Communication Technology and Rural Development In India: Promises and Performances

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this discussion paper is to examine the extent to which communication technology has contributed towards India’s rural development. The other aim is to pause and reflect over the achievements and the failures of information and communication technology (ICT) in the development march where millions are struggling to improve the rural quality of life. The analysis of selected communication projects for rural development before media liberalisation and in post-liberalisation indicated continued media advantage to urban rich. The analysis indicates that “pro-poor” development issues have been pushed aside in favour of urban upcoming rich after media privatisation—leading to proliferation of private and public broadcasting and ICT in favour of consumerism and entertainment. The current communication policy of the country, which on the face of it is proactive for rural development, but remains urban “pro-rich” in effect. Besides, forces of market economy, focused towards profits, have begun to shape broadcasting and information technology programming philosophy, content and programme schedule.

“Development is neither a simple, nor straightforward linear process. It is a multi-dimensional exercise that seeks to transform society by addressing the entire complex of interwoven strands, living impulses, which are part of an organic whole”. (Haqqani 2003:xi)

Even now, rural development defies any clear definition as it has gone through a number of changes over a period of time. Hence, there is no comprehensive universally accepted definition of rural development. Earlier, we have taken rural development as commonly understood and expressed by political leaders, academics and a whole lot of UN bodies as an enabling force for improvement of the quality of life of rural people.

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Development, as a process meant to empower the poor, reduce exploitation, and oppression by those having economic, social, and political power. It also means an equitable sharing of resources, improved health care and education for all.

One of the major components and driving force of rural development is communication. Conventionally, communication includes electronic media, human communication & now information technology (IT). All forms of communications have dominated the development scene in which its persuasive role has been most dominant within the democratic political framework of the country. Persuasive communication for rural development has been given highest priority for bringing about desirable social and behavioural change among the most vulnerable rural poor and women. Initially, the approach lacked gender sensitivity and empathy of the communicators and development agents who came from urban elite homes. Added to these constraints is political will that still influences the pace and progress of rural development.

Technological changes further compounded the direction of rural development as information and communication technology (ICT) has been thought by communication and development workers as a panacea for other ills that obstructs the development process. It has lead to indiscriminate applications and use of ICT in every aspect of information dissemination, management & governance of development. While there are few shining examples of achievements of ICT in development, there are a large number of failures and unauthenti-cated claims.

A view has also been advanced that “totalitarianism is latent in [information and communication] technology”. Also communication technology is always expressions of socio-economic, geographical and political interests, partialities, alignments and commitments. In brief the will to technical knowledge is the will to technical power” (Armitage 2001: 2). To a large extent, my own view is that communication technology in more than one way reflects socio-cultural and political values of the society in which they were invented and nurtured. Earlier, I had postulated that the advent of satellite commu-nication in the country would lead to curbing of democracy.

I am still inclined to postulate that the relationship between democracy and communication technology is quite tenuous and transient. In order to understand and appreciate the implications of communication technology for rural development, it would be essential to describe the current communi-cation scenario of the country.
Current Communication Scenario

The closing decade of twentieth century was the opening of historic information and communication technology interventions for development. This period has witnessed enormous and unprecedented changes in every aspect of communications technologies, policies, infrastructure development and services. Political leaders of India have begun abandoning archaic government control over communication that has lately moved from government to national and international private players. Finally, airwaves and electronic signals have achieved their freedom from centuries old colonial bondage to reach out and connect people through a privately owned and operated communication network and infrastructure.

Both international and national private players have taken a dominant role in redefining, reshaping and providing tele-communication, broadcasting and information services for national development. It has initiated an era of partnership of public and private entrepreneurial skills and abilities to bring about unlimited connectivity. It has already started reshaping the life of a number of elites in India. But what about the rest? Little is known, though there is a trickle down communication effect in many areas of development including rural development. The role of communication technology for development must be viewed in this new and changed environment. How these ICT global and regional changes have influenced the access and use of ICT for development remains an issue of discussion and analysis.

