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A Pioneer Rural Press Project In India
A PIONEER RURAL PRESS PROJECT IN INDIA

(An article written in 1985)

The tendency to treat the countryside with indifference, and the people living in them as second class citizens is universal. In the developed countries, however, powerful lobbies have come into being to protect and promote the interests of the non-urban people. In the developing countries, on the other hand, although a substantial majority of the population live in the countryside, rural interests are neglected. Every basic human need—health, education, housing, communication, etc.—is doled out in short measure to the rural people of the developing countries. The reasons for this state of affairs, which nullifies economic activity in precisely those areas which contribute a relatively larger proportion of the national product and which need greater attention, are not far to seek. But they are not relevant to this discussion.

However, the continued indifference to the interests of the rural populace has warped the judgement of the ruling elite which concludes that there is no potential in the countryside for any kind of goods or services. Also, living as second class citizens, they think the rural people deserve less than the best that can be made available.

This attitude extends to the kind of newspapers provided to rural folk. There is, in general, no urge to cater to the special needs of the rural population. In the urban areas, speciality newspapers and journals exist to cater to the recognised needs of women, the youth, sports, the arts, business, etc. But we seem to be convinced that the large population that lives in the villages has no special interest. This is the principal reason why India can boast of metropolitan newspapers of world standards, but suffers from a complete absence of a robust rural press.

The bigger urban newspapers generally serve the urban elite. They are obsessed with political events and concern themselves with largely urban issues and development activities of concern to the more affluent, largely urban readership. They cannot and do not serve the special interests of the rural population. There are quite a number of newspapers published in district or taluk (sub-district) headquarters in the Indian countryside. They are, by and large, slimmer and poor replicas of the metropolitan and the provincial press. They generally follow, at least attempt to follow, the format and concert of the widely circulated and more prosperous provincial and metropolitan newspapers. They are badly edited and badly produced and ill serve the needs of the rural people.

When I talk about rural newspapers I do not mean just newspapers published and distributed in rural areas. Rural newspapers, to adapt the famous Lincolnian saying, are newspapers of, for and by rural communities. And this is the proper definition of the Rural Press. They also mean small newspapers with small circulations, serving small communities and catering to their special needs and interests.

Many international organisations including the UNESCO have been rightly exercised over the absence of a vigorous and economically viable rural press in the developing countries. The need for a robust rural press is also widely recognised by the Government of India as well as those concerned with the state of development in the Indian countryside. Public policy is claimed to be designed, and incentives provided for the establishment and growth of small newspapers to serve remote and neglected rural communities. But such policy and incentives have turned out to be political concessions and palliatives to the conscience rather than carefully designed support for the promotion and sustenance of small rural newspapers.

The fact that no rural newspaper of any consequence exists, and the readership is extremely low would encourage the conviction that readership for rural newspapers is very limited. This assumption is not valid. The readership is not there because rural newspapers, of an acceptable quality filling a need, simply do not exist, or are not made easily available in the remote villages. The growth of a robust provincial press in recent years should prove this point.

Just as provincial newspapers with an appropriate editorial formula and good management have attained respectable circulations and secured adequate advertising support, well produced papers with editorial content catering to the needs of the rural people can achieve reasonable circulation levels and attract enough advertising support to become viable.

The editorial policy of a rural newspaper must be so framed as to find its full expression in its total identification with the community which it seeks to serve. They must involve themselves fully with every kind of activity that goes on in their areas. They should purvey information of all kinds which is now either wholly denied or belatedly disseminated to the rural people. Information has become a commodity, preempted and exploited by the elite. It is almost a truism in the modern context that one who gets at information first, prospers, and uses it exclusively for his benefit. Unsatisfactory as they are, policies and measures are announced by local and Central governments which are meant for the rural people, who, in the absence of a good medium, are either totally ignorant of them, or, are made aware of them so late, that they become infructuous for their needs.

Rural people are also denied information of social and cultural events in their own neighbourhood. Births, deaths, weddings, social and cultural events all go unreported. Newspapers
even in the districts are at present so obsessed with political developments, in the world, in the whole country and at the State level, that they do not have the space to devote to news of special interest to rural readership. They are also not equipped to gather such information.

News of activities of their local governments, of the panchayats, municipalities, of how local authorities are tackling problems, or even of the existence of such problems, largely go unreported.

The communication process should be a two-way process: to be informed and to be heard. As it now exists in the countryside it is essentially a one-way process and even this need (to be informed) is poorly satisfied. The equally, perhaps more, important need to be heard remains unserved.

One aspect of the editorial role of newspapers that is particularly important is the dissemination of information on local success stories in agriculture. With low productivity, the bane of agriculture in developing countries, news of improved agricultural practices adopted by individual farmers would help raise yields in the locality. In this respect, rural newspapers would have a much greater impact than radio programmes which generally focus on experiments in agricultural research stations where conditions are far removed from reality. Similarly, examples of self-help in opening up communication, provision of drinking water and sanitation can have tremendous impact, if their stories are carried to the countryside.

