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<th>Title</th>
<th>Information needs of rural people and community information centres</th>
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<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Raju, K. A.</td>
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Paper No. 18
INFORMATION NEEDS OF RURAL PEOPLE AND COMMUNITY INFORMATION CENTRES

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ABSTRACT

In India, 74% of its population lives in villages. Also 300 million people are estimated to be below the poverty line and they mostly live in the rural areas. Inspite of the successive Five Year Plans and enormous inputs that go in the name of alleviation of poverty, poverty has not shown any signs of reduction. Many advocate people's participation, infrastructure development, creation of awareness and access to productive resources etc. as possible solutions to improve the productivity of the rural people and thereby the reduction in poverty. The paper outlines the various needs of rural people and identifies those information needs that would improve the quality of life and sustain it.

In the light of the processes that are leading to the democratic decentralisation to empower the local people to increase their participation in planning and development, the kind of activities the local governments at various levels are scheduled to take up, are outlined. Here the dimension of 'Right to Information' is discussed.

The role of Community Information Centres in fulfilling the articulated needs of the village community and how these centres can be conceived as dynamic institutions, integrating information generated at various levels, transforming into readily usable material, and the various databases to be developed depending upon the needs of the rural community are discussed.

In view of the advances that are taking place in the information and communication technologies, the paper suggests the need to bring this communication revolution to the doorsteps of the people. There is a move to extend the communication facilities under the new Action Plan of the IT Task Force upto village level. Under this Action Plan, the 'last mile' is also to be connected and Community Information Centres are to work as not only as a STD Booths but also as a Telecottages or Information Kiosks. Then there is a possibility that information available on the super highway would also be made available in a repackaged format in an intelligible and usable format to the rural people.
INFORMATION NEEDS OF RURAL PEOPLE AND COMMUNITY INFORMATION CENTRES

Introduction

India is predominantly rural oriented country with 74% of its population of over 900 million live in villages numbering nearly six lakhs as against 4700 cities and towns. About 37% of the rural population, i.e. nearly 250 million are below the poverty line. This makes it imperative to give high priority to the rural sector for its development more so in a democratic society like India. Also village is a basic unit for measuring socio-economic and cultural life of our society. It also acts as a grassroot political as well as administrative entity. In all disciplines of social science village studies gained important place. Since independence the successive Five Year Plans have been emphasising various factors that led to the overall development of the villages i.e., eradication of poverty, reduction of inequalities and elimination of exploitation etc.

Starting with Community Development Programme in 1952, over the years several other programmes were launched primarily to increase the productivity of the village thereby to improve the quality of the life of the rural poor. Inspite of these developments and planned progress, the village scenario, has not changed much since independence except some mud houses and thatched houses have become pucca and some tiled houses had become RCC roofed. Still there are no pucca roads, drinking water facilities, sanitation facilities, employment opportunities, proper communication, health and educational facilities worth mentioning. That is the quality of life of common man or his social development is yet to come of age even after 50 years of independence. Added to this, the village society is divided with caste complications, religious bigotry and various other dissentions. Besides there are problems in each category of the society like small farmers have difficulty in obtaining reliable seeds, inputs at fair price and credit to purchase these inputs; artisans have problems in obtaining required modern skills, tools and training and educated youth have difficulty in finding suitable employment. Inspite of all this, we sometimes wonder why people still prefer to live in rural areas. What are the advantages of rural living? It is true that the rural areas are free from overcrowding and air, noise and other pollutions, very low crime rate, natural environmental attributes, good family and religious life. The rural
isolation also allows for more outgoing attitude and the qualities of urban life like depersonalisation is seldom seen.

The following tables give some of the other interesting statistics pertaining the rural people.

**Table 1: Incidence of Rural and Urban Poverty**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1973-74</td>
<td>56.4</td>
<td>49.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977-78</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>47.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td>42.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987-88</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>40.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993-94</td>
<td>37.27</td>
<td>32.46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Rural Literacy Rates * - 1991**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male (Percentage)</th>
<th>Female (Percentage)</th>
<th>Total (Percentage)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All India</td>
<td>57.87</td>
<td>30.62</td>
<td>44.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Rates relate to the persons of the age group 7 years and above.

