



## Rural newspapers in India

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*A well-edited newspaper or periodical provides a continuous link with neo-literates. However, the urban orientation of most newspapers in India, with their scant coverage of developmental news, cannot perform this role. There are 8000 small newspapers and 250 farm journals but it is difficult to assess their readability. B B Mohanty calls for the setting up of a Rural Press Foundation of India to meet the needs of the neo-literates.*



**B B Mohanty**

The International Commission on the Development of Education, constituted by Unesco, in its report entitled "Learning to Be", observes: "Every individual must be in a position to keep learning throughout his life. The idea of lifelong education is the keystone of the learning society." In a learning society, the entire process of adult education is seen as a continuum, and the distinction between the literacy, post-literacy and follow-up stages gets blurred. This is more so in our context because the three components — literacy, functionality and awareness — of our Adult Education Programme are to be reflected in the literacy as well as the post-literacy and follow-up programmes. However, for organisational and management reasons, appropriate stages have been designed for literacy and post-literacy and follow-up; and their success depends, among other things, on the suitable learning materials which can be placed in the hands of the learners.

## Rural Bias

Design of need-based learning materials for the literacy stages is relatively easier, from the point of view of magnitude of the requirements, but for the post-literacy and follow-up stage, which, in the scheme

of things, is the same as the continuing education stage, the design and production of materials are rather complex. The need is reflected in terms of a variety of materials on a number of topics to be fed regularly into the learning system. In spite of the suitability of books as learning materials in the post-literacy & follow-up stage, they sometimes are not able to meet the changing needs of the neo-literates, because of their static contents. The topicality of a book does not last long and once a book has been read, the need for it attains a declining curve, whereas a newspaper or a periodical, properly edited and produced regularly, serves to establish a continuous link with the neo-literates by giving them both education as well as relevant and timely information on many aspects of their day-to-day life. Such a newspaper has to possess a rural bias in its contents, and its language should be easily understood by the readers it serves.

Harold Thomas, of the International Press Institute, says: "Four out of five of the peoples of the developing countries live in the areas, the places which governments and journalists all too often forget. Yet this is where the development stories are to be found — and where they are missed. So should there be a rural press based in the rural areas for rural readers?" The opening theme of the Seminar for Asian journalists on reaching the rural readers, held in Colombo, in December 1981, "was the neglect of

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rural news and the absence of an effective rural press." Sarath Amunugama, in his keynote address to the seminar, had said that there had been growing dissatisfaction with the existing pattern of news flows because it was dominated by western owned and oriented news organisations; and the developing countries complained that they did not get fair coverage. "But what strikes me as very interesting", he said, "is that these same complaints, these same objections, can be levelled internally against the imbalance between the metropolitan news sources and the rural areas. In the Third World you can have just the same argument about lack of balance in the coverage of rural news and metropolitan news. In Asia some commentators have said it is far more difficult for rural news to get a play in metropolitan papers or the agencies or radio or TV than for a Third World news item to find its way into the western press. For us in the Third World we have to admit that these deficiencies do exist."

The seminar, after considerable discussion came back to the same questions with which it had started: "What is a **rural** newspaper, as distinct from an urban newspaper which may reach into rural areas and be read by village people? So far the seminar had not identified a rural paper published in a rural area for rural readers. The idea of a rural press was an interesting concept, but did it exist? What were the conditions for it to exist?" Frank Barton, of the International Press Institute, who directed the seminar observed that "the radio was not enough because you cannot refer back to it — nor answer back to it. To sustain literacy after leaving school there had to be something to read. What was needed in the rural areas was an unambitious very simple newsletter, perhaps a single duplicated sheet. Rural areas were the natural location for small papers, but it was essential that they should be produced within the community, though at an interim stage they might be printed in a regional centre or on a portable press." P. N. Malhan writes about the four-fold criterion for identifying the rural press. The place of publication comes first; it should be located outside the metropolitan areas and big cities. The second is the contents of the rural newspapers. What is the extent of coverage of news and features relevant and meaningful to the rural people? The Indian Rural Press Association lays down that 40% of the editorial space should be devoted to news and views on agriculture, community development, cooperation, and allied developmental topics. The third is that a rural newspaper should be in the spoken language or idiom of the rural readers; and the fourth is that the rural newspapers, including magazines and wall newspapers, should be meant for rural readers.

