

MASS MEDIA IN AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION: BEST, YET TO COME

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Rapid changes in the agricultural scenario of the country are posing multiple challenges to the extension functionaries. Independent farmer of past is dependent on many players today for information, input and marketing his produce. Agriculture too is changing from subsistence and traditional to commercialized. National focus is on glut management from scarcity. Changing context requires changed roles of extension functionaries, which builds enormous pressure on the extension system in terms of capacity building of extension functionaries, development of required infrastructure and strategy and mobilization of funds. Present extension system is already under pressure due to wide ratio between the extension worker and farmer i.e. 1:1000. Considerable time of extension worker is spent for administrative work and travel. Under these circumstance is it possible to serve all the farmers, all the time for all the problems? The answer search for cost effective and efficient support systems, in the present context, points towards all powerful tool called mass media.

Mass media consisting of newspapers, magazines, traditional media, radio, TV and information technology are proved to be most powerful opinion makers in this information age. They cover more people in less time and less cost. This strength of mass media is of great help to extension worker in providing cost effective and efficient service to farmers.

The history of printing technology goes to its discovery by a German scientist, John Guttenburg, in 14th century. It took nearly a century for this technology to reach India, through Portuguese book sellers during 1557 AD. But, took little time to become the powerful media to the extent of influencing the opinion of masses.

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As on December, 1997, the total number of newspapers and periodicals was 41,705 in the country. There were 4719 dailies, 325 triple weeklies, 14,743 weeklies, 11,505 monthlies, 5654 fortnightlies, 3001 quarterlies, 365 annuals and 1393 publications with periodicals like bo-monthlies, half yearly etc. Newspapers are published in as many as 100 languages and dialects. The total circulation of Indian press was 10,57,08,191 copies (India, 1999). Around 465 Agriculture magazines are published in different languages.

Traditional media includes drama, dance, songs, harikathas, yakeshagana etc. Experimentally, it is proved that traditional media play important role in influencing the behaviour of traditional people which includes farmers. Unfortunately, these traditional media is slowly disappearing due to dominance of TV, films, lack of interest and encouragement from people.

Radio is popularly known as 'companion medium' started service in India during 1927. Today 195 radio stations, 9 relay centers, and 300 transmitters are functioning in the country covering 97.3 per cent of population and 90 per cent of geographical area of the country. Farm and home units started in 1966 are broad casting programmes for farmers and farm women on regular basis. At present there are 81 All India Radio stations producing and broadcasting Agricultural and rural programmes (Kaurani, 1995) in which on an average 60-100 minutes are covered on agriculture. Establishment of private radio station in Bangalore and expected similar attempts in future will boost the process of agriculture communication through radio.

Television is emerged as the most powerful medium of the present time. Due to opening of space as a result of liberalization, paved way for number of television channels. But, only few are covering agricultural programmes like Doordharshan, EeTV and Asianet. Hence, the potential to increase, agricultural programmes through TV is immense. International channels of Doordharshan are covering half of the globe, which can play important role in the context of WTO. First telecast was made in India on 1959 and today there are 897 transmitters of varying power covering 87 per cent of

population. Extensive cable network and cinema halls will also serve as effective communicators for big groups.

Computers are the greatest discovery of 20th century. But, when all the fields are surging ahead to use information technology, agricultural extension is yet to device proper ways and means to use IT to benefit farmers. Few attempts in this direction are spark plugs in extension. Information village concept of MS Swaminathan Research Foundation, which is being implemented in few villages around Pondichery, trained rural people in IT, provided information support in all areas useful to villagers including agriculture. Trained villagers themselves provided service. Gnana Dooth concept of Madhya Pradesh being implemented in Dhar district, provided essential government documents and agricultural information including prices of agriculture commodities through information centers situated in villages for a nominal fee. Ikisan.com a web site of Nagarjuna groups provides all information on certain crops in local languages with voice back up, like agriwatch.com, commodityindia.com, rythumitra.com etc. istations established in villages of Karnataka could be effectively utilized for spreading agriculture information. Video conferencing can facilitate paperless and travelless training programmes.

Effective utilization of mass media in agricultural extension - some issues

- 1. Shift from individual to group approach** – At present, it is not possible to attend all the farmers, all the time on all the problems. More ever, it is not needed too. Important issues may be segregated and focussed through proper media strategy. Shifting from individual to group approach is inevitable considering the cost, time and existing extension scarce resources. To ease the growing burden of extension worker, an exclusive agriculture TV channel, more time on radio for agricultural programmes, more space in print media, innovations in information technology utilization in agriculture extension, capacity building of extension personnel, infrastructure and most importantly proper media strategy and liaison with mass media are need of the hour.