**Table 3: Distribution of Persons by Broad Usual Activity-- Rural (July 1993 - June 1994) per thousand**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Self Employed</th>
<th>Regular Employee</th>
<th>Casual Labour</th>
<th>Stud- not in Labour</th>
<th>Engaged in Dom-</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Sarvekshana, July 1993, NSSO.
Also out of the total rural population nearly 33% belong to the age group of 15 to 34 years followed by 21% in the age group of 35 to 59 years (National Family Health Survey, 1992-93). That is, 54% of the rural population belong to the age group of 15 to 60 years who are productive and need assistance in one form or the other to improve their quality of life and sustain it. As they pursue various productive activities depending upon their endowments and environments they have several needs as given below which need to be addressed.

Table 4: Rural Needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Needs</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic Needs</td>
<td>Health, Water Supply, Sanitation and other amenities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Needs</td>
<td>Where to find what, Policies and services available to get benefited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Needs</td>
<td>How to produce better crops where to sell the produce and other market information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Needs</td>
<td>Text books, Teaching aids and general education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreational Needs</td>
<td>Sports facilities and cultural activities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Basically, it should be recognised that people require information for development and channels and mechanisms that carry, store, process and supply information are traditionally weak and non-existent at the village level. The attempts to empower people should essentially mean not only Panchayati Raj (PR) but also using these mechanisms for better transparency in making available information for development.

The common problem for information for development seems to be availability and accessibility of information. Availability in turn depends upon the criteria for selection,
resources available and actual physical possession of the documents that contain information required. The levels of information needed for decision making can be categorised as (a) policy and management information, (b) scientific & technical information for understanding and making technical decisions and (c) operational information enabling production and initiating services. According to Slamecska (1979), the above categorisation can be re-formulated as know-why information, know-how information and show-how information. In order to understand the felt needs of information at the village level, a detailed case study was undertaken by NIRD on the existing library system in rural areas as well as the user community residing in those areas (Takalkar & Ramadevi, 1998). Andhra Pradesh and Kerala with library legislation and Madhya Pradesh and Orissa without library legislation were selected to make a comparative study. From these four states, four districts were selected and in each district, two villages were identified, one of which was socio-economically developed compared to the other. It has been found from the study that the libraries in general have limited resources and offer very limited services. The literates are more aware about the libraries as a source of information. Functionaries of Panchayat Raj institutions and other Governmental agencies are sources for information for majority of rural people besides relatives, friends and mass media. Socio-economic status and level of education of users have a significant impact on the demand for information. However, there is a case for enhancing the involvement of local institutions like PRIs, Banks, Cooperatives and NGOs in the development of information systems at the village level including libraries.

Needs Assessment

Compounding these problems is the fact that the question "What are my information needs today?" is not one which the average citizen, rural or urban, asks himself each day. (Bannon & Curran, 1980). This does not mean that citizens do not have information needs, but that survival, educational, and entertainment issues just do not find expression in the same terms that occur to some information scientists, library educators, and librarians who, while their thoughts on matching needs with services are crystal clear to them, do not communicate well with citizens and do not provide adequate mechanisms for the citizens to communicate with the librarians. Add to these considerations the fact that many rural librarians choose to remain outside the mainstream of political decision-making activity, and the complexity of the matching problem comes more clearly into view. When rural politicians question why the local public library and the school library in the same
community each need the same encyclopedia title (and they do ask), it becomes obvious that librarians and holders of purse strings are not communicating effectively.

Information Needs of Rural People

Decision making is based on an information base – formal and non-formal. The quality and rationality of the decision will depend upon the amount of information available, its reliability, perceptive analysis and usage. Decision making also takes place at all levels beginning from the individual in the village and rising hierarchically through the functionaries at the lower levels and the line departments to the highest policy making bodies. The basic information should cover the following areas for optimal utilisation and skills according to Fernando, 1980.

(1) Land Resources and Utilisation


(2) Climatic

Temperature, humidity, rainfall, evaporation, sunshine.

(3) Water

Hydrological data, drainage, erosion, irrigation and water management, water table – groundwater resources.

