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<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Vyasulu, Usha.</td>
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A Plea For A Middle Range Communication Policy

By

Usha Vyasulu
"Rural communication", "agricultural development", "the culture of peasantry", "the need to develop the agricultural sector", "subsistence farming", "mutual distrust", "perceived good", "fatalism", "low empathy", "lack of innovativeness", and so forth. All the above terms and phrases have been used by scholars, academicians, and administrators alike to describe the state of citizens living in rural areas and making a living from agriculture and allied industries. These citizens have been regarded apart from the mainstream of the nation's life in that they are to form one massive Sisyphus' rock on the hilly road to industrial development.

It is argued that in order to be moving on the development continuum, one has to vitalise the agricultural sector for it is this sector, that forms the bulk of the population, produces and consumes the bulk of the food. The overriding emphasis in these studies on the rural sector (with its research in rural communication) has been in the agricultural areas, disregarding handloom and cottage industries, fisheries, blacksmiths, carpentry, to name a few. Improving the lot of the rural population must involve attention to all rural industries.

No one can deny that academicians and administrators alike share a genuine sense of commitment to the rural sector. Students and experts of communication are no exception. Communicators, with as well as missionaires, feel that the key to rural development is through rural communication, and conclude from research findings that if rural communication is effective, it will accelerate rural development, thereby assisting in the goal of national development.

Unique opportunity

As experts in an interdisciplinary field, communicators have the opportunity to understand the varied aspects of rural development. But communicators have borrowed from different fields and have gone so far as to compile a list of barriers to rural development and then, following an urbanite point of view, talking in circles, the ways of eliminating these barriers. Study of problems has short been uni-directional, albeit multilinear. Models of rural communication do not vary much from the traditional models of the communication process. The change agent or agency constitutes the source, the various media serve as channels and the rural dwellers are set as receivers. Yes, feedback is obtained, but it is essentially a reaction to a predetermined stimulus. Only in experiments, few and far apart, are the villagers given an opportunity to act as the stimuli with communicators as the reactors. Flow of information to the change agent through the change agent or extension worker is hazardous. There are innumerable obstacles from the change agent to officials formulating policy.

For example, no attempt, to the knowledge of this writer, has been made to ascertain if there have been no changes in the bullock cart for a thousand years because: a) no farmer is innovative enough to alter or b) under certain conditions, villagers find the bullock cart the most effective form of communication available. Nevertheless, institutions of fame and repute in India spend fortunes examining the technological development of the bullock cart; whether rubber tyres are best, or brakes, or gears, or whether increasing the food and protein intake of the animal is going to increase its effectiveness.
Even if we were to introduce mechanised vehicles in the place of all forms of transportation, would we not tamper with the social fabric and unity of a group of farmers in a bullock cart caravan to the market?

**Social effects**

More than any others, it is the social scientists who must be concerned with the social effects of rural communication, with the possible disruption of the society and culture, and with its potentially dangerous consequences.

A major factor which must be explored and understood is that what are usually considered social, religious, and cultural barriers to change are results of the realities of rural life. The number of offspring in a rural family is undoubtedly related to the number of working hands available, and security in old age. A hesitation to sell or alter cattle for meat may be related to the use of these cattle in providing milk, gobar, wool, and other dairy products, essential for the survival of the rural family.

The introduction of tribals into the economic mainstream may be ideal in terms of development, but in one instance, it has had disastrous consequences to their way of life. The findings of a national (and as yet unpublished) study on rural banking done last year illustrates this point. Tribals in Andhra Pradesh were loaned money by the banks to purchase cattle. Repayment of the loan was to be in the form of the sale of milk to the state milk projects in the area. Tribals, essentially a nomadic people, were now tied down to the land; they milked the cattle, sold the milk as repayment of loan. Additional expenses included no doubt the maintenance and food of the cattle, a burden unnecessary for them which tied them down to the land, unheard of for them; and probably had an as yet unmeasured impact upon their lifestyles — as they were rudely introduced to the market economy, bewildered, naive, and worse off than before.

In this instance, with the characteristic flavour of the bureaucrat and the missionary, Kipling's burden shifted to the brown man's shoulder. Without fail communicators had a role to play here!

**Middle-range policy**

One cannot exclude, in this discussion, barriers as a result of either governmental policy dictated from outside the area, or linguistic barriers. While the latter are easier to overcome, the former pose various problems. In the first place, there is no clear-cut communication policy for the nation, let alone a policy of rural communication. The policy there is, is often in the form of guidelines or directives, outlined not by regional and state governments but by the central government. Secondly, not one organisation, but a host of governmental non-governmental organisations are involved in the field — each on its narrowly circumscribed area of operation. Thirdly, central control of the mass media inhibits the ability of these media in meeting the needs of diverse areas effectively. Granted, no policy programme can be formulated with only one village in view. Policy must also be formulated at the national level alone. What is required is that with overall targets and goals in view, policy and its implementation must be planned and carried out at a middle level, determined by middle range officials who are forcefully kept in contact with the problems in the field. A single change agent in a village, who is a communicator — cum-link and advising on as varied topics as cropping patterns, live-stock and family health problems, cannot effectively bring about change in directions deemed desirable by the officials seated at their desks in state capitals and Delhi. Required in villages are teams of individuals, experts in various fields, maintaining formal vertical and horizontal links with their superiors and among themselves and simultaneously working with the villagers.
A clean break needed

Implied in this discussion is that the current philosophy and policies of rural development and communication are inadequate. A clean break must be made from the past tradition in this field and indigenous methods of communication be tried out.

A start in this direction can be made through the analysis of other areas in which rural communication has succeeded. One such area is political communication. What are the factors that resulted in the political awakening of rural India, reflected in the elections of 1977? In what manner do the political workers arouse the consciousness of individuals in a field basically peripheral to the pure task of survival? What is the structure of the political communication network and what is the role of ideology?

The Chinese experience could also be examined. How did the Chinese government use the existing framework of an orderly society, rigid and full of social and cultural norms, to bring about change in a direction desired? Next, like all research, an experiment must be conducted in the field to develop a middle level philosophy of rural communication. In selecting the field, a decision must be taken to either superimpose the experiment on an existing area or to start afresh in an area as yet untouched.

Suggestion

It is the recommendation of this paper, that in evolving a manner in which rural development through rural communication can take place, we utilise the coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh, i.e. Guntur, Krishna, East and West Godavari, as an experimental field. These areas were targets of the cyclone and tidal waves which struck India's south-eastern coast last month. In the task of rehabilitation of these areas, communicators have a unique opportunity to rebuild these districts communication-wise while simultaneously, using them as experimental cases in the building of middle level policy of rural communication and development.

Why these districts? Well these four districts which took the brunt of the cyclone must be rehabilitated from scratch. We can cast aside the existing communication structure more easily than elsewhere, while at the same time barriers to change, as communicators perceive them, persist in the form of farming practices, social and cultural traditions, etc.

Economically, these districts have been destroyed. Money is tight, and loss to individuals differs only in degree from total to partial.

Linguistically there are few differences; and what is unique about these districts is that they are basically fertile. The coastal area is the foodbowl of the state and also provides up to 40 per cent of the national food production. Other rural industries are also present, e.g. fisheries, handlooms, carpentry and the like. The cyclone relief organisation can be converted into an umbrella organisation involved in the communication and coordination task.

In concluding this paper, I make a fervent plea to the international and national experts at this seminar to cast aside meaningless discussions, and to use this opportunity to the dual task of developing the framework of a middle-range rural communication policy and contributing to the rehabilitation of the coastal area.