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Role Of Media

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The role of the press in the areas of agriculture, health and family planning is still minimal. Ways and means need to be devised to play the role of effective change agents.

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Information is a weapon and a means for inculcating the wills of change. Agriculture, health and family planning are the areas in which the role of media as carriers of information should be felt. Unfortunately the Indian Press in general accords the lowest priority to these areas.

The role of newspapers in areas of health and family planning is very important in India where 480 million people live in villages. They have problems such as inadequate medicare, malnutrition, ignorance about contraceptives which the media can effectively probe.

The need for health reporting is felt in cities too. Let me cite a simple example. It is becoming fashionable among the Indian middle class mothers to bottle feed their babies rather than breast feed them, despite a widespread protein shortage. Unfortunately, the water used to prepare the formula is often contaminated. This combined with the lack of human antibodies in cow's milk has led to a much higher mortality rate among bottle fed infants than among breast fed ones. There is thus an immediate attitude of young parents by bringing to them the message that breast feeding is safer and better for babies.

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Examples like this are numerous. The availability of a few items of essential scientific information can mean the difference between health and disease, life and death.

Whether an agricultural labourer with only two rupees to spend for meals should buy protein poor tapioca or protein rich Bengal Grams is such a vitally important decision that it should only be made with a knowledge of the principles of nutrition. Lack of this information is the major cause for the high mortality rate in India's rural people.

But India's national press is rather reluctant to come to the aid of these helpless millions. They dissipate their energy in endless political squabbles.

The Government controlled publications, Radio, Television and Films Division are making efforts in this direction. But control in these media partially nullify the good work done. Their credibility is poor especially in the family planning field because of the emergency experiences. Compared to the all India picture, our small state Kerala is in an advantageous position because of its high literacy and conscientious efforts on the part of its newspapers.

There are 76 newspapers in this state. The most popular among them are the Malayala Manorama (circulation (4 50,000) and the Mathrubhoomi (300,000).

I may be pardoned for taking an example from the Malayala Manorama. Our Sunday edition invariably carries at least one feature on health, usually by an eminent doctor. Our sister publications carry question-answer series on health problems. 'Vanitha' the ladies magazine devotes three pages to women's question on health.

We give support to the family planning efforts of the state government in multifarious ways. Apart from publishing features on family planning methods we give wide publicity to family planning camps conducted by the government. The gay and colour make the people flock to these camps just like they go to temple festivals.

Some family planning (F.P.) operations end in disaster- doctors say the probability is one in thousand. In such cases we give follow up series and see that the poor victims are given adequate compensations either by Government or social service organisations. This imparts confidence in people to undergo F.P. operation.

Because of the alarming information gap in rural areas on health problems, many other states in India are forced to introduce barefoot doctors scheme. These half quacks with a modicum of health knowledge travel to interior parts with essential medicines to give advice to the village folk on health problems. Fortunately Kerala has not implemented the stop gap scheme as doctors are available in plenty and as newspapers reach every corner with health advice.

The effect of newspaper coverage is well reflected in results. The birth rate in Kerala is as low as 28 per thousand compared to the all India average of 35.2 thousand. Kerala's mortality rate is 8 (thousand) compared to 15.9 at the all India level.

A boy born in 1975 can expect an average 60.9 years of life in Kerala. The all India figure is 52.6. These figures are 63.3 and 51.6 respectively for women. While 139 out of 1000 infants die at the all India level, Kerala's infant mortality rate is as low as 57.3 per thousand.

Agricultural reporting remains a low priority area to the Indian press even after 30 years of independence. The news media show a definite elitist bias. There may be some glorious exceptions and valient efforts. But in general, the Indian press still lacks living contact with the countryside.

The British Government in India never bothered about the Indian agriculturists and their problems until the great Bengal famine. Then the authorities felt the need for a change in the traditional methods of cultivation and the end result was the launching of 'Bengal agricultural gazette' under the editorship of Robert Knight. One doesn't know whether the Famine overtook the Gazette also, but the paper closed down shortly.

A new phase in agricultural reporting coincided with the Indian struggle for independence. It goes to the credit of the Father of nation, Mahatma Gandhi who emphasised that political freedom without economic freedom had no meaning. He started a weekly called 'Harijan' and its pages were devoted to the betterment of agriculture and cottage industries. The language was simple and easily understood.

Agricultural communication is almost a one way traffic in India. There has been little feed back. As a result, many research projects have become a mere waste of resources and time. The journalists could have stepped into the vacuum and become an effective channel for a two way communication.

I would like to touch up on two or three exceptional cases. During the six years editorship of Mr. B. G. Verghese, (1969-75), a Magsaysay Award winner, at the Hindustan Times, he started a unique experiment of adopting a village for intensive reporting on the life, economic conditions, social relationship and other developmental activities. The village was Chhatera, in Haryana state, 40 kms from Delhi. The publicity made all the developmental agencies flock to it. The village as it stands today shows what the press through contact and intensive reporting can achieve. Chhatera is an India in miniature.

Pardon me for taking yet another example from my own state Kerala. The 'Malayala Manorama' and the Mathrubhumi were the first newspapers in the country to start a farm feature. They allot one page every week exclusively and the other smaller papers are now following suit.

The weekly feature carries one or two articles on agriculture and animal husbandary or poultry, two or three farm technique tips, four or five questions and answers, and the letters from farmers. The articles are meant mainly to create awareness and interest in improved production techniques. The farming tips or brief notes on different aspects of crops and innovations coupled with field experiences make the feature spicy.

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In the question and answer column any questions or doubts raised by the farmers are answered. Also, there is opportunity for the readers-farmers to voice their opinions and share their experiences. This leads to a sense of involvement. Appropriate picture and photographs make the column attractive and easily assimilable.

The Malayala Manorama which has an effective readership of over 4,000,000 is not content with these routine features alone. At times we take up problems for detailed survey. In 1975 November we conducted a survey on coconut farming. I would not be wrong to say that every home in Kerala has coconut trees. The problems of coconut planters were discussed in its socio-economic perspective.

I am glad to state that the 'Malayala Manorama' known as the 90 year old granny of Indian newspapers, has always been the vigilant watchdog of the interests of agriculturists. Our lead stories prove this point. Here are a sample few.

In 1975 there were three lead stories in 20 days highlighting the problems of agriculturists. The 'Malayala Manorama' has stood by the agriculturists in times of peril as a guardian saint. I remember the 'Holy War' waged against the Kerala State Government to protect the paddy fields of Kuttanad - the rice bowl of Kerala - from saline water intrusion. It was a spillway which resisted saline water inflow into Kuttanad. The shutters of the spillway became old and ineffective. Manorama focussed attention on the dilapidated condition of the spillway through a splashy front page story.

The Government promptly denied any leakage in the spillway.

Within two days, Manorama published the report that the irrigation engineer of the area has sent a report to the Government demanding repair and replacement of shutters. Then another follow up report was published pointing out that paddy cultivation in tens and thousands of hectares are slowly succumbing to saline water. A few revealing photographs were also published. The Government had to budge. Ministers admitted that some shutters were ineffective. Within six months of the publishing of the first report all the 41 shutters were repaired by allotting additional funds.

Our success story only proves that newspapers can work wonders if there is a change in attitude to agriculturists who form the largest single professional group in developing countries.

Everywhere the farmers want precise information regarding use of fertilisers, pesticides, and agricultural technology. It is estimated that about 50% of the fertilisers is wasted since the farmers have no precise information on how to use them. Who is there to help them?

We have miles to go in reporting agriculture and health. No contraceptive can reduce our population to safe limits without the help of the media. We have to devise ways and means to play the role of effective change agents.