

AGRICULTURE MEDIA IN INDIA: MARCH TOWARDS PROBLEM SOLVING AND PROFESSIONALISM.

*P. Chandra Shekara**

“One who writes, doesn’t grow and one who grows, doesn’t write”.

This qualitatively sums up, the present status of agriculture media in the country. Inadequate coverage i.e quantitative and lack of depth, i.e qualitative, handling of agriculture media by non-agriculture professionals and most importantly covering for the sake of covering without problem solving approach are the main impediments in strengthening agriculture media in the country.

Scope for Agriculture Media

Majority needs attention: Eighty five percent of the country’s population is depends directly or indirectly on agriculture. This majority contributes only one fourth of the country’s GDP and is decreasing. It is a cause for great concern and must be a priority of the nation to build the capacity of majority citizens whose contribution to national income is decreasing. It is the priority of the country, not agriculture alone.

Widening Extension Gap: Thirty five state agriculture universities, more than one hundred ICAR organisations, around 400 Krishi Vigyan Kendras, a large number of private research and extension organisations, 1,17,000 Public Extension workers and 33,000 scientists are involved in massive technology generation and dissemination process in Agriculture. A re-look at the rate of transfer of technology indicates that not more than 25-40% of the technology is transferred, leaving a wide extension gap. Agriculture media has an important role to play in filling this gap.

* *Faculty and Coordinator, Agriclincs and Agribusiness Centres Cell, National Institute of Agricultural Extension Management (MANAGE), Rajendranagar, Hyderabad – 500030*

Shrinking Public Extension: Inadequate extension manpower, insufficient funds, lack of adequate infrastructure, non-filling of vacant positions and focus on production technologies are a cause for concern while managing a mega extension system as in India. All these deficiencies are observed when the Indian farmers largely depending on Public Extension and absence of any viable alternative system.

Emergence of Mass Media: - Increasing literacy rate, emergence of a large number of TV and Radio channels, rapidly expanding telephone network, internet services, widening of readership base of print media, introduction of innovative, attractive technologies in mass media are creating a very good platform for the emergence of Agriculture Media using these channels.

Cost of Education: Agriculture media provides a most viable and sustainable means of alternative agriculture communication in India's context, as it is possible to reach a large number of people in less time and where cost, without any communication loss through mass media.

Availability of Professionals: Ten thousand unemployed agriculture graduates who are passing out of agriculture universities every year are the most potential agriculture journalists of the country. Further professional orientation to these graduates will provide the required skilled manpower to strengthen agriculture media. Initiatives of National Institute of Agriculture Extension Management (MANAGE) and Centre for Alternative Agriculture Media (CAAM) in launching Agriculture Journalism course are significant steps in this direction.

Emergence of Private Extension: Emergence of Private Extension Service providers in Extension Scenario is most welcome at this point of time. The role played by Agribusiness companies, input dealers, progressive farmers, farmers organisations, non-governmental organisations, private TV and radio channels, newspapers, agriculture magazines, fast expanding internet services, private banks, donor agencies are increasing and can absorb significant time, space and professionals in agriculture media.

Favourable Government Policies: Considering the limitations of Public Extension and ever growing farmer's needs, the government is pro-actively promoting private extension service providers including media and private-

public partnership in Agriculture extension management. Government proposal for green channel, promotion of private radio stations, cyber extension, Agriclincs and Agri-business centres are few significant steps to quote. The national Agriculture Policy clearly provides the space for Agriculture media directly or indirectly.

Farmers are craving for useful information: Due to uncertain monsoon, markets, WTO, quality conscious consumers, scope for value addition and post-harvest technologies, farmers are in urgent need of useful information which is inadequately supplied by existing extension system. Agriculture media has a significant role to play in serving farmers in these directions.

Networking, need of the hour: Considering the globalization of agriculture, it is urgent need of the hour to network all the individuals and organisations working under agriculture research and extension which are functioning almost parallelly to converge their efforts to provide synergetic services to the farmers. Agriculture media is capable of creating such a common platform involving all the stakeholders to think, plan and act together.

Innovations to facilitate this process: It is width or the depth, mass media is growing. Technological and creative innovations are adding teeth to this growth. Satellite communication, digitization, creatively of programmes, narrow stations, wind and play radio, advanced printing technology, audience research and immense interest of business houses to use mass media would certainly hasten the process of reaching the un-reached.