There has been substantial effort to promote literacy in the rural areas. But literacy, unless it is sustained, is quickly lost. The absence of reading material is the main reason why rural people after achieving literacy quickly lose this facility. A rural newspaper, because of its price and regular availability can be a great aid in sustaining literacy.

It seems that from many points of view, the rural press would serve as an effective instrument for the development and well-being of the people.

A pertinent point that arises concerns sustenance. And sustenance can be provided only through circulation and advertisements and control of costs. While trying to minimise the over all expenditure, it is the primary duty of the publisher to explore ways and means of augmenting the revenue by larger circulations and greater advertisement revenue.

Management must identify the readership and organise itself to reach it. It must also seek the revenue potential and cultivate and exploit the sources fully. Just as readership exists which cannot be served by the urban press, so does advertising potential which cannot be satisfied by the bigger newspapers. The small and rural newspapers must convince themselves that a special clientele exists for them and is waiting to be satisfied.

There are products and services which have a universal market as well as more specific ones which are marketed mainly or only in the countryside. The potential of the market for advertising through the Rural Press needs to be gauged whereby they may be shown to be suitable vehicles for the advertisers to carry their messages to the rural public. Here again a careful study has to be made to identify products which offer scope for advertising--those of universal use and those particular to the rural market--in the local newspapers. The governments at the Central and local levels can make good use of these vehicles to carry to the people of the area information of their plans--health care, agricultural projects, education, and the growth of ancillary industries.

The suitability of a stable rural press for particular types of advertising, and the potential that exists has been dealt with by leading practitioners in advertising. They have often bemoaned the absence of a reliable and regular medium to take the advertiser's message to the vast market that the rural areas present.

It is not just the content of a rural newspaper that is important. If small newspapers are to be successful, they should be as well produced as the bigger ones. The mistake that has so far been made is to hold the view that the rural reader can make do with a badly produced newspaper. Rural newspapers if they should survive have to be made attractive to the community.

Facilities for publishing rural newspapers are non-existent in most rural areas. This is the reason why such newspapers as exist are printed in cities from where they are distributed. The quality of production is poor, and distribution costs are high. Besides, the publishers are urban based and maintain only tenuous contact with the communities they seek to serve. In the event, the rural press is poor in quality and does not really meet the needs of the society it seeks to serve.

If rural newspapers should be reasonably attractive and are to be published in truly rural areas, committed to the people in the community, then the printing facility must be situated in the communities themselves and it should be such as to ensure a reasonable quality of production.

Hand composing and its partner, the letterpress indifferently operated by unskilled people in remote places have so far produced the occasional rural newspaper that has not commended itself to the readers. Hot metal casters have become so expensive that they cannot be considered for a small newspaper.

All these considerations influence the adoption of high technology. Both in respect of quality of production and reasonableness in price, photocomposition is the most suitable. Its natural partner, the offset process, is now not too expensive for the rural press.
It is now possible to have simple photocomposition and offset printing equipment which require a few people and at the same time ensure good quality of reproduction. The extra capacity available can be used for commercial work to help sustain the publishing activity. Comparatively, the capital costs are not high considering the quality and quantity of the output.

The estimated cost of the capital equipment is Rs. 8 lakhs. (one lakh is equal to 100,000) Together with furniture, working capital and for miscellaneous items, the capital required is Rs. 10 lakhs. It has been further estimated that the operation costs including depreciation, support to the Editor/Publisher of each newspaper, and his assistant, would be Rs. 2.50 lakhs per year. Allowing for a conservative level of income from commercial work, the costs of publishing six newspapers would be Rs.1.8 lakhs, requiring an income from advertising for each newspaper of the order of Rs. 30,000 per year. This is a figure that is achievable given good editorial and business management.

It will be some time before income can be raised to that level. Assuming that such an income can be generated progressively in a time span of three years, the working capital required would be:

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<th>Period</th>
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<th>Total Cost</th>
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<tr>
<td>During the first three months</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>45,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>of the entire cost</td>
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<tr>
<td>During the next nine months</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>100,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>of the cost</td>
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<tr>
<td>During the second year</td>
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<tr>
<td>of the cost</td>
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<td>During the third year</td>
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<td>of the cost</td>
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Allowing for over-runs and unforeseeables, the total cost of the project should be around Rs. 15 lakhs. With that kind of investment, it can be reasonably hoped that within four to six weekly newspapers for the rural areas could be brought into existence and nurtured to become viable units within three years.

Although the scheme has been worked out with care, the proof of its success can be provided only on the field. The Research Institute for Newspaper Development, Madras convinced that the project is worthwhile and can be assured of success, will launch it in the beginning of 1986. Sagara, in Shimoga District, Karnataka, has been chosen as the publishing centre from where upto six rural weekly newspapers can be brought out to serve six adjoining taluks, in the districts of Shimoga and Utaara Kannada.

