

RURAL LEARNING AND THE NEED FOR A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT IN INDIA

HISTORY

The concept of rural libraries is not new in India. The library movement as a people's movement actually started in Andhra Pradesh during the early years of the 20th century. During the pre-independence period, the library movement was village oriented in many parts of India. Libraries were established in many villages in many parts of the country mainly with public funds. Village libraries not only served the educational and recreational needs but also played a key role in spreading the message of the independence movement.

During the days of the freedom movement these libraries also carried the concept of initiating special methods to educate villagers in local history, village traditions, the methods of cultivation, public health and hygiene etc. by exhibiting innovative pictures with the help of magic lanterns. In Andhra Pradesh, library workers used to go into a village and meet the people to discuss these matters. Though many of these activities were localised in some states only, it is apparent that the concept of rural libraries have been in vogue for almost a century now.

CURRENT SITUATION

The current situation of Indian public libraries has been viewed by some as follows: the public library system in India is condemned to remain peripheral to the actual information needs of the masses; that it is in a depressed state, and serves as little more than a warehouse of recreational reading materials, a majority of which are in regional languages. The Government needs to make a concerted effort to reverse this decline especially in light of new technological developments which are already showing the potential to change public libraries in rural India for the better.

The role information plays in socio-economic development can not be over-emphasised. People need different types of information in their day-to-day life and the information seeking behaviour also differs from person to person. In India, 70 percent of the population lives in rural areas. The access the rural population has to information sources is very limited. Libraries, in addition to other sources, form a major source of information. However, the libraries in rural areas, are traditional in nature and not well equipped to effectively cater for the information needs of the rural people. Non-existence of library legislation in various states of India is one of the factors which adversely affected the development of a library system.

Libraries existing presently in rural areas are in a poor state of affairs. Lack of adequate resources, financial and human, is identified as the major reason for the present status of rural libraries. As far as providing a local information base, it is evident that there is an acute need to look for information relating to development schemes, employment opportunities, education, health, etc. Mass media including newspaper, TV, and radio are the major sources of information, followed by relatives/friends, and government officials.

Information is the base for all developmental activities in all countries. In India, however, the diversity of the people and their life styles call for diversification of generation and dissemination of information. The information needs of the Indian society differ according to life styles and socio-economic status of its people. A vast majority of Indians still live in the villages and if the modern concepts of development have to seep into their life, the

information base in the rural environment has to be streamlined to a great extent, so that the right information reaches the right clientele in the most comprehensible format at the right time.

THE NEED

In the changing environment of the society in India, the information needs of the rural population differ mainly due to the following reasons:

- Level of education
- Economic activities
- Social status which includes caste levels
- Family status inclusive of women's status
- The rural policy

Within these factors the main needs in the rural environment are the following:-

- Shelter
 - Food
 - Nutrition and healthcare
 - Safety - law and order
 - Economic activities
 - Education
 - Culture
 - Recreation

THE NEED FOR A RURAL LEARNING CENTRE

The main objectives for setting up such a centre are as follows:-

- To enable the local community to remain fully informed with the latest information on technical development.
- To help local tradesmen and women to keep abreast of necessary information about the latest development in their respective field of trade e.g. agriculture, crop markets, live stock, farm mechanics, crop protection, crop insurance etc.
- To provide a base for education and training for the local village population and to help them to preserve and enrich their well being.
- To process Government generated information in a lucid manner so that the villagers understand the new developments in social, political, economic and other fields of related activities.
- To act as an information base for the general well-being for communities and to play a major role in local campaigns.
- To facilitate activities which may be channelled through the learning centre in collaboration with other communication facilities so that all members of the community have access to and enjoy reading as much as they enjoy the other activities in the set up.

The user groups in the rural arena can be divided into two main categories:-

- The generators and disseminators of information, and
- Recipients of information through various agencies.

The first category comprises the governmental/NGOs and voluntary agencies. This category of users tend to be much more formal in their approach to information seeking. Their information needs are two-fold, i.e., the details of the community they serve and the type of information needed by the said community. The second category comprises the broad spectrum of socio-economic groups in the village. Within this group the most information starved persons in a village are probably those working in the unorganised sector, e.g., pot making, bangle making, seasonal agricultural jobs etc.

Women fall into the category of information seekers and they are a very important group in the community. Students and young adults, children and neo-literates are the other groups who can benefit by the printed media. But the largest clientele in a village still comprises the illiterate and the underprivileged. The highest challenge for the information disseminator is to process information in a way which could be received and understood by this group so that the development activities already in process can be utilised by the majority of the local rural population who are still not able to read and write

LEARNING CENTRE AS THE VITAL LINK IN INFORMATION TRANSFER

The common objective of establishing such a centre is to improve the living condition and quality of life of the local rural populace, All the programmes housed are information oriented and is expected to generate and disseminate information in some form or the other through different media of communication. If the centre encompasses these activities within its spectrum of activities, then this will be a focal point and hub for local villagers and communities. .

We have started developing the first Learning Centre in the district of Sivagangai in Tamil Nadu. Initially housed in a local building in a rural village, the following services will be offered from there;

- Flat screen computers with internet access for local people
- Extensive range of Tamil and English books for local reference
- Play equipment / crèche facility
- Range of empowerment and capacity building projects
- Base of local campaigns

The end point

The success of democracy depends upon the quality of access to the free flow of information. It can be said that the present acute problems of poverty, social disorder, unemployment, ill-health and illiteracy are related to a great extent to the lack of access to information for useful participation in the local economy and general social up-liftment. The need for information may vary under different circumstances but its requirement is essential and universal. This in essence is the fundamental reason why the Foundation has undertook to develop this much needed facility.

“If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate a family”

Ghanaian scholar [Dr. James Emmanuel Kwegyir-Aggrey](#)