Socio-Cultural Perspective

We are one of the world’s oldest and ancient civilisations that evolved, matured and decayed over several millennia. After independence we have been experimenting and carving a path of revitalization for development through democracy. The existing sharp divide between the small but economically, politically and socially “rich elite ruling class” and a very big but “economically poor and socially deprived” continue to persist as a legacy of the past. While the rich elite has had access to knowledge, both oral and written, the economically poor remained confined only to oral knowledge. The imposition of British educational system for over two centuries help add another layer of social barrier though on surface it gives an impression of equitable access to education. Privatisation of education has further helped the rich elite to dominate the contemporary social and political scene at the cost of the poor who remain oblivious of communication technology for any improvement in their existing miserable life (Agrawal 2000: 13).
Communication has been seen by a large number of development planners as a panacea for solving major social ills and problems. Apart from development, the introduction of communication in the educational process for open and distance learning is seen as step towards improving the quality of education and bridging the social and educational gap (Agrawal 1993). However, experience indicates that those rich who could afford to have access to private resources have hogged the advantage whether development or education. In this respect, it seems that communication technology has, in no way has helped the poor for improving their socio-economic condition.

I shall try to support my observation by examining selected rural development projects. For discussion, communication technology projects for rural development are divided into two categories. In the first category are those development projects which were implemented before 1992 economic liberalization. At that time the primary responsibility of rural development remained with the government. These rural development projects broadly followed an “extension model” in which broadcast media were used to reach the large rural population or target groups. In the post economic liberalisation period, rural development projects added information and communication technology (ICT) to provide individual need-based information in broad development areas through Internet. In the post economic liberalization phase without abandoning the extension model “social marketing approach” to rural development has been adopted.

**Government Initiatives**

After independence, the government took upon itself the major responsibility of development. Hence, the central and state governments carried out development projects. Four such projects are briefly described.

*Radio for Rural Development*: Popularly known as “Radio Farm Forum” was one of the earliest efforts in the use of radio for rural development. The experiment was carried out from February to April 1956 in five districts of Maharashtra State by All India Radio (AIR). Rural listener groups were organized, who would listen to radio broadcasts twice a week at 6.30 p.m. for half an hour. “The group then stayed together for discussion of what they had heard, the discussion lasted usually, about half an hour, seldom less, frequently more” (Neurath 1960:7). The summative impact evaluation indicated positive outcome of radio rural forum. Impressive knowledge gains as a result of radio listening were reported across illiterates and literates, agriculturists and non-agriculturists, village leaders and others. However, over a period of time the project withered away and
could not be operationalised for large-scale implementation in one form or the other. Lack of political will and indifference of bureaucracy killed the rural development project even before it could help poor to take advantage of radio broadcast.

Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) is considered to be one of the biggest techno-social communication experiments in education and rural development. The one-year experiment (August 1975 - July 1976) aimed to provide direct broadcasting of instructional and educational television in 2400 villages in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan. Over 500 conventional television sets spread over 335 villages in Kheda district, Gujarat was also part of SITE. Satellite technologists had called SITE as leapfrogging from bullock cart stage to satellite communication, which did not discriminate between rural poor and urban rich for information and communication. It had given 50 years communication lead to rural poor of the country.

SITE provided telecast for rural primary school children in the age group 5 - 12 years studying in grades 1-5. (For details see Shukla and Kumar 1977) and teachers’ training (Agrawal 1981). Rural adults viewed television programmes on improved agricultural practices, health and family planning. They were also able to view news. Television was considered as window to the world. The telecast reliability was above 99 per cent during the experiment period. More than 90 per cent direct reception television sets were in working order (for details see Agrawal ed. 1985: 21-24).

Both quantitative (survey) and qualitative in-depth (anthropological holistic study) evaluation indicated modest gains in some areas, whereas no gain or negative gain in other areas. The one-year duration was thought to be too little for any positive results. Based on the experiences and positive gains, INSAT satellite was launched in 1981. Since than a series of INSAT satellites have been launched and used for nationwide television telecast for education and development. The sad part is that, in spite of best efforts, satellite television has been used for entertainment more than rural development. I am sad that my prediction came true that satellite television will be used for entertainment and not rural development.

Post Media Liberalisation Approach to Rural Development

The post media liberalisation phase, communication has been further re-emphasized and recognised as “missing link” in achieving development objectives.
As early as 1995, Karnik, Nazareth and Dasgupta (1995) made an excellent proposal for creation of agricultural information and communication system for rural and agricultural sector. The report provides tentative outline of activities that should be carried out to create the information system and a rationale for setting up of such an information system that would meet the perceived needs and emerging needs of farmers to increase agricultural productivity in a sustainable manner. The authors suggested the overall approach to be “demand driven”.

