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# Technical Report

UTILISING THE RURAL EDUCATED  
AS CHANGE AGENTS

by  
Prof. Arun Menappa


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AHMEDABAD**

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The use of television and more recently of space communication has become an integral part of rural development programmes. If this medium can effectively communicate the many messages that are essential for rural education, the importance given to it would be justified. But studies and news reports regarding the impact of this medium on rural audiences have not been encouraging.

Suggestions have been made to change the quality of the programmes, to simplify the message. There has been a feeling among communication experts that the medium is still effective - it is the quality of the programmes and the content that has to be improved. These same constraints apply equally to the "message" films made especially for rural audiences.

In a study done by sociologists and communication experts of New Delhi (reported by Sumanta Banerjee "Wasted Propaganda", Economic and Political Weekly, 13, September 1975, pp. 1452-55), in the Saharanpur District of U.P. on the impact of family planning films made by the government and private producers the villagers had this to say: "it is like a dream, seen at night and lost now". This line sums up effectively the impact of mass media on rural audiences.

This paper aims to find out the disadvantages of completely relying on this media for rural education and development programmes which are necessary to effect socio economic change.

Serious as the government and other agencies may be to put across national messages, we must remember that the audience, primarily the farmer and his family who work hard the whole day are not willing to come and sit down to listen to long commentaries on the necessity of family planning or the need for sanitation. At best they are impressed by the equipment, by the wonder of the "moving pictures" - but the message itself goes over their heads.

In addition, they find the situation portrayed in the film or on TV very different to situations in their environment. More important, as was found by the study team the message of the film does not have "The support of necessary facilities, services and goods which the films direct the audience towards". As Bernard Shaw rightly pointed out in his preface to "the Doctors Dilemma", it is easy for a doctor to prescribe champagne jelly - however good a medicine it may be in curing the respective disease, its efficiency is nil, if it is beyond the reach of the patient.

In reviewing a recent book on "Communication and Rural Progress" (Edited by Mehra Masani) K.S. Mullick has this to say "Indeed, some of them even said that the radio, TV, the films and the press had been largely "irrelevant" to the needs of the majority of people in rural areas because "they cater for those already well informed and ready to accept innovation and change".

Miss Masani sums up this: "An adequate response to the challenge of poverty involves a reconsideration of the structure of our broadcasting system, the location of transmitters and studios, the language and content of the programmes, and so forth. If, on reconsideration, we decide that TV is to be used to support rural progress we would have to scrap the existing TV organisation which provides entertainment for the urban rich".

Doubts were also expressed about the outcome of SITE, mainly on the grounds: the limited size of the viewing audience, and its being dominated by the well-to-do members of the village community; the poor "retention capacity" of most of the viewers; and the malfunctioning of the receivers due to technical snags.

The government is determined to conquer the population explosion and has set targets for itself. This has led to corruption and "target oriented" fanaticism in most of its officials. It is no secret that old men and young boys are forcibly made to undergo vasectomy operations and very often these "camps" are conducted under the most unhygienic conditions leading to serious after effects, to treat which no provision is made. The "word of mouth" message spreads like wildfire and is more effective than all the films on family planning put together. This has a disastrous effect on the minds of people and no media however effective can change this feeling of doubt and fear of ill-health resulting from these operations. Thus the viewers feel that the films and TV do not show real life situations - and that they have no pertinence to real life.

Information regarding sanitation, animal husbandry, farming, family planning and other related topics has to be conveyed not through a disembodied voice on a TV screen or in a film to be effective. The rural inhabitant considers these personal topics and we feel films and TV are not the media to convey such serious messages - once a favourable climate of confidence is established by trained personnel, then this media can be used to reinforce the argument - but in themselves they do not fulfil the requirements. On a screen the poor man expects to see songs and dances, he feels only "dream world" or "outer world" scenes are being projected and is not ready to accept it as real life situations.

Every village has a fair number of educated people - atleast educated enough, to understand basic logic and to realize the importance of rural change for personal and national welfare. These few rural educated could be trained by the government to help the rural farmer cultivate his land more scientifically and to live a cleaner, more wholesome life. There is no use importing a few people to the cities, training them in classes, then sending them back to the villages, without any practical experience and only theoretical knowledge. The trainees should be trained in the village, so that they can grapple with the problems and find effective solutions, as they learn. Trained personnel have been used haphazardly in the past for rural education. They have not been successful primarily because they are outsiders who the villagers view with suspicion, since they visit the village only to convey some information or to persuade them to use some new farming method. There is no continuous association with the educator, the only method by which there can be a feeling of trust on the part of the village population. Trust is an important basis for any human relationship to be successful - if communication is to be effective, it is important to keep this in mind. Moreover, these rural development officers have suggested methods that are out of the reach of the small farmers and which the latter finds impractical. The farmer is not interested in using methods to cut down his labour force consists of his family, his input is low and his output (work they do) is high. It is for this very reason, that small families and arguments to substantiate how happy small families are, do not hold any water with rural audiences. For them the larger the family, the larger the work force.

