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RURAL PRESS SERVES THE NEEDS OF VILLAGE INDIA

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When we talk of rural communication, in the context of a largely illiterate community we talk of hoardings, cinema slides, films and fairs and possibly private meetings and demonstrations. We forget deliberately or inadvertently the press (the rural press) which transmits the knowledge of means for the rebuilding of farming and, in general, rural life. It is read by the rural opinion-makers. I do not call them opinion-makers because they have more land or they are rich or belong to a higher caste. I call them opinion-makers because they can read and write and they have knowledge of what is good for farming and what Government pronouncements on credit and subsidy are, who can also explain the political events in the country in the context of what has been broadcast on the radio.

The opinion-makers, who motivate or influence rural activity, are the ones who read the rural press and communicate its contents in local dialect. Why do they read the rural press and not the urban daily press? Firstly, a daily paper is expensive. Secondly, but for occasional farm items, the daily press finds politics more engaging. On the other hand, the rural press carries information which meets the needs of the rural people.

Here, may I define the rural press. A rural paper is not necessarily which is brought out from a rural area or a small town for its peripheral rural community. A rural paper, as defined by the Indian Rural Press Association, is one which devotes at least 40 per cent of its editorial space to farming/community development/cooperation and panchayatraj. Its language should be simple enough for a person of common intelligence.

A rural paper should not only be a communicator. In order to be an effective communicator, it should also be a fighter for rural causes. It should be able to strike fear in the hearts of the rural exploiters, even if they are officials.

Written word commands great respect, if used with care. It is more so with the rural people, who look upon any written or printed document with great deference.

Village India needs knowledge of better farming at its door-step. It needs the facilities on ground which the Government has sanctioned on paper. It needs effective defence against local musclemen and corrupt administrative machinery. Village India also needs to know how it can obtain better facilities of sanitation, health and Hygiene, drinking water, child care, nutrition and literacy.

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Rural press alone can not achieve much. The Government also has to pitch in. Also voluntary bodies. The rural press, however, has an advantage in that its appeal is continuous and has more credibility. I strongly believe the rural press can achieve its assigned task quickly and effectively, only if it is read by a larger number of rural people. Even those who can read and afford to buy a rural weekly for a rupee a month do not do so. The fault is not entirely theirs. It may be due to the journal's lack of resources which prevent its expansion.

The rural press is an extension agent with the capacity to tell its readers more than what a Government extension worker can tell. In fact, the extension worker himself will greatly benefit if he forms the habit of reading at least a good rural weekly. Week after week, he will know the latest in agricultural research done by agricultural universities and research institutions. Also, he will know about the Government's newest policies earlier than if he were to depend on circulars from a Government office.

The Government has spent vast sums on rural extension. My strong plea is for Government to utilise the rural press in its huge, challenging task.