(4) Other Natural Resources

Minerals, clays, livestock, fisheries, forestry.

(5) Manpower Resources

Skilled and unskilled

(6) Demographic

Birth and death rates, age and sex distribution. Work force participation rates. School going population, literacy, urban-rural ratio, dependency ratio.

(7) Socio-economic

Income distribution, status, employment, educational levels.

(8) Cultural

Innate skills and traditional technology, religious and social taboos, beliefs etc. eating habits.

(9) Education

Formal and non-formal, availability of schools, teachers.
(10) Health
Hospitals, beds, specialists, ayurvedic practitioners, family planning facilities, morbidity patterns.

(11) Fuel & Power
Hydro resources, wind, anaerobic digestion, solar energy, firewood.

(12) Housing
Structure of household units, types of skilled workers and local construction materials which could be utilised.

(13) Transport
Traditional energy saving methods. Linkages to major routes.

(14) Agro-based Industries
Available resources and skills for agro-based industries.

(15) Marketing & Supply
Availability of seeds, fertilizers, pesticides and other inputs. Disposal of produce. Distribution network and its efficiency.

(16) Credit facilities
Institutional and non-institutional, prevailing rates of interest, payment patterns.

(17) Extension / Network
Availability of extension staff and the extent of fragmentation (Agricultural, Industrial, Fisheries, Health) Effectiveness.

(18) Environment

According to published literature on public libraries (Raju K.A, 1997), the questions frequently asked by common man from the public library are of the following nature. We can perhaps use the appropriate information sources as given to cater to the needs.

Table-5: Information and sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Information</th>
<th>Information Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Local Information / News</td>
<td>Databases to be developed locally in consultation with Panchayat Raj functionaries, agricultural extension workers, village / mandal officers and other local elite.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. How to do it Information/ reference
How-to-do-it-Manuals, reference books, videos and other AV material.

3. Government programmes for development (local, state and central)
Constant interaction with Government officials, PR functionaries, NGOs and other change agents.

4. Current Information (Radio, TV, Train Timings)
Newspapers and magazines

5. Agriculture and related information (Technical)
Apart from local extension officials networking with district information centre of NICNET and other available databases of ICAR would be helpful.

6. Programmes of literacy and higher Education
Interaction with district officials, National Literacy Mission, databases of higher education at college and university level.

7. Legal, Medical, Health related questions
Networking with NICNET and ICMR

8. Addresses
By surfing various networks and from reference guides, directories.

9. Crafts, hobbies
By referring appropriate reference books and searching databases of NICNET

10. Travel Information

11. Consumer Information

12. Careers, Employment (vocational guidance)
Consultation with PR and rural development functionaries, apart from various newspapers, vocational guidance and training centres

13. School assignments
Encyclopaedia (CD-ROM)

14. Political Information, Biographical details
Directories (CD-ROM)

15. Other General / Miscellaneous reference questions
Encyclopaedia and other reference guides.
Thus the foregoing arguments state that the effectivity of the public library system can perhaps be enhanced by changing the focus from traditional role to a more dynamic role by offering information capable of tackling day to day living problems of the common man. The public library specially at village level has to play significant role in not only supplying the need based information but also information about various development oriented schemes and programmes in order to energise the villagers to benefit from them. Here the concept of Community Information Centres (CICs) is relevant. Existing rural libraries could be transformed into CICs to cater to the needs of general public and government functionaries at local level (Venkatappaiah & Raju, 1998).

Democratic Decentralisation

The 73rd amendment of the constitution (1992) and consequent legislation at the state levels paved the way for bringing the administration nearer to the people under the Panchayati Raj (PR) system. It is aimed at increasing community participation in planning and development process at the local level. The following table gives the number of functionaries under P.R. System in the country. They are all potential clientele for a revitalised Community Information System.