2. **Triple role of mass media** – Mass media has triple role of informing, entertaining and educating the masses. But education component is overshadowed by other two. Politics, current affairs and entertainment have lion share in mass media coverage leaving inadequate space and time for agriculture. Unlike entertainment, agriculture does not enjoy the back up of agri-business industry. Hence, it is necessary for the agri-business companies to utilize mass media effectively in promoting their products and sponsoring agriculture programmes. Production of innovative and quality programmes by professionals will help in sustaining the interest of farmers.
3. **Professional approach** – Agriculture journalism is the field where tools and techniques of journalism are applied in the area of agriculture. Journalism is the profession of conducting or writing for the journal / newspapers / magazine / radio / TV and IT in the present context. Very few organizations are training the personnel in agricultural journalism, which is highly inadequate. It is also most important for the mass media to utilize only qualified professional.
4. **Mass media co-ordination committees** – This concept of mass media co-ordination committee aims at bringing concerted action between various stake holders in agricultural extension and mass media to benefit the farmers. It could be group of all stake holders in agricultural extension like farmer, scientist, traders, extension workers and media people. They could meet frequently to decide the areas to be covered for the next one month or a quarter and also should decide who has to contribute article / programme and screen before going to masses. This process will ensure right news, in right form, at right time, by right people through right channel.
5. **Network of correspondents / reporters** - Network of resource persons to contribute to mass media on various issues of agriculture is the most important issue to be tackled first. Either the existing reporters may be trained, or trained professionals may be recruited or a network of progressive farmers, extension workers and scientists have to be maintained.

The concept of self help journalism attempted in Karnataka is worth case to mention in this context. The person who grows, does not writes and the person who writes, does not grows. Hence, the gap between the reader and writer is widening. In order to overcome this gap, some committed farm leaders in Karnataka, motivated farmers to write for the mass media by imparting training in journalism skills. As a result, for Adike patrike, a Kannada Agricultural magazine, writers, editors, circulation agents and majority of the Readers are farmers. As a result, the credibility of magazine is too high in the eyes of farmers. Similarly, Deccan Development Society, an NGO in Andhra Pradesh, trained illiterate women in video films production. As a result, the group made around 500 video films on various issues of rural life including agriculture. The films were used effectively in educating the rural people due to the reason that, the films were made by their own people who understood their problem better and pictured effectively.

6. **Innovation, key for success** – Some newspapers have question – answers column which covers important field problems raised by farmers. Adike patrike is a agricultural magazine entirely run by farmers. Traditional media like Harikatha is being effectively used by an NGO in Maharashtra to spread agricultural massages in villages. Phone in programme tried in Hassan AIR of Karnataka is most popular programme. Any farmers quiz program in the lines of Koun Banega Crorepathi will be popular surely. Information technology in agricultural extension like MSSRF, Chennai, Warna wired villages programme of Maharashtra are not only bring novelty into the system but also efficiency. Thus, wherever new ideas are tried, saw the success. Hence, more the innovation, more will be popularity of mass media which is essential to sustain economically. Creative input is crucial in extension through mass media.
7. **Inadequate coverage** – Majority of the mass media focus on urban based issues leaving little space and time for agricultural information. Chandra Shekara *et al* (1998) revealed that newspapers covered very little information (2.51%) on agriculture. Hence, there is need to

dedicate more space and time for agriculture issues handled by professional agriculture journalists.

8. **Simplicity, can only convey and convince farmers** – Radhakrishna and Karippai (1998) found that the readers could reach only to a minimum level of 67.5 per cent in reading comprehension of agricultural articles, though the potential was 100. It indicates the difficulty level of the articles. Hence, it is necessary to write articles in simple language, so that, farmer understands easily.
9. **Make use, mass media covers more people, in less time and less money** – Existing Mass Media need to be utilized effectively through proper media strategies. Cost and time effectiveness, using few people reaching more people are some of the other benefits which present extension system should derive out of mass media for effective functioning. Expansion of mass media is taking place through information technology. The strategy for popularizing information technology application in agriculture extension could be :
 - Install computers
 - Capacity building of extension personnel
 - Efficient maintenance
 - Content building
 - Making cyber correspondence mandatory
 - Updating the content
 - Charging the services
10. **Motivate extension functionaries to use mass media** – It is necessary to make utilization of mass media in extension, a mandatory act to be performed by extension personnel. Necessary training in this regard may be imparted to them.
11. **Cover demerits** – It is tendency of the writers to focus only on merits of technology, not the limitations. Thus after realizing the field level difficulties, farmers loose faith in source of information. Hence, it is

necessary to provide all information on technology where farmer makes final decision.

Hence, in the present context, mass media can play very important role in agricultural extension. They can reach more people in less time and less cost. Here, farmer gets right information, in right time, through right form, through right channels, by right person. Work load on extension worker reduced by using mass media in extension, scientist get the feedback from fields, traders and farmers can make good profit, mass media will increase its popularity and circulation. Hence, mass media in agricultural extension is a game where all the players are winners. But, most important element is co-ordination among all stakeholders in deciding what time, what information, by whom, how and to whom. Making use of mass media co-ordination committees it is possible to bring desirable concerted action.

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