According to Hifzi Topuz of UNESCO, "In fact, it frequently happens that new literates forget what they learned at school after a few years if they have no reading material at their disposal. In countries

where the great majority of the population is composed of rural dwellers, the reading material which should be provided for new literates is the rural press." "Many Voices, One World", the report of the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, while summarising the recommendations of the Commission, says, among other things, "The development of a community press in rural areas and small towns would not only provide print support for economic and social extension activities. This would also facilitate the production of functional literature for neo-literates as well." A Commonwealth Committee on Communication and the Media, in its report entitled "Communication, Society and Development" has recommended: "The literacy problem is compounded in many Commonwealth countries by the existence of several language groups, each of which requires specific attention. Despite these difficulties, newspapers and other components of the print media have an important role in promoting literacy. This can be advanced if they are adapted to the needs of the bulk of their reading audience and adopt a style and format designed to promote reading interests. The small-readership press is of special significance in the Commonwealth, where many countries have small populations or several linguistic groups."

### ***Indian press***

The press had a long and chequered history in India. It had its beginnings in court newsletters. It also had its origin in the marketplace, which was the centre of discussion and dissemination of the news of the day. Shopkeepers and travellers were, and even are, the informal news vendors. The modern press, as we know it today, was born to defy the foreign rule. According to M. V. Desai, "Even as consciousness of the sinister implications of foreign rule dawned on the public mind, the 'vernacular' press grew in importance, especially after the mutiny of 1857. It spoke directly to the masses, in a language they could understand. The socio-religious reform movements of the nineteenth century gave the press a number of causes to fight for. The cross-fertilization of ideas expressing the forces of British imperialism and a nascent nationalism began. The journals of Raja Ram Mohan Roy are among the best examples of this phase."

Mahatma Gandhi appeared as a mass communicator par excellence. His life was his message. His weeklies, the **Indian Opinion**, the **Young India** and the **Harijan**, stirred the conscience of the world. In his own words, "If you diligently study Harijan, it will equip you for the delicate task. It will give you an epitome of the week's doings in various parts of India in connection with the campaign against untouchability. It will also tell you what the others are doing and what the opponents are saying. It will lay bare the weaknesses and mistakes of workers .....

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### ***Farm periodicals in India have contributed towards the growth of development journalism.***

I am an optimist. I have no quarrel with the opponents. These pages will be written as much for them as for the reformers. If Harijan stands for truth and if the reformers have patience, the opponents today will be the reformers of tomorrow." He further said, "One of the objects of the newspaper is to understand the popular feeling and give expression to it; another is to arouse among the people certain desirable sentiments; and the third is fearlessly to expose popular defects."

The English newspapers and those in the regional languages published from the metropolitan cities in India are highly urban-oriented, and their coverage of developmental news and topics is very very low. Excepting Kerala and a few other pockets, the press has not penetrated in a big way into the rural areas, although during the five years from 1976 to 1980, the rapid growth recorded by our leading newspapers is really outstanding. As against 20 dailies with a combined circulation of 3.48 million copies in 1976, there were 45 top dailies in 1980 with a total sale of 9.8 million copies. By the turn of 1981, there were about 20,000 newspapers, big and small, in the country with a circulation of about 55 million copies. Some of the language dailies with large circulation are: **Navbharat Times** (450,000) and **Hindustan** (240,000) in Hindi, **Anand Bazar Patrika** (500,000) and **Jugantar** (350,000) in Bengali, **Lok Satta** (280,000) in Marathi, **Gujarat Samachar** (210,000) in Gujarati, **Malayala Monorama** (570,000) and **Matrubhumi** (360,000) in Malayalam, **Dina Thanthi** (300,000) and **Dina Mani** (200,000) in Tamil, **Eenadu** (270,000) in Telegu and **Prajavani** (250,000) in Kannada. Excepting Eenadu, which was started in 1974, all the others were founded decades ago. There has been a magazine boom both in English and other Indian languages. One interesting feature of the Indian press is that all the top newspapers and magazines are published by "common ownership units", that is "publishing groups owning more than one publication."