Print Media: The history of printing technology goes to the discovery by a German scientist, John Guttenberg, in 14th century. It took nearly a century for this important technology to reach India, through Portuguese booksellers during 1557 AD. Now, it is one of the most powerful media and greatly influences the opinion of the masses.

As on September 2000 the total number of newspapers and periodicals being published in India was 49,145 as compared to 46,655 during 1999, registering an increase of 5.34 percent. There were 5,364 dailies, 339 tri/bi-weeklies, 17,749 weeklies, 6553 fortnightlies, 13,616 monthlies, 3,425 quarterlies, 431 annuals and 1,668 bi-monthlies / half yearlies etc. Newspapers were published

in as many as 101 languages and dialects during 2000. The largest number of newspapers (19,685) were published in Hindi, followed by English (7,175) and Urdu (2,848). Daily newspapers were brought out in all the principal languages except Kashmir.

National policies are very much favourable for promotion of literacy and in-turn the print media. National Policy on Education (1986) commits at least 6% of national income for education. In the 9th plan, the fund allocation for the purpose is Rs.20,381.64 crores, excluding Rs.4,526.74 crores allocated for midday meal compared to Rs.153 crores for the first five year plan. As a result, the literary percentage as on 2001 census is 65.38% (India,2002).

Increasing literacy, large number of publications, wide readership base and favourable government policies provides good ground for promotion of agriculture media in India.

Lack of professionals and professionalism in agriculture journalism, inadequate quality and quantity of agriculture message covered in print media are major bottlenecks in promotion of Agriculture Media.

Efforts by National Institute of Agricultural Extension Management (MANAGE), Hyderabad in moulding agriculture journalists through post graduate programme in agriculture journalism and the attempt made by the Centre for Alternative Agriculture Media (CAAM) in starting a diploma in agriculture journalism are significant steps in creating professionals in this area.

The present agriculture news seems to be coverage for the sake of coverage with no focus on the needs of the farmers. Formal agriculture articles, which start from introduction and end with conclusion can only satisfy the thirst of writers rather than wiping the tears of farmers. The content, which is very simple in nature may be in the form of question – answer column, frequently asked questions and problem – solution mode would certainly be more effective than formal articles. Photographs, success / failure stories, weather and market intelligence information will certainly draw the attention of farmers. The agriculture media should not focus only on merits of any technologies but highlight demerits too.

Inadequate coverage is the major bottleneck in promotion of agriculture news in print media. Chandra Shekara et al (1998) revealed that newspapers covered very little information (2.51%) on agriculture. Introduction of more professionals and professionalism would overcome this problem to some extent.

Concept of mass media co-ordination committees at the district level brings participatory approach to agriculture journalism. This committee at the district level consisting of media managers, state government agriculture and line department officials, farmers, trades, scientists and extension workers identify priority areas for agriculture media, collects the information, filters and disseminates. This convergence is most required while handling agriculture media in a diverse country like ours.

Self-help journalism tried, tested and proved by adike patrike of Karnataka and women members of Deccan Development Society, Andhra Pradesh are worth mentioning. In adike patrike writers are farmers, the editor is farmer, it is printed by farmers and read by farmers. The content in this magazine is regarded as most credible news by farmers.

A group of women of Deccan Development Society, Andhra Pradesh produced more than 500 films on issues around rural life. They strongly believe that they themselves can understand the problem of others better and portray them more effectively than anybody else.

Regional language agriculture magazines namely Adike patrike in Kannada, Karshaka Shree in Malayalam, Annadata in Telugu, Baliraja in Marathi, Krishik Jagat in Hindi are few to name which are rendering yeoman service to farmers.

Radio : Radio, popularly known as companion medium liberated dissemination process from literacy and transistor revolution provided mobility at the user end. Thus, it became most user-friendly medium at this juncture in the Indian condition.

Even though broadcasting started during 1927 in India, at the time of independence, we had only six radio stations. All India Radio presently has

208 radio stations and 327 transmitters. This include 149 medium wave, 55 short wave and 123 FM transmitters and provide radio coverage to a population of 98.8 per cent spread over 90 percent geographical area of the country.

Further technological innovations like wind and play radios, narrow stations, community radios are instrumental in revitalizing the radio dissemination and localizing the news.

Through Farm and Home programmes, AIR is broