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Prospects Of Rural Press In India:
A Personal Impression

By

Lalit Surjan
Talking about situation of Rural Press in India, it may be remembered that it is a comparatively new concept for this country and its role and purpose has not yet been properly defined. What we have today in the name of rural press is either a broadsheet brought out from a district/subdistrict place or a farm journal which insists upon devoting minimum 40% space to agriculture and related subject.

The district centre publication be it a daily or a weekly, hardly cares about its immediate surroundings. For news intake it greatly depends upon Radio news bulletins and in some cases on national new agencies. Its editorial department is always understaffed. It lacks in reference facilities and seldom it engages professional reporter in the field. A daily district paper may be in a little better shape than a weekly one as it gives at least some news of national and international importance to its readers even if it is totally unconcerned about the local events. But a weekly has proved to be nothing more than a scandal-sheet. The editor-publisher-proprietor of a district paper too, may not be a full time qualified journalist.
Rather from an aspiring local politician to a businessman, he may be anybody trying to use the print medium to reap some other benefits. It is typical of such newspapers that they will issue press identity cards to any person who is willing to dish out a price for it and may use the card for blackmailing. In most cases, the publication does not reach general public through an organised circulation network but they rarely bother about the same. In a small town a person wanting to obtain press card may become a selling agent as long as he finds the card useful. These publications are brought out on age old machines and their reproduction quality is often very poor.

As far as the farm journals are concerned, most of them are published by the State Agricultural Departments or the agriculture Universities. As such, they should not be treated as part of the mainstream press. Though some independent newspapers are also being brought out, they totally depend upon government hand outs, bulletins and other publications for news gathering. For financial viability, they again solely depend upon government advert and government subscriptions. If these papers have made any serious effort towards in-depth study of any aspect of rural life in India, I am not aware of it. The farm journals may have their usefulness in importing knowledge of better agriculture techniques to the farmers. They play only a limited role towards creating Rural Press in India. Afterall, a village community's interests go much beyond the agriculture know-how. A newspaper big or small should adhere to four basic principles of journalism i.e. to inform, to interpret, to educate and to entertain.
What we need is a community newspaper caring for its readers in totality. The weekly papers published from small villages in U.K. and some other countries may serve as a model for India but unfortunately not much thought has been given to this.

A beginning could be made now. But the present situation of newspaper industry in India does not give hope for immediate success of such efforts. Let us have a look at the situation. As we know, the press in this country is traditionally categorised in two sections - one is the National Press and the other is called the language or regional press.

The national press comprises of English Papers published from four metropolitan cities namely Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi and Madras. In fact these are urban papers catering to a vast region respectively i.e North, South, East and West. This press is well equipped in all respects and has adequate resources to promote a developmental bias in the Indian Press at large by setting examples in coverage of rural issues. But barring exceptions like B.G. Varghese during his tenure with Hindustan Times, the National papers have shown no inclination in this direction. They are happy with their pro-urban attitude and with their heavy political bias perhaps in desiring to become king makers. Of late, exposure of corruption in places high and low has become the favourite game of the National Press, bringing them honours galore. But it never thought fit to spend even a small portion of time, money and energy for covering rural India which was spent upon coverage of political scandals.
The position of the regional press is different only in the sense that it may lack in resources but its attitude towards the news is very much identical to the national press. Though it has twin advantages of language and geographical location, it has failed to turn them for the benefit of the common people. What National Press is doing through English in a radius of 500 kms, the regional press is trying to copy it in the language of the masses in a radius of no more than 100 kms. Since, most of the regional papers work with inadequate infrastructure, they have been reduced to a poor carbon copy of the national press. Perhaps there is a historical reason for this mental makeup. As we know, the regional press was in the forefront in the India's struggle against colonial rule. It may be therefore that it does not want to come down and discuss any issue which has not achieved national dimensions. Just take a look at their titles and you will find reflections of thier loftier ideas and ideals, such as DESHBANDHU (Friend of the nation), BASUMATI (MOTHER EARTH), LOKSATTA (people's rule) and so on. Newspapers indicating local settings in their titles are instantly looked down as poor relatives. It is high time the regional press realises that the post-independent struggle for a better life for Indian People is as much important as the struggle for freedom was and that it too has to take part in it.