Table 6: Panchayati Raj Institutions in 1995

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No.</th>
<th>Name of Body</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Total no. of elected representatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Village Panchayats</td>
<td>2,26,108</td>
<td>29,71,446</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Panchayat Samiti</td>
<td>5,736</td>
<td>1,45,412</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Zilla Parishad</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>15,815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Centre for Panchayati Raj, NIRD.
Panchayati Raj Functions

In the Eleventh Schedule of the Central Act, 29 functions were clearly defined upon which the PR bodies can take decisions. In broad terms, the distribution of functions between the three levels of panchayats can be seen below (Satish Chandran T.R., 1994).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gram Panchayat</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Municipal functions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local Amenities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Poverty alleviation programmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agriculture &amp; allied activities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Taluq Panchayat</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agricultural and allied activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minor irrigation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural industries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rural housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drinking water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Primary education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Roads &amp; communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social welfare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relief and rehabilitation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zilla Panchayats</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Planning for development of district and supervision, coordination and integration of development schemes at taluq and district levels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agriculture and allied activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minor irrigation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Small scale industries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minor forest products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Roads &amp; communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-conventional energy schemes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Poverty alleviation programmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Community Information Centres

To fulfill the above mandatory functions at various levels, enormous data are to be collected. It is often recognised that the data gathering mechanisms are weak and the data are not reliable, though the village functionaries maintain and update a number of registers relating to the village and its development. The landlords of the village, caste leaders, teachers and other educated people who constitute the elite group of the village, often influence the opinion and trends of the community and exploit the environment to their advantage at the cost of the poor, disadvantaged and weaker sections of the community. If this trend is to be stopped, the disadvantaged need to be sensitised, made aware of various development programmes, procedures to be followed, functionaries to be contacted, to take advantage of the opportunities available. The Community Information Centres (CICs) are conceived as a dynamic institution which can help the village community to overcome the difficulties in obtaining needed information after integrating information generated at various levels. Many of the governments at state and district levels are realising the need for such integration at the grassroot level and are promising to have one window approach to make it easier for the beneficiaries of different programmes in particular and a village community in general. In order to help such an effort, the Community Information Centres is visualised as a right kind of an institution.

These centres are also envisaged to be the extensions of the existing STD/PCO booths, meeting points for the community, a reading room or an information café, so that they can have additional facilities like telephone, fax, computer, Internet connectivity, photocopying facilities, newspapers, T.V., radio, video etc.

CICs can perhaps support the present programmes of the National Literacy Mission to sustain the campaign which in turn may facilitate the receptivity and understanding of the people to benefit from the on-going development programmes. The conventional librarianship should give place to a more dynamic portfolio transforming the librarian as an agent of change. In such a scenario, what is expected of a CIC at village level is to collect information that is directly relevant to the 29 functions outlined for PR System.

Databases on Community Information

The CIC should be able to develop for the benefit of the community it serves, databases on the following areas to begin with.
1. Common Property Resources (Wastelands, grasslands, lakes, forests and other village resources)
2. Community occupational patterns and skills available
3. Literacy skills and educational facilities
4. Agricultural practices, soil classification, Input supply, cropping pattern
5. Markets and Marketing
6. Transport and communication infrastructure
7. Institutional and Social facilities (Credit, cooperatives apart from leisure and recreational outlets, religious places etc.)

This is only an illustrative list. Many can be added depending on the needs of the local community as well as to the extent resources permit.

Process of Planning at Local Level

According to the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, the local level institutions are encouraged to formulate plans for economic development and social justice. The plans have to be based on the felt needs of the people, with people’s participation and knowing the local resource endowment. It is believed that planning with people’s participation would bring their support, contribution in terms of voluntary work. It also minimises possibilities of corrupt practices and empower panchayats. Further, by identifying viable schemes with people’s participation, the successful implementation of such schemes would be easy thereby the belief in scientific planning and the beneficial outcomes would encourage further participation. The process of planning as a case study was studied by NIRD in the Karnataka and Kerala States. (Thaha, 1998)

In Karnataka, under Dakshin Kannada District, soon after the elections of the gram panchayats in April 1994, meetings of the adhyakshas, upadhyakshas and members of the gram panchayats were held at Hobli for a group of nearly 30 villages to discuss the problems and needs of the village community. The panchayat members were asked to list out the felt needs based on their acquaintance with ground realities. A list of facilities like roads, water supply, buildings and other infrastructural facilities to be provided at specific locations were prepared. Later the Zilla Panchayat officials based on the funds available and merits of the schemes selected a few of the items from the list and
incorporated in the plan for the district for the year 1994-95. In this fashion, the gram panchayat members immediately after their induction could participate in the planning process. Later, a workshop was also held for these members to map out the existing socio-economic facilities and services and how much of the resources can be mobilised with local efforts and through voluntary organisations.

