

PRINT COMMUNICATION IN RURAL INDIA

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One of the main concerns in the developing countries has been to optimize the role of communication in rural development. The study of the role of communication is significant due to huge deployment of economic and human resources for development in rural areas.

When we refer to print communication in rural India, it is basically the rural press which means small newspapers with small circulation, serving small communities and catering to their special needs and interest. Rural press is one of the most important, viable and effective means of communication for reaching out to the vast majority of rural population. The role of rural press has been universally recognized by all those who are interested in development. However, due to scarcity of funds and resources, mostly the publication of newspapers and magazines is restricted to urban areas, from where they originate and are distributed to the accessible rural areas where there is demand for it. The electronic media enjoys a slight edge over the print media in rural areas owing to its power of visual, audio

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communication over the need for literacy in the case of print media.

Before we venture in to the rural dimension of the press and its role and impact, it would be proper to understand and analyse the various figures. Media is all about people, as altruism goes and in India, with over 72.22 per cent of its 1,043 million population living in the rural regions as compared to 27.78 per cent living in the urban regions, media, to a large extent ought to be catering to the rural mass. When one talks about rural India, the focus has to be on 700 million people living in nearly 600,000 villages spanning over 150 million households. However, in spite of the economic progress, the benefits have not completely percolated down to a large number of the people in the rural areas, who languish in poverty. Planning Commission of India has estimated that 27.5% of the population was living below the poverty line in 2004–2005, down from 51.3% in 1977–1978, and 36% in 1993-1994. The source for this was the 61st round of the National Sample Survey (NSS) and the criterion used was monthly per capita consumption expenditure below Rs. 356.35 for rural areas and Rs. 538.60 for urban areas. 75% of the poor are in rural areas, most of them are daily wagers, self-employed householders and landless labourers.

Apart from purchasing power of the people, the literacy of the population is one of the main factors which has a direct relation to circulation figures of the press, readership and its impact. According to Census of India 2001, literacy in rural areas is 59.4 per cent whereas urban areas have literacy rate of 80.3 per cent.

Just as in other areas, there is a rural and urban divide in the reach and readership of print media as well. The rural population constitutes 72.22 per cent of population, but the urban bias is clearly reflected in the contents of the newspapers wherein the news regarding rural areas hardly get 25 per cent of media coverage. Newspapers generally do not publish news about development in the village unless it is of exceptional importance or of human interest. Unfortunately, just as other professions, press too has become commercialized. There is an urban bias and natural antipathy towards life in villages.

The following tables clearly bring out the rural and urban divide in the print media on various parameters:

READERSHIP TRENDS						
<i>(percent of adults)</i>						
	2006			2007		
	All India	Urban	Rural	All India	Urban	Rural
Dailies	37.4	57.0	28.6	37.1	55.8	28.6
Magazines	13.8	23.9	9.2	12.2	21.1	8.2
Any publication	38.7	58.7	29.9	38.3	57.5	29.7

Source: IRS 2006(R2) and 2007 (R2)

Newspaper readership		
<i>(Percent of adults)</i>		
Year	Urban	Rural
	Newspaper readers	Newspaper readers
1990 NRS	44	-
1995 NRS	46	10
2000 IRS	45	15
2002 IRS	54	24
2007 IRS	58	30

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MS Analysis of NRS & IRS

Opportunity/ Challenge: Wide range of reach of press High and Low levels		
<i>(percent)</i>		
	Urban	Rural
Socio-economic strata	14 – 86	8 – 25
Income levels	14 – 78	6 – 37
Female – Male	27 - 46	7 – 20

Source: IRS 2007 (R2) – Lintas; CMS Analysis

STATEWISE REACH (%): INTER STATE DIFFERENCES		
State	Urban	Rural
<i>Uttar Pradesh</i>	30	9
<i>Bihar</i>	32	10
<i>Madhya Pradesh</i>	29	4
<i>Rajasthan</i>	46	16
<i>Orissa</i>	27	7
<i>Kerala</i>	71	62
<i>Tamil Nadu</i>	39	19
<i>Maharashtra</i>	40	18
<i>Goa</i>	52	39
<i>Andhra Pradesh</i>	31	12
<i>Assam</i>	32	11
<i>Jharkhand</i>	35	7
<i>Chandigarh</i>	53	
<i>Delhi</i>	49	
<i>Gujarat</i>	40	14
<i>Haryana</i>	30	14
<i>Himachal Pradesh</i>	45	20
<i>Karnataka</i>	35	14

<i>Chhatisgarh</i>	31	7
<i>Punjab</i>	38	14
<i>Uttaranchal</i>	37	
<i>West Bengal</i>	33	12

Source: IRS 2007 R2

Thus on the whole the reach of print media in rural areas is rather limited due to low literacy which is further compounded by low purchasing power and poor means of transportation for timely delivery of newspapers. There is direct link between backwardness or underprivileged condition and deprivation of communication resources. In 2002 the CMS did an analysis where it found that hardly one-third of country's rural population (14 years plus) were readers of a daily newspaper. In some states it was not even half of that. However, with the improvement of literacy, economy and infrastructure in the rural areas, the reach and the readership of the print media and also the coverage of rural news is bound to improve.

Role of Rural Press

In view of its special position the rural press has multi functional roles to play. The rural press can be a link between the policy makers, bureaucracy and farmers. Print media can play the role of providing scientific knowledge,

imparting adult education and promoting social awareness and development. Rural press can disseminate information and knowledge about nutrition, health and hygiene, improved farm practices, family planning measures, employment, development plans and the programmes and policies of the government for poverty alleviation, credit and land reforms. They should cover subjects like success story of a farmer, problems faced in marketing of agricultural produce, social superstitions and taboos inhibiting economic growth and productivity, rural banking facilities, use of fertilizers, manure, high yielding variety seeds, irrigation, animal husbandry, dairying, mechanization for optimizing agricultural production. The other areas of coverage can be weather forecast reports, health of livestock and their sale and purchase, new development projects like construction of a new road or a bridge in the village, water canals, electrification. Rural press should be the mirror of local people, their worries, their anxieties, their troubles and tribulations. The rural reporter should be in touch with day to day life problems of the common man- a small scale or a marginal farmer, rural artisan, village school teacher, etc. The rural press which basically is grass root journalism can cater to all this.

The rural press can also make public participation in government policies more informed, relevant and meaningful. Apart from broadening the educational base of its readers, the rural press can break down the barriers of isolation and thus be a catalyst for change and growth. Thus rural press has a rich potential, an educational and constructive role to play in the sphere of nation building. All that is required is consistent and dedicated effort by rural press in this direction.

With the gradually increasing percentage of literate rural population and the level of general awareness going up and with improvement of income, rural press can definitely fill the hiatus which at present exists at the various level of bureaucracy, agricultural scientists, political leadership and farming community. With sustained efforts, innovative approach, training opportunities and governmental support and incentives, it is possible to build up a cadre of committed journalists who can meet the communication requirement of the rural population. Improved communication in rural sector would help in improving agriculture, health, hygiene, economic condition etc. and thereby accelerate the speed of national development.

In the end I would like to say that it is appropriate that the Vishwa Bharti University, the excellence of which was so close to the heart of Rabindranath, has initiated this debate on 'Communication : Engineering Social Development' because development must take in its sweep every strata and segment of the society. In India, development can be sustained only when it reaches the grass roots.

Namashkar