Capital equipment consisting of two phototypesetters, camera, plate making equipment and an AB Dick small offset press have been acquired. This has been possible through the generous donations from Sijlhoff Press, a large newspaper group in Holland (US $40,000) and Creusot-Loire, manufacturers of newspaper offset presses (US $25,000). The Graphic Media Development Centre, a Dutch Government organisation dedicated to development of printed communication in developing countries, assisted in choosing and acquiring the equipment. They are also assisting in training the person who will look after production in Sagara.

The Government of Karnataka has sanctioned Rs. 6 lakhs over a period of three years as assistance to the project. The project will be independent of Government control and completely under the guidance of RIND.

Six Editor/Publishers who are committed and capable of starting these newspapers are being chosen. They will be given training in the principles of editing and management of small newspapers. Operators have already been selected and are being trained. Premises have been rented in Sagara. The plant is expected to be in operation by the end of December 1985, and publication should commence by mid-January 1986 or within a few weeks thereafter. RIND is launching the project with confidence in its success.
Concluding Statement of Rural Press Seminar, 1983

The following is part of the draft statement that was discussed and adopted by the Bangalore seminar on Rural Press Development in February 1983.

I. Introduction

In the developing countries of the Third World, where 70 to 80 per cent of the people live in the rural areas, the role of the rural press and radio in national development is now widely recognised. But while radio plays its part, the rural press has a special function which radio cannot do—promote literacy and adult education programmes. Its importance in the development efforts of these Third World countries therefore cannot be underestimated.

II. Rural Press Defined

But what do we mean by Rural Press? Does it exist anywhere in the Third World today? There are three aspects of the term that we can look at: location, contents and ownership.

1. Location: Where is the rural press located—in villages only, or in towns and district/provincial capitals? We recommend a broader definition of the term to refer to newspapers outside the big metropolitan centres. We can call them rural, local or regional press.

2. Contents: What do or should, rural or local newspapers contain? Farming news only? Or should they include information of a general nature of interest to the entire community? We recommend that we adopt the broader definition. Although the contents may vary from community to community, they should be varied and mixed and touch on all local issues.

3. Management & Ownership: Who should run and own the rural local paper? The ideal, it seems, is that they should be in or owned by people belonging to the community and that the editor/publisher and his staff live in the community and become involved in its life.

This ideal has been articulated by Mr. G. K. Reddy, in a paraphrase of Lincoln: A rural newspaper is a paper of, for and by the rural people.

We recognise the fact, however, that this is largely an ideal as of today: What is more true today perhaps is that in some parts of Asia and the Third World, there are rural papers for the rural people.

Rural papers by the people could be the next step. Any future projects, whether pilot projects or honest-to-goodness plans, could work towards these local papers being run by the people of the community or their representatives.

The third and final step could be rural papers of the rural people, where the local communities own these papers through co-operatives or other forms of ownership structures.

III. Rural Press Support

The issue of who supports, or should support, these rural papers looms large in the consideration of the problem. The ideal is that the people should support them, invest capital in them, provide for their operating expenses and give them advertising.

In practical terms, however, the experiences of different countries vary, according to their cultural, social and political backgrounds. In Asia today there seem to be three main models: The Chinese model, the Indian model and the Indonesian model.

1. The Chinese model is one where the government owns the rural press but the people in the community operate it and write for it with government assistance. Full support therefore comes from the government or government bodies.

2. The Indian model is one where the press is privately owned and privately operated. Main support comes from advertising, which may come from private business or government. This is similar to the situation in the Philippines and Thailand.

3. The Indonesian model is one where the government subsidises the private press. In order to publish editions of the newspapers, support comes from both advertising income of the paper and government subsidy for the rural edition. It is understood, however, that government support is for a limited period of time. The situations in Malaysia and Bangladesh may bear resemblance to that in Indonesia.

4. While government subsidy is accepted in the Indian and Indonesian models, it is preferred that the subsidy be general, that is, all the newspapers must be eligible for such support and the criteria for getting the subsidy must be spelled out so that everyone can compete and have an equal chance of qualifying.

5. Also, while conditions may vary from country to country, it is the general feeling that only a financially self-supporting press can be truly credible and independent and thus be a useful aid in community development.

IV. Role of Technology

Although these rural/local papers are in the smaller towns and villages, there is no reason why they cannot take advantage of modern technology for printing and photo reproduction which are simple to operate and maintain and which present no language problems. The key word is appropriate technology.

But while technology is important, people are more important. It is skilled and trained people who can put the technology to work for man. The role of training therefore assumes great importance here.

V. Karnataka Pilot Project

The Seminar discussed the Karnataka Pilot Newspapers Project which is being managed by the Research Institute for Newspaper Development, Madras. The project envisions the publication of four rural newspapers in Karnataka using a centralized printing plant. The project has also been discussed with some of the local people in the area where the centralized printing plant and newspapers will be established.

The general feeling of the seminar was that the project should be started. Although there are always uncertainties involved in pilot projects of this kind, careful planning and implementation will give it better chances of success. The project should enable its sponsors and everyone concerned with the rural press to learn from its success or difficulties.