Besides wanting change in attitude, there are some more requirements. First and the most important on the list is the provision for training journalists and technical staffers for regional papers.
Some Indian universities conduct well organised courses through English medium which ensures a steady inflow of talent for the English press. But the same cannot be said about the courses conducted through Indian languages, particularly in Hindi. Further the numerical growth of language press in India in recent past is also making it increasingly difficult to find sufficient number of trained journalists for an establishment. Job switching has become a common practice and the papers are being forced to work with inadequate staff. Moreover, in regional press, in-house training is also not provided. Second is the setting up of research and reference library to which regional newspapers have never given a thought.

It is also necessary to discuss the financial aspect of the regional press. With the introduction of offset technology, newspaper production has become a costly affair. The initial cost is very high and not all newspapers can afford it. The RIND printing facility set up at Shimoga in Karnataka may prove to be a successful experiment as far as weekly papers are concerned but for daily newspapers, financial assistance or leasing of machinery through a newspaper finance corporation or any other institution may be the only solution.

Here I would also like to discuss the Government's attitude in brief. Some 20 years ago, when a cold war started between an influential section of the press and the Government some strong measures were introduced by the Government to keep the press under control.
The measures included many fold increases in newsprint price, frequent changes in newsprint policy, terming the commercial nature advts released by the Government as state subsidy and imposition of import duty on newsprint etc. Such pressures in reality instead of hitting the national press did more harm to the regional press, which was by and large independent of business or political interests and had no financial buffer to sustain the attacks. At the same time, introduction of modern technology presented the regional press with a dilemma. Either to adopt or to perish in a highly competitive market. In its bid to accept the modern technology and survive the regional press became more susceptible to pressures from vested interests. It started leaning upon business houses, started cultivating political masters or decided to go into other business activities which further meant seeking favours from the government. The financial base of the regional press has been further eroded as more and more new publications have come up resulting in shrinking of circulation area and as now the lion's share of the advertising business is going to the television and the colour magazines.

This brief analysis convinces me that unless the condition of the regional press is improved, we should not hope for a healthy growth of rural press. It is still in formative stage and by compulsion of history it will have to depend upon the regional press for drawing managerial skills and editorial talents. In a vast country like India it is not easy to launch a massive operation on experimental basis for developing Rural Press.
It will require endless time, money and expertise which may not be forthcoming. But if steps are taken to strengthen the regional press, it will require much less resources and soon will start promoting the rural and community press, in its own interest.

In essence, there is not much difference between the concept of the regional and the rural press. Both of them live near to the ground and possess first hand knowledge of the social environment and are capable of presenting the events in proper perspectives provided they work with an independent mind. The reginal press can apply its better resources for indepth studies of the subjects raised by the rural press and compliment its efforts. In turn, the rural press may also prove to be a valuable news source for the regional press.

Taking into consideration their complimentary roles, a strategy may be evolved where senior persons retiring from the regional press or the younger ones after getting properly trained in a regional newspaper are encouraged to go to the villages to set up their own publications with the main purpose of serving the community through getting actively involved with it, through sharing its hopes and aspirations, its joys and sorrows and through becoming a bridge between the people and the state.

To sum up, I put forward some proposals which may be discussed in this forum:
1. The Government of India be urged to establish a Newspaper Finance Corporation as an autonomous or co-operative body providing financial assistance to regional/rural newspapers.

2. An independent professional organisation like press institute of India put up collective use printing facility at various places like one already installed at Shimoga, encouraging professional journalists to publish a quality newspaper not bothering about the heavy investment at the initial stage. To start with periodicity of publication will be once in a week. Such weekly papers will become reflections of the village life and in turn will prove to be an important news source for the regional papers.

3. Conduct frequent training courses for junior staffers and refresher courses for seniors in different language regions. Thomson Foundation and alumni of T.F in India be urged to take up this programme.

4. Press Clubs and Journalist's unions functioning at various places be urged to set up reference libraries as an essential part of their activities.

5. Individual journalists and newspapers be recognised by Press Institute or C.P.U./Editor's Guild for excellence in rural and developmental reporting like the award already instituted by the Statesman.
6. If newspapers agree, award winning and other prominent journalists be sent on deputation to them for conducting short time on job training programme.

7. The rural press be redefined conveying its location and enveloping the entire field of activity in that locality, not limiting it to farm technics alone.