? I have seen human reading companions in 'beedi' workshops. One worker, who happens to be literate, reads the newspaper while the others make 'beedis', And they make the reader's quota of beedis as well. But a taped reading companion, or a 'newstape' instead of a newspaper can free the human reader to make his own quota. Poetry is already sold on cassettes in Western Countries. Why not put agricultural technology in verses for our non-literate farmers to get by-heart and use at his discretion?

A Variable speed tape recorder without distortion of signals at change of speed has been evolved. So that, material recorded at a particular rate can be slowed down or speeded up during reference without loss of intelligibility. All this will to a great extent, delink, education from training in writing. At least, education will no longer be synonymous with bookwork.

Writing has its unique value because of its spatial and therefore simultaneous display of signals. Writing will still be an integral part of our culture. But all development and all education need no longer wait for literacy. And from literacy for knowledge we can pass to literacy because of knowledge, and knowledge-induced motivation.