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Radio And Television : Change Agents In Rural Areas

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RADIO AND TELEVISION : CHANGE AGENTS IN RURAL AREAS

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India is the second most populous country in the world and eighty percent of her people live in villages. Some rural communities in the country are located in remote mountainous or desert areas and are beset with serious physical and communication barriers. To uplift them, the Government of India has made the village the basis for country's future development. It aims to channel communication media to serve the development interests of the rural folk, instead of acting only as a source on entertainment or as an elite and propaganda media.

The role of communication in the integrated development of rural India is to provide a coherent supporting service to the reconstruction and transformation of a backward rural society - economically, socially, and politically. Communication makes this all-round development faster and easier, economical and humane, by enlisting people's support and participation. It has been shown that a development administration can reap maximum benefit by adopting a multimedia and inter-disciplinary approach. This can be done through scientific preparation of communication programmes in the backdrop of audience knowledge, and an understanding of their felt needs. By communicating with people persuasively and not communicating merely prescriptory programmes and collecting feedback and by resorting to organised group listeners peoples' active response and continuing and informed involvement can be secured. It is through communication that a bridge of mutual understanding and goodwill can be built between the rural development authorities and the people. But to achieve this, the communication system itself has to be an integrated entity, implying that it should be a comprehensive, unified, interdisciplinary, multi-media, relevant and usable system. It should involve linkage of its principal constituents-knowledge generators, administrators, political leaders, knowledge users or public and intermediate audience group

With the immense vastness of India and the low literacy level of her people, no communication channels are mor effective relevant to her rural masses than radio and television. They are timely and can speak in the language or dialect of the listeners. Consistent with the oral traditions among the rural folk, the spoken word in India often has the authority of an oracle, provid the media enjoy the credibility of the people. Of the two, radio is more widespread and cheaper. With the network of 83 stations spread over the length and breadth of the country, All India Radi is one of the major broadcasting networks in the world and its broadcasts cover nearly ninety per cent of the people and 77 percent of the area. Comparatively, television, known as Doordarshan in India, has a periphery rural reach, the SITE experiment of 1975-76 however created history in the television system of India by linking up viewers in 2400 villages situated comparatively backward clusters of six states. The terrestrial transmission to rural areas a SITE continuity project, is now under way.

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The media or extension research conducted during the sixties and seventies in India and the successful operation of broadcasting system in the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia proved that the electronic media have the potentiality of serving as good development communicators or educators. Planned, innovative or participatory programmes , creative voice organised group listening visuals and integrate and flavour of words can add to their usefulness as motivators and change agents. Despite the forebodings of the 'idiot box' and the political overtone of the media being government operated, both the electronic media to the extent of their professionally meaningful operation, have served well in the sphere of agriculture, education, health, nutrition and family welfare. Some of the innovative programmes or experiments that have been evolved during the recent times account for this success.

Farm and Home programmes

Over the radio, the first such programme was the Farm and Home Programme, which was started in 1966 to provide educational and information support to agricultural programmes in the Intensive Agricultural Development Districts or areas where intensive farm output or high yielding variety seed campaigns are in progress. Today, 46 stations located in or nearbbout areas of intensive agriculture development put out this programme. Established as a continuous intensive communication link between the specialists, scientists and extension workers on the one hand and farmers of the region on the other, these broadcast stations are responsible for disseminating new agricultural technology to the farmers. They broadcast technically useful and relevant information which is field-based and problem-oriented. Apart from entertainment, their contents include farm news, market rates, weather reports and interviews and discussions with experts, field workers and farmers. The main objective of the system is to help farmers increase their production and income, better their living conditions, and above all to enable them to see how they can become active participants. In these programmes the farmwife is not forgotten; there are special programmes for women.

The Farm and Home Programme is broadcast late in the evening. It is a half -an-hour hard-core broadcast providing functional news and information related to crops in areas served by the station. Some stations put out a morning or an afternoon bulletin as well, giving topical hints to farmers on improved practices or about farm operations to be taken up by them in the following twenty four to forty-eight hours.

Twice a week, these broadcasts include a thirty-minute Rural Forum programme which provides feedback. The Farm and Home programmes also provide intensive communication support to the farmers' training and functional literacy projects undertaken by the Union Government with the help of experts and assistance from FAO, UNESCO, and UNDP.

The popularity of terms like 'radio rice' and 'radio wheat' which indicate the significance of radio information to the people. The success and credibility of the programme is also proved by a stream of letters received from farmers. The listener research units of radio stations have discovered that Farm and House Programmes are popular among all farmers, whether literate or illiterate. The farmers have acknowledged that these programmes have kept them alert and active and have also encouraged consultancy with the experts regarding their daily problems. In a recent survey conducted by the Audience Research Unit of Hyderabad (Andhra Pradesh) it has been found that a majority of the farmers were exposed to extension education and guidance through these programmes.

AIR also brings to the people the voices of satisfied users in farm and welfare programmes and gives them the opportunity to voice their doubts and to receive answers by qualified and well known medical practitioners. It has attempted to fight rumours, arrange group discussions and bring leaders of public opinion into the programmes.