According to an estimate made by Bhabani Sengupta, the former editor of **Yojana**, in 1966, "the total non-urban circulation of newspapers in India was about 4,14,000. In other words there was not even one copy for every village. In the absence of any national break-up, it is difficult to say which villages

get how many newspapers." There are about 8000 small newspapers operating in and for the rural areas and covering rural themes. These include dailies of tabloid size, weeklies and biweeklies. The largest number of such papers is in Hindi, published from different parts of the country. These newspapers also appear in other languages, such as Gujarati, Bengali, Marathi, Urdu, Telegu, Malayalam, Oriya, Tamil and Kannada. Malhan writes that "there are yet other papers which are published in the languages of various small and ethnically distinct groups like Konkani, Manipuri, Lushai, Khasi, Santhali, Garo, Dogri, Tulu, Angani Naga, Tankhu Naga, Thada, to mention a few." However, no systematic data is available to indicate the readability levels of these newspapers and the suitability of their contents for development journalism.

Farm periodicals in India have contributed towards the growth of development journalism. The first farm periodical to be published from Agra about six decades ago, was **Krishi Sudhar** in Hindi, which was followed by a few in South Indian languages. The Government agriculture departments started languages. The Government agriculture departments started publishing farm magazines in 1931, and in 1938, the Government of Bihar started the farm magazine **Gaon**, which served the farmers for many years. Soon after independence, the Indian Council Agricultural Research started a popular farm magazine in Hindi called **Kheti**. In 1948, the Government of West Bengal started **Basundhara**, its periodical for farmers. Notable unofficial ventures were **Krishak Jagat** (1946) and the weekly **Sewagram** (1953) which continue to serve the rural readers. The Maharashtra Government farm magazine, **Shetkari** (Marathi) has a circulation of 120,000 copies. Today there are about 250 farm periodicals published in India, of which about 190 are in Hindi and other regional languages. In the absence of a readability survey on these magazines, it is difficult to say anything about their suitability for neo-literate learners. Mathur remarks that although there are 21 agricultural Universities and 33 research institutes of the ICAR, there seems to be a near absence of concern for using farm periodicals as media for transfer of technology.

### ***Sporadic efforts***

Apart from the 800 small newspapers operating in and for our countryside, some sporadic efforts have been made in bringing out monthly bulletins and periodicals for the neo-literates and others having limited reading ability. The Karnataka State Adult Education Council's **Belaku** (Kannada) (Light) is a very popular weekly for neo-literates and had been in the adult education scene since long ago. The Community Development Programme during the fifties and sixties accelerated such efforts. The Juna-

garh Community Project in Kalahandi district, Orissa, used to bring out a foolscap-size mimeographed publication called **Ama Yojana Katha** (Oriya) (Our Project News) for the social education (post-literacy) programme. Its popularity increased immediately after the first issue was circulated, but after a few years, when the community project phase was over, it had a sudden death. The Barpali Village Service, a multi-purpose village development project of the American Friends Service Committee in Barpali, Sambalpur district, Orissa, used to bring out a quarto-size mimeographed monthly called **Janiba Katha** (Oriya) (Things to Know) for the social education programme during the ten-year life of the project in the fifties. The Literacy House, Lucknow, has also been very active in this endeavour. There are many agencies, both government and private, which are bringing out such publications for the neo-literate learners. The Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity of the Government of India brings out a fortnightly wall newspaper named **Hamara Desh** (Our Country) in Hindi and other regional languages. The latest one is **Jago Aur Jagao** (Hindi) (Awake and make others awake), published by the Indian Adult Education Association.