Almost all healthcare projects for rural poor, especially women and children have used demand driven social marketing approach for rural development. United States of America, World Bank and other donor agencies have been advocating for such an approach for rural development. At the same time, communication convergence, especially of media and Internet, opened up the possibility of individualised non-broadcast communication. Launch of “Kisan Call Centres” and an exclusive “Farmer Television Channel” are examples of social marketing approach for rural development. Let me give few example of social marketing approach of communication for rural development.

Community Radio Initiative: In post media liberalisation phase, Government of India, announced the policy for community radio broadcasting. “Community radio is expected to focus on issues relating to education, health, environment, agriculture, rural and community development”. (<http://undp.org.in/News/Press/2004/PRESS277.HTM> 10.10.05).

Country’s first community radio station became operational on February 1, 2004 at Anna University, Chennai. Sreedhar responsible for setting up of the radio station indicated that Anna University will serve the educational needs. How this community radio will serve the rural folks is yet to be ascertained. However, given the low power of the radio station in the heart of Chennai, it is clear that the major benefits will go to students rather than farmers, women and poor.

Another “cable” community radio station, named as Namma Dhwani or Our Voices’ was set up earlier in Boodikote, Karnataka. The villagers believe that “This radio station is ours because it speaks about us - in our language and in our accent”. Community radio in Boodikote, according to Seema Nair, helps the villagers run the radio station “it is a new source of strength for poor people because it addresses their most basic development needs”. (<http://undp.org.in/News/Press/2004/PRESS277.HTM> 10.10.05).
'Kunjal Panje Kutchji' is an interactive and participative development communication project. It is also the first time that a voluntary organisation, the Bhuj-based Kutch Mahila Vikas Sansthan (KMVS), has bought airtime on the radio as part of its communication strategy. The serial is broadcast on commercial time with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) support. The initiative is using existing commercial radio stations for community broadcasting.

A feedback exercise was planned for continuous improvement and to ensure listener-ship not only decide what issues are taken up but also shape the script of the dramatized serial.

‘Kunjal Panje Kutchji’ has also focused on capacity building for elected women in panchayats on development issues. No feedback is available to assess the effectiveness of the project.

Community Television: Since the inception of INSAT satellite television system, Doordarshan achieved a kind of world record in setting up over 1000 low powered television transmission stations in the country. Each station in theory was supposed to telecast local television programme for rural development. A large number of television professional were trained for this purpose. Doordarshan has been planning to introduce local television for rural poor and farmers to achieve the goals of rural development. Earlier similar attempts have been made to set up local television stations for rural development like in Nagpur.

Very little is known about the operations, achievements of local stations also their utility and effectiveness. Today, local stations have been largely subsumed in the maize of urban national television. The advertisers have used the television time for selling consumer products that are not of any use to rural poor. Hopefully, small town neighbourhood restaurants, shopkeepers and television dealers will have a new venue for cheap advertisements.

Tamil Nadu Veterinary and Animal Sciences University (TANUVAS) Project

Currently TANUVAS tries to maintain contact with farmers and rural entrepreneurs through 14 University Training and Research Centres (UTRC), three Farmer Training Centres, and two Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVK-Farm Science Centres) -all scattered in rural towns throughout Tamil Nadu. These outreach services are staffed with animal and agricultural specialists, most of whom hold post graduate degrees and professional level rank in TANUVAS. The primary means of contact with farmers at
the centres is through face-to-face contact, either individually or during
the training programmes and workshops.

This project has been experimenting as to how Internet can be used
and combined with other technologies to benefit farmers and rural
communities. Personal discussions with the project leader indicated that
there are positive gains. At present and no evaluation is available to base
future decisions for expansion of the project.

One inference that can be drawn from all these initiatives and
experiments is that communication technology is not culture-neutral. It is
no accident that not a single communication projects for rural development
discussed here can be an unqualified success. This calls for a serious re-
examination and reflection of what we have learnt from the past and
before getting fully committed to social marketing.

The analysis presented so far indicates that “pro-poor” development
issues have been pushed aside in favour of urban upcoming rich after
media privatisation- leading to proliferation of private and public
broadcasting and ICT in favour of consumerism and entertainment. The
current communication policy of the country, which on the face of it is
proactive for rural development, but remains urban “pro-rich” in effect.
Besides, forces of market economy, focused towards profits, have begun
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