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Industry's Role In Communication For Rural Development

By

S Bashiruddin
Industry's Role in Communication for Rural Development

By Prof. S. Bashiruddin*

The Problem:

If India has to develop in all its aspects - economic, social, political and cultural - rural development would be almost a synonym for this in real terms. With the changed priorities of national planners giving emphasis to rural development, the question now is how to bring this about.

Since 80 percent of India's population lives in the villages, conveying useful information of applied value to this massive majority should be of foremost concern to the national planners both in Government and Industry.

Communicate to Segmented Audiences:

At the very outset, it is clarified that rural population is not homogenous. The rural people that are in need of assistance and help very often have to forego it as they do not have the awareness, education or resourcefulness for accessibility to development information. The problem that faces the rural weaker sections is the absence of outlets for seeking usable information and interpersonal assistance for operational follow up.

What is the role of industries, banks and private sector in rural development? How far can they initiate the process of facilitating communication for development or of supplementing communication for rural change? How to mobilise the mass of over 80 percent of India's largely illiterate rural population? Rural communication is the need for which concerted efforts and innovative approaches could originate from the mixed sector of public and private industry, banking houses, etc.

Weaker Sector Handicapped:

While most of the rural development schemes and facilities should be directed to the weaker and under-privileged sectors of rural population, in reality what happens is that it is this very segment that fails to get the benefit as the privileged rural elites and the educated or rich rural segments corner away the advantages they have access to information. This brings us to the most crucial step in rural development which is the need to bridge the gap in communication between the benefactor and the beneficiary.

To give a few instances, while government or industry or banks launched well-meaning benefit schemes for rural artisans, landless labourers, marginal farmers, etc. the procedure to obtain loans or to utilise the incentives involves first becoming aware of such a facility and secondly to locate who is in charge of the administration of the scheme and thirdly to know how to fill in the numerous forms and fulfill the other procedural formalities; the weaker segments have hardly benefited from this. On the other hand, the rich or entrenched and resourceful segments of the rural population who have the necessary contacts and political pull, utilise the schemes and become richer.

Operational Solutions:

One of the means by which the under-privileged sector of the population can be helped is the stationing of extension agents on behalf of industrial houses and banks whose objectives should include locating the rural poor and the needy and to communicate interpersonally the means to utilise the development schemes.

* Prof. S. Bashiruddin is Director of Communication, National Institute of Rural Development, Hyderabad.
So far rural development projects in the country have put the cart before the horse i.e. presented the plans and programmes for rural development as fait accompli to the rural population expecting the rural folks to put in shramadan (voluntary effort). This has been a grave oversight, one which, even to this day, is not grasped by many riders and developmental officials of either the government or the industry.

It is a universal human phenomenon that motivation is always with need fulfillment and self gratification. If this is true all of us whose basic needs are fulfilled, and yet respond to where our self interests are involved how much more relevant this be for the poor rural folk whose basic needs are not even

Prioritize Rural Needs:

Therefore, the first stage of rural development and welfare measures should be to find out what the rural people consider as their problems and grievances and rank them according to the priorities ranked by them and not by us. If this first step is overlooked, all other steps are going to be affected. This may sound elementary and even cliche-ridden but let me repeat that though we know this on paper, when it comes to actual practice, we overlook the first stage and begin with the second stage i.e. formulation of developmental objectives;

Information Caravan

To sustain credibility among India's rural masses, the Information Caravan concept of a package deal will be effective. Here, while a team of people make available information on nutrition and health, health workers immunize the population and distribute drugs, extension workers supply improved seeds, pesticides, insecticides and fertilizers; folk artists entertain and the tube well sinkers drill for water: all by camping in a village. This will lead to more credibility than mere information preceding the supply of seeds.

These are some of the specific methods by which the industrial houses and banks could take up rural development in the country.

Rural Catalytic Centres:

Since there are more than 5.6 lakh villages in India one of the methods to span the whole country would be to locate rural development catalytic centres catering to a cluster of villages in a taluq, say forming a radius of 15-20 Kms. This would mean identifying the existing cluster markets for reinforcement of developmental activity even developing new clusters.