After the resource consortium — National Resource Centre and State Resource Centres for Adult Education — was organised in India in the late seventies, the need for a rural press for post-literacy and follow-up programmes was keenly felt all over the country. The State Resource Centres, without waiting for any miracle to happen in this field for historical reasons, started work in this direction out of their limited financial resources and within a period of the last four to five years have come out with weekly and monthly bulletins and monthly wall newspapers which have proved their worth in the post-literacy and follow-up programme.

**Belaku** (Kannada) of the Karnataka SRC and **Ujala** and **Ghar Grahasthy** (Hindi) of the Literacy House, Lucknow, have continued with their success and popularity. **Chalti Jagat** (Bengali) of the West Bengal SRC, printed in newsprint in a tabloid format, gives the appearance of a newspaper and is highly popular in the rural areas of West Bengal. **Samyadini** (Marathi) of the Maharashtra SRC is equally popular. **Nattu Velicham** (Malayalam) (Light of the Village), the monthly wall newspaper of the Kerala SRC, in 'multi-colour offset', is very popular in the rural areas. **Halchal** (Oriya) (Word of Mouth), the monthly wall newspaper of the Orissa SRC, being the first of their kind in the State, have proved to be very successful as follow-up reading materials throughout the State. The contents of these publications are development oriented having the required readability for the neo-literate learners. Most of these publications, in spite of their success and popularity, are prototype materials and need to be

mass produced by the State Governments to cater to the needs of the respective States.

A UNESCO mission on Rural Press, which visited Africa in 1971, has defined the aims of the rural press as follows:

- (1) to provide reading material for neo-literates;
- (2) to ensure the continuing education of the rural masses; to give them practical advice on production and civic rights and responsibilities;
- (3) to give the masses information about events concerning their environment, their region, their nation, and the outside world at regular intervals;
- (4) to ensure a 'dialogue' between the leaders and the rural masses;
- (5) to help ensure the participation of the rural masses in the economic, social and cultural development of the nation;
- (6) to proceed to set up a local, decentralised press and to show the rural masses how to express themselves in the press;
- (7) to introduce the rural masses to the reading of newspapers.

The above aims of the rural press, although originally conceived in the African context, could be adopted for international usage.

The 'Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-85)' states: "Techniracy would be adopted as the major instrument for the spread of literacy, numeracy and practical skills relevant to the economic activities of the people concerned. It would be supported by post-literacy, continuing education through a network of rural libraries as well as instructional programmes through mass communication media, particularly after INSAT is launched to its orbit." The need for a rural press is inherent in the above scheme of the Planning Commission. With all the resources and the infrastructure we have, it should not be difficult to establish a rural press in India, provided it is backed by a strong political will.

A survey of the rural press in India, like the one done by UNESCO in Africa, is an urgent need. This should be done by a special Working Group on Rural Press to be constituted by the Planning Commission, in collaboration with the Directorate of Adult Education. The other terms of reference of the Working Group, to flow from the findings of the survey,

should be to formulate guidelines for the organisation of a viable rural press in India and to suggest operational structures for the rural press keeping in view the growing needs of the learning society of the future.