Farm school-on-the air

The most recent feature of great importance is the Farm-school-on-the-air, which constitutes a comprehensive educational course put out for farmers from nine radio stations in the country. Based on the problems-oriented approach and study of topography, social conditions, climate, cropping pattern, farmers' needs a topic is selected for broadcast by a committee consisting of local agricultural scientists, officials, of the department of agriculture, extension officers and the Farm Radio staff.

Then a well thought-out syllabus of subsequent lessons is designed. To generate interest among the rural listeners of the area, suitable publicity is given to the programme through pamphlets, circulars, letters, local newspapers development departments, extension workers and field publicity units. On the basis of this publicity campaign, thousands of farmers are registered for the course. An earlier method, namely that of lecture-cum-discussion, is pursued, followed by questions and answers. The system has a bold feedback component. The broadcaster poses certain questions to the listeners whose answers are sent by them for evaluation. Listeners are also encouraged to send their own questions, which are answered in the next broadcast.

To reinforce the effect, the broadcast lessons are supplemented by printed material. To generate enthusiasm incentives in the form of prizes are announced. The farm school-on-the-air programmes are periodically evaluated to test their impact on the farmers.

SITE : a teacher in the sky

Television made its debut as an experimental, instructional and developmental tool in India in 1959. The significant feature of this slowly growing Indian television service was the Krishi Darshan (agricultural programme) and community viewing for villagers started in 1967. Though limited in its reach, the programme was hailed as a fairly good success by researchers, foreign and Indian, and its impact recognised. However, the most momentous development in the realm of electronic rural communication took place when the one-year Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) was launched on August 1, 1975, following an agreement between India's Department of Atomic Energy and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration of the United States of America. For the first time in the history of telecasting the Television Organisation in India, in cooperation with Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) of the Department of Space, started beaming educational, developmental and national cohesion programmes direct via the American satellite ATS 6 to 2400 villages spread mostly over remote and backward, in six states - Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan. Apart from this, about 400 villages in Gujarat also viewed the Satellite programmes through a transmitter, set up by the ISRO at Pij. To draw listeners the scientists, experts and extension personnel sought to identify and design the messages to different audience groups. The timings of farm programmes were so scheduled that they did not clash with the working of farmers in the field.

It was found that much of the information given on SITE was put to immediate use by the viewers. According to newspaper reports, farmers in Rajasthan, for instance, found agricultural programmes and information to be good. One farmer regretted that the pest control programme was not shown to him the previous year when his crop was eaten by the pests. Knowledge about the dry farm techniques and other farm information were also reported to be liked by farmers. It was discovered that programmes which had a low information content but included variety, humour and catchy music found great favour with the viewers. The experiment led to the collection of useful research data, viewers' profiles and other general information. It was revealed in the process that the producer who based their programmes on that date got an edge over others.

The nature of social impact may be gauged from success stories published in newspapers. A villager in Chhattisgarh (MP) was found to have offered to correspondents tea with groundnut milk made from a TV recipe. A large number of women viewers took to soap making after seeing the programme. Near Cuttack (Orissa), children of one family were seen eating nutritious laddoos made of wheat, maize, jaggery and groundnut, another TV recipe. These and many other cases constitute stories of human interest and learning in action. The results assessed in terms of the objectives were heartening.

The hardware aspect of the SITE was considered a hit. According to one estimate, the success was nearly cent percent. Some experts have held that the experience with making and using hardware installed confidence that a hybrid TV system with [illegible] satellite components could be designed, manufactured and run, employing indigenous know-how and managerial skills. But the more viable criterion of assessment of this expensive and sophisticated technology is its competitive success as a communication and change agent in rural areas. In this respect the research has depicted a mixed but fairly promising record. Judged from the responses and social research groups, programmes on health were popular, followed by those on agriculture and animal husbandry. It was discovered that there were fewer dropouts from schools in which television was used.

Videotape, an intimate medium

The other Indian development worth mentioning is the experiment by the Centre for Development of Instructional Technology, New Delhi, in using a portable videotape recorder as the medium communication among the distant rural villages. Based on this experiment, the Centre found that medium to be very intimate. The video-tape recorder not only acts as a good means of conveying information but also as an instrument that actively involves the villagers and helps them articulate their problems and reactions.

These few broadcasting experiments have proved successful in the Indian context. They deserve serious attention in the developing countries of Asia. The other innovations which can act as equally good pointers are the Kenyan experiment of broadcasting health, nutrition and family planning programmes by three radio humourist on every Sunday, one-minute commercial radio spots on similar themes in Nicaragua and the Philippines, the two-way street programme, Pulong-Pulong, of the Phillippines, the two-channel programmes for different age groups of Hong Kong and the telemedicine experiments in rural Alaska. The data and findings of these experiments can be handy to policy makers, researchers & media practitioners. But they all need to be reinforced by local trials and experiments to make them more meaningful and relevant to the specific requirements of the developing countries in Asia. However, the task is worth accepting and likely to prove rewardi

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