Secondly, how the beneficiary, household can be developed by implementing income generating and welfare schemes through the resources made available by the institutional finance. The importance of resource inventory was emphasised for scientific plan formulation at any level.

In the Kerala model, the first stage in the planning process begins with Gram Sabha meetings, to identify existing problems, necessities and priorities of the people. The second stage ends with preparation of a status report dealing with different development sectors. The third stage starts with the development seminar where the status reports of different sectors of the panchayat are compiled as Panchayat Development Report for discussion at the Gram Sabha meeting. Later, a detailed review of the programmes were undertaken, proposals prioritised for scrutiny and classified according to the implementing agencies like State Governments, Co-operatives, Panchayat Raj Institutions and others. Thereafter the gram panchayat plan was integrated at the block level and in turn with the district plan for the final formulation of the Ninth Plan.

This stupendous exercise was done throughout the state where 30 lakh people participated, about 1 lakh task forces was constituted, 3 lakh projects was identified and five-year perspective plans with an annual action plan for 1997-98 were prepared.

One important aspect that emerged from the case studies was that Gram Sabha is important more than the Panchayats because Gram Sabha acts like a miniparliament where all the adults of the village had a say whereas Panchayat was an elected body of few persons. The possibilities of these few persons cornering the benefits due to their accessibility to information cannot be ruled out. Hence it is necessary that the people at the grass root level are to be made aware of procedures of planning. That is, there is a need to build up the capacity of villagers to appreciate the basic principles of planning.
Similarly the PR functionaries should also be trained in formulating plans for their respective areas. Thus the concept of ‘Gram Swarajya’ of Mahatma Gandhi is highly relevant and could be achieved by empowering the people with right kind of information and by converging all services from all levels at the panchayat.

Right to Information

Another concept that is gaining ground over the last two years is the National Campaign for Peoples Right to Information. The right to information is considered critical to people’s participation and empowerment in free and participatory democracies in the world. Hence, the citizen’s right to know (obtaining Information) has come to be recognised as one of their basic rights. The Scandinavian countries are the early ones to ensure free flow of information to the people through statutory provisions. The European countries like France, The Netherlands, Austria, Sweden, Norway and West Germany have specific laws which entitle citizens as well as journalists to have access to official records. The Freedom of Information Act in the U.S. facilitates the citizens to obtain information from official documents except those which are classified under essential heads like the National Security etc. But in the U.K. and India, there is an impenetrable veil of secrecy between the people and Government with regard to information.

Such a situation is likely to create an impression that the citizen’s right to information is alien to the Indian Constitution/statutes. But the fact is that the right to information very much lies embedded in the provisions of the Constitution of India. The broader horizon of the Right to Life (Article 21) is considered inclusive of the Right to Information also. Further the Supreme Court, in several cases, has recognised that the individual’s right to information also from the broad-spectrum Fundamental Right of Freedom of Speech and Expression [(Article 19 (1)(a)]. Denial or delaying of the right to information has to be construed as the basic product of the rulers’ distrust of the people. No democratic Government worth the name deserves to exist with such a contempt of its own principals, the people.

Assurances of open Governments are frequently heard from persons coming to power irrespective of their political colour and hues. But in the matter of actually enabling the citizen to enjoy his right to information the favourite game hitherto played by the people
in power has always been 'hide and seek'. To seek, to strive is the pass-word of the common man and 'not to yield' that of the Governments. (Muthirulandi, 1997)

The common man stands bewildered by the recent revelations of mega scams, scandals, crimes, charges of corruption, kick-backs, discretionary allotments etc. in our country involving politicians and bureaucrats. The citizens' (misplaced) faith in the existing system has been severely rocked. People are in no mood to pay further homage to the hallow of magical words 'secret' and 'confidential'. Thanks to the development of consumer activism and the culture of public interest litigation in our country, that has not only affected the individuals but also social, voluntary groups and other class, private interests are often heard fearlessly raising their voice for the right to information in spheres that affect peoples' lives and works. The administrators cannot go on with their classical obsession with 'official secrecy'.