### **Rural Press Foundation**

It may not be out of place to reflect in this paper some of the organisational and management needs of a rural press in India. In view of the structure of the Indian press, its ownership pattern and its urban and elitist orientation, it is not likely that it will soon be penetrating into the rural areas to accelerate the growth of development journalism. Therefore, an alternative organisation has to be created without any further delay. This should have been recognised as one of the key elements of our communication policy and we should have analysed the factors that impede the growth of the rural press and suggested patterns conducive to its development. However, it is never too late and the time to begin has come. A Rural Press Foundation of India should be established as an autonomous organisation, and its main function should be to facilitate the growth of the rural press in the country. Such a foundation could be funded "through a modest newsprint or other cess on newspapers — an extension of the basis on which the new Press Council is being supported." B.G. Verghese writes: "It should be possible to find ways and means of financing and circulating wall newspapers, mobile libraries, slides and cassettes, and even local papers and periodicals. One means of distribution might be to organise this in certain areas through the milk collection vans that ply the countryside everyday, twice a day, at dawn and dusk to carry milk from the villages to the dairies being established under Operation Flood. Small newspapers and journals could also club together to share certain common facilities and to pool their circulation for purposes of advertising through a special agency." Rural press will also be able to accelerate rural marketing. The agricultural input manufacturers would be too happy to advertise their products in the rural newspapers. This would be an important source of revenue, and if the advertisement copies are properly designed and worded, these would be excellent functional reading materials for the rural readers. Therefore, the rural press would gradually find its own advertisers.

A recent estimate shows that "there are over 60,000 printing presses in India ranging from large numbers of little treadle machines to high speed rotaries." What is needed for a community newspaper is a "rugged rural/small town press." Harold Thomas, in his little book, "The Rural Press in South Asia", writes: "Yet the seminar had come round to a different view, that there was a future for local printing, both as an income earner and as a community service, if the right kind of small-scale printing tech-

nology could be developed. In the last hour of the seminar we had really got down to nuts-and-bolts, and were ready to establish a two-way exchange of ideas and information on technology for the rural press which could be fruitful for the future." The Printing Panel of the Intermediate Technology Development Group (9 King Street, London WC2E 8HN) would be happy to know about the problems and requirements of local printing in the Third World countries. The Panel has some useful information on printing technology.

A rural newspaper needs a small team of editorial people. In Africa, most of the rural newspapers have an editor assisted by one or two full-time reporters. These are development officers working in government development departments and although were never formally trained in journalism, they were endowed with the skill in communicating with masses and an ability to write development messages in local languages in an interesting way. The monthly bulletin **Halchal** (octavo, 4 pages) and the monthly wall newspaper **Tundabaida** of the Orissa SRC are written and edited by two staff members having sensitivity to news sense and linguistic needs of the people. They are occasionally helped by a graphic artist who designs mastheads and other illustrations when necessary. These publications are printed in a small press in Angul (Orissa), but for a large run of both the papers, the existing print shop would be inadequate. However, the press is ready to go in for an offset unit if the print order for **Halchal** becomes 100,000. The Orissa SRC is unable to print 100,000 copies of **Halchal** every month because of budgetary restrictions, but the State Government can possibly do it through the SRC. Presently a single copy of **Halchal** costs ten paise only, and its annual subscription is Rs. 2/- only, but its actual cost of production is much more than the revenue it earns. So far, it has not gone for advertisements owing to restrictions of space.

### **Training**

The Research Institute for Newspaper Development (RIND), Madras, is interested in the growth of the rural press in India, and it is quite possible that the RIND would start its training programme soon. It is also hoped that the Press Institute of India, the Indian Institute of Mass Communication and the Journalism Departments of the Indian Universities would soon organise training programmes in the different aspects of rural journalism. And the time has come for the Directorate of Adult Education and the State Resource Centres to formulate the necessary curriculum for such a training programme and organise the same as a model for the entire country. Perhaps to start with, the Directorate of Adult Education should have a special cell for rural press immediately.

The rural press, to be able to survive and attain success, needs the communication support from the All India Radio, Doordarshan and other media and should be able to provide support to radio and television by publishing their programme schedules and highlights.

Rural newspapers have to honour the media ethics. In his autobiography, Gandhiji wrote: "The sole aim of journalism should be service. The newspaper press is a great power, but just as an unchained torrent of water submerges whole country-side and devastates crops, even so an uncontrolled pen serves but to destroy. If the control is from without, it proves more poisonous than want to control. It can be profitable only when exercised from within. If this line of reasoning is correct, how many of the journals in the world would stand the test? But who would stop those that are useless? And, who should be the judge? The useful and the useless must, like good and evil, generally go on together, and man must make the choice."

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