It is suggested that these trained rural personnel could each be given a small plot in the village to cultivate. They need not be paid a salary, but could be paid a small honorarium

to help out with the rural programme. They could be given charge of a cooperative department which will have a tractor, fertilizers, farming equipment, sprinklers, implements and tools to be rented out to small farmers. It would be desirable if members with small families are chosen, so that, the women of the house, could educate the women of the village in the effectiveness of good sanitation, speak to them about family planning methods etc. There will be a more responsive audience, as the village woman will be familiar with the trainees wife and it will be informal, in the nature of a discussion on the women's doorstep rather than with charts and books in a large audience. The personal touch is very important in any programme and should be incorporated as far as possible. Many agencies have been using demonstration plots in the rural areas, to help people see the positive advantages of improved methods of farming or sanitation, but again as isolated pieces of a puzzle, rather than as an integrated package for rural development.

A recent two day symposium organised by the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry on rural development, wherein delegates from industry participated, several interesting suggestions emerged such as "adoption of villages, helping agro centres, starting linkage effect industries, particularly labour-intensive, spreading the message of family planning and water conservation and training programmes for people in rural areas".

Most rural education officers tend to be authoritarian and act as if they are only doing their duty, but have no genuine concern for the people with whom they deal. What is the use of loans given by rural banks, fertilisers, sophisticated equipment, if the farmer does not know how to use it or is not convinced of its

effectiveness. They are not impressed by facts and figures that are reeled off to impress them - they need proof. If the trained rural educated (TRE) could successfully cultivate the plot of land using these aids, it would help to build confidence in the farmer. He could use the equipment, fertilizer etc. in the cooperative, only if he is satisfied - hence he need not pay his hard earned money to buy something which he is later dissatisfied with and thus create a hostile climate. It is also essential that the rural farmers be taught to diversify into poultry, dairying, weaving, pottery - instead of relying solely on agriculture. The TRE being on the spot could advise and help with the farmers problems if and when they arise.

It is true that when plans are made, there is great enthusiasm and they are made on a large scale. If they fail, it leads to a considerable material loss and creates a poor impression. It is therefore suggested that few villages should be taken up at first and the rural educated from these trained and put into action and see how they function. Problems, difficulties in carrying out the plans can then be corrected. These villages should be close to district headquarters so that there can be constant checks to prevent misuse of funds and equipment and to allow for frequent supervision by higher officers. It would be a good idea that only persons of average intelligence and aspirations be trained to work in the village - as otherwise there may be job dissatisfaction in those with great initiative and with dreams of better jobs.

Plans to develop village with the help of these trained rural educated, should not be stereotyped - but should be changed depending on the nature of the village, the environment, the people. Methods should be used which will prove most effective keeping in mind the local experience. If there are large industries



in the area, they could help these TRE's to put across the message of rural development. Industrial enterprises could provide the finance to set up hospitals, farms etc. to improve the standard of living in the village - these funds could be administered by the officers of the industry and need not be handed over, in which case there is a tendency towards corruption and misuse of funds.

It would also be a good idea to send willing students from nearby towns to live in these villages as paying guests with the village people. They could live in their homes and teach them the basic of healthy living, sanitation, nutrition, through example rather than instruction. Living in the village hut, playing with their children, they will be able to create the atmosphere necessary to put across these messages effectively. Later, they could come from time to time from the towns to visit the village family and note the progress.

The government is planning to implement a spell of National service for the educated youth of the country. Recently this proposal has crystallised into a definite plan for the Doctors. However, before the scheme for the vast number of educated youth is implemented, details regarding the nature of the assignment that each one will do, needs to be worked out. If this tremendous resource of highly trained manpower, could be well utilised, one could hope for some change in the quality of human life in the rural area. The educated youth, could lend a helping hand in facilitating an improved 'quality of life' rather than an imposed one.

In allocating the educated youth to the rural areas, as far as possible they should be sent, to their respective villages. This would help on two counts. Those who have migrated to other centres for receiving their education, could function better as change

agents, having greater familiarity with local conditions, greater credibility with local people, hence facilitating the change process. If on the other hand, a person has migrated several generations ago, it would give him an understanding of what his/her ancestral village is now like.

While the educated youth, would provide one input in improving the quality of human life at the village level, they would form the core team to train, design and implement.

There is an urgent need for practical plans, and the necessity to do away with redundant plans, if they fail. The trouble these days is, that plans are made on a large scale, with crores of rupees involved - hence even if they fail, planners do not give them up and continue with them due to the outlay involved. Another feature is crash plans - like crash diets they have ill effects.

True, TV sets in villages, documentaries, statistics of the network of communication is all very impressive. It is a pity that communication technology has advanced more than its audience. Old fashioned as it may seem, the human being (after relative allowances are taken into consideration) is still the most effective carrier of information and makes the greatest impact if he goes about it in the proper way.

For change is to be accepted and internalised as a way of life, it has to be perceived by the affected person, as being so, rather than being told "try it, its good for you". It is in this process of introducing change that many of our social welfare programmes have come to grief.