Model Bill

In our country, the controversy for Right to Information had remained as a case between the State and the Press. There are instances when the courts reacted favourably and directed the governments to show more transparency in administration. All these years the concept of Right to know is considered elitist and the rural poor particularly were kept in the dark. In the absence of this right to the citizen common people in the villages had no means of knowing where the massive funds earmarked for rural development are being spent, what are the schemes and who could get benefited. According to an estimate there are 150 development schemes that are presently being undertaken by nearly 40 departments at the block level, while district level had about 300 schemes (Hindustan Times, 5th November 1998).

Under these circumstances, 'Right to Know' was essentially a 'Right to Live' for the disadvantaged villagers. The struggle that Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sanghatan (MKSS) spearheaded in Rajasthan in this area had reverberated in Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. Thus the fight for freedom of information acquired people oriented connotation and transformed into people's movement against corruption. Government of India appointed a working group headed by Shri H.D. Shourie, which has developed a Model Freedom of Information Bill in May, 1997.
All these developments were discussed at a National workshop conducted by NIRD during September 1997 which was attended by several Social activists, learned journalists and leading media professionals. It came out with a 'Right to Information Bill - 1997' which was submitted to Government of India for consideration. The Home Minister at the centre indicated that Official Secrets Act was being scrapped to bring about transparency in the function of the government (Indian Express 25.11.1998).

Bill submitted by NIRD covers aspects like defining the Right to Information, Obligation on Public Authorities and under what circumstances there could be restriction on Right to Information procedures for the supply of information, penalties on the offences and penalties for not furnishing the information. In order to promote the freedom of information in the country, the bill proposes to establish National Council for Freedom of Information at the apex level with state councils under various state governments. The council would periodically review the administrative arrangements, operation of the Act and oversee and advise on various matter relating to the freedom of information.

Sensitive information

The Lal Bahadur Sastry Academy of Administration, Mussoorie organised range of meetings to discuss the issue and came up with a draft policy on the right to information. The Commissioner of Bilaspur Division, Madhya Pradesh has put into operation a system where details about fair price shops and wages in Government works etc. photo copied on demand against a small payment. This facility not only strengthens the case for Activist Organisations struggling for accountability but has significantly brought down the extent of leakage and corruption in the fair price shops. The snowballing of the movement of the Right to Information is making the Government, Politicians and Bureaucrats, apprehensive and reluctant to yield much. The Rajasthan Legislation and the Tamil Nadu Bill on Right to Information are seen as apologies for Right to Information. A.P. government is also planning to introduce a bill soon on the subject.

The proposed amendment of Official Secrets Act 1923 and Enactment of a legislation on freedom of information has committed by the then United Front Government in its common minimum programme is yet to come by. The draft freedom of information Act prepared by the Centre at the recent conference of the Chief Ministers talks more about how not to give information under the guise of sensitive data. Under the clause
entitled "exemptions from disclosure", the authors of the Act have listed 11 factors to deny the access to information. The reasons for not parting in the information include (1) may not serve public interest; (2) may prejudicially affect the management of services under the public authorities and (3) may affect the government's ability in managing the economy. Adding to these it may also be possible the officials may take recourse to the pastime of stating often that the "information being collected and would be furnished in due course".

**Transparency in information gathering activity**

The first step towards introducing transparency in the functioning of the Government should be the demonstration of political will to treat all data other than information relating to defence, internal security and incompletely investigated by Enforcement agencies as non-sensitive. From this it logically follows that the Government should make public, the draft policies and programmes, budgets, tenders, contracts in order to minimise corruption.

Many government agencies are also the sole organisations that have been collecting primary data from every nook and corner of the country. All the primary data does not get published in the form of a report. Such data if available, would benefit the growth process of Indian economy. It is also noted that the sale of primary and secondary data through private sector Information Providers giving on-line access to Government data banks is worth of billions of dollars in the globalised Indian environment of cut throat competition. The timely access to information is vital for survival and growth of business as well as for policy planners to fine tune the policies.