This method would be more manageable as the catalytic centres located in the cluster markets could adopt the caravan concept of information-cum-development package team sponsored by industrial houses wherein entertainment and communication will be integrated with public health, agricultural inputs and utility services. It is clarified that the catalytic centres would be so chosen as to be accessible through easy means of transport—rail, road, bus route, bullock cart and will be already on the villagers, route to weekly fairs, festivals of entertainment and gatherings so that they are already known to large number of villagers. These centres should be provided with public utility services such as bus stops, post office, hospital and marketing of agricultural produce and cattle trade facility. It would then be easier for the communication-cum-demonstration teams camping in the cluster centres to reach out to the nearby villages and keep continuity of contacts and render follow-up assistance to the farmers and rural people.
Industry's Fringe Benefit Scheme

Since the raw materials for industry in reality come from the rural hinterland, it would be useful for industry to support cooperatives in villages and make available goods through proper rural marketing channels so that they reach the cooperative outlets, and to even ensure that the subsidised rates are implemented.

Today rural developmental expenditure is subject to the benefit of being non-taxable by the government. It would help industry to divert the amount currently spent on advertising on urban media and to launch development-oriented media programmes of informational value to rural population as also to use part of the amount for developing village cooperatives.

Industrial houses and banks could utilise traditional and rural indigenous media such as folk forms of communication. They may appoint extension agents, to screen 8 mm. film films or to help villages to exhibit their products in village fairs. Industry could invest money for subsidizing and promoting small and cottage sector as a social cost for rural development or as a fringe benefit role of the large scale sector.

Rural Extension Departments

While the banks have adopted rural development schemes as part of their policy, the schemes have not really benefited the under-privileged sectors of the rural population but have been mostly of value to the upper middle and middle segments of the rural population. This is due to the securities insisted upon by the banks before money could be advanced and the various procedures which require initiative on the part of the illiterate rural segments. Leading industrial houses have not taken up rural development in an earnest manner, which today is in the shape of tokenism or sporadic effort at the time of natural calamities like droughts or floods.

What is required is consistent effort with continuity and systematic apportioning of a small percentage of the annual corporate turnover for rural development.

It would be necessary for each industrial house to set up a rural development division staffed with village development and extension personnel drawn from rural milieu whose job should be to actually live and work in the village and to serve as grass-roots two-way information conveyers i.e. keeping the industry informed of the needs of the rural population and in turn informing the rural population of development plans, and assisting them to utilise these facilities.

Fillip to Village Industry

Industry can also train a cadre of rural labour force for absorption either in the industry or for work in cottage and small scale sectors. Industry could consider obligatory to develop ancillary unit in rural areas by improvising and modernising the small scale sector. This could be tailored to the development plans of the district where the industry is located. It will also be useful to start adult literacy classes, training in handicrafts and even subsidising rural schools, health centres, veterinary clinics, etc.

Rural community relations

One of the ways would be for each industry dealing with a product to think of related rural service facility. For instance, fertiliser and farm tool manufacturers could take up schemes for improving rural livestock, cattle breeding and artificial insemination centres; textiles industry can go for opening of fair price cloth stores, holding sewing, knitting and tailoring classes; banks could promote cooperative stores; machine building units could take up training of rural youth in small scale industrial sector, etc.
The pharmaceutical industry which nets a sizeable profit in the country should open health clinics, provide nutritional supplements, run classes in dietetics; leading leather goods manufacturers could help and absorb the relevant rural population in ancillary units to be located in the rural sector.

Leading radio, television, photographic and music record manufacturers could sponsor rural development programmes on AIR or Doordarshan, the screening of 8 mm films in rural areas or providing cassette and slides through extension workers for skill learning and improvement through demonstration classes, etc.

In the People's Republic of China, thousands of motivated extension agents use cassette recorders, slide projectors etc., to teach improved skills to the rural population. Since our political structure provides for a mixed economy and media ownership pattern, we need not depend solely on the Government of India's Field Publicity or Films Division units to cater to the needs of rural population. Industrial houses and banks can commission documentary films with rural change themes or short films on skill learning to be screened in catalytic rural centres.

Relevance of Little Media

Since the majority of our rural population, about 70 per cent illiterate, audio-visual tools like slides, 8 mm films, cassettes; posters, flip charts are more useful than printed newspapers.

Besides, little media such as tape recorders and audio-visual training group media are also inexpensive. If less than 5% of the industries profits is diverted to rural development, this use of relevant media should not appear an insuperable problem.

Rural India is real India and until our villages are economically among the efforts of the industry will be a mere trickle in the ocean.