**A.P. Government - Proposal**

Inspite of such problems and reluctance to right to information in the Government sector one silver lining is A.P. Chief Minister's ambitious proposal for Electronic Government. The A.P. Government has put up a strong case before the Centre for radical policy changes including an end to the monopoly of VSNL in providing internet services. It has pointed out that the Centres promise in 1995, for licensing multiple access to INTERNET and service providers is now being implemented after three years. The A.P. Government wishes to provide INTERNET access and services to every district headquarters and towns with population more than one lakh. It wants to set-up "one stop non-stop information services" for citizens to access government information sources on
the lines of Federal information counters in US". The State Government proposed to setup an Institute of Electronic Government in Hyderabad for carrying out policy level analysis in the context of information technology development. It wishes to provide subsidised E-mail service for both individuals and business people. The Government suggested to setup "Store and forward" servers by VSNL at each District Headquarters so that E-mail access become available across the state to a wide range of people. (Deccan Chronicle, July 15, 1997).

Conversion of STD/ PCOs to Internet Community Centres

At the end of 80's, there was a revolution in rural telephony through the spread of STD/ PCOs. As a result, many STD booths were opened along the length and breadth of the country thereby satisfying the communication needs of the people but also creating fresh employment opportunities. Internet is ideally suited for state level applications and can be adapted to local languages according to Sam Pitroda (Business Line, Feb.08, 1999). All government functions including ration cards, police reports, health and community requirements can be addressed through the Internet Community Centres. The concept of Internet Community Centre is quite simple. People would have access to the centres where community services would be offered at lower prices. They would help in the process of creating awareness, accessibility and democratisation of information to rural areas. People would have accessed worldwide sites related to areas such as health, education and other economic and social issues. For example, they could pay their water and electricity bills through the centres and they would be able to apply and seek admission to schools and universities also. According to Sam Pitroda, the firm WorldTel is focussing on Southern States of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala apart from Gujarat and West Bengal where literacy levels are comparatively higher.

These are very laudable initiatives by the State Governments using the advances in the information technology to serve the common man in his quest for information. Simultaneously it is necessary to encourage interfaces like voluntary agencies, change agents, contract farmers, extension agents and the like as their role in enhancing not only the information availability but also its acceptability to the common man cannot be over-emphasised. The combined effort would make the citizen more informed and more productive under the market economy.
Conclusion

Provision of information to public or to satisfy the information needs is not an easy task. Before successfully attempting to handle such a responsibility a review of the existing set-up or infrastructure is to be made.

Government is spending enormous amounts for alleviation of poverty. In the Eighth Plan period Rs.30,000 crores are allotted for rural development programmes. In the Ninth Plan, the allocation is proposed to be doubled to exceed Rs.60,000 crores. It is also realised that participation of the people is a prerequisite for successful implementation of developmental programmes. Panchayati Raj Legislation was a step in that direction. The CICs can perhaps step in to make the life of the villager more meaningful by its involvement in the alleviation of poverty programmes. This is necessary in view of low levels of literacy, high level of unemployment, deprivation, exploitation that may lead to unrest in the society which is not conducive to any development. Collaborating with the local voluntary sector may provide the fillip to the information collection, organisation and dissemination activities and also may bring out clearly to the fore the necessity to change role of a conventional library.

Today, we live in a world of information explosion. Prof. Marshal McLuhan had envisioned four decades ago that our world would be so interlinked with communication networks that it would be transformed into a 'global village'. With the advent of personal computer with astounding capabilities, satellite communication facilities, television coverages, radio links, the world is shrinking. It is all the more so with the invasion of INTERNET. It is the bounden duty of all concerned to bring this communication revolution to the door steps of the rural people. It should not be allowed to remain confined to the towns and cities and to the elite sections of the population. As everybody acknowledges that information is power, the rural people should not be deprived of this power so that the slogan "power to the people" under Panchayati Raj could be realised in all its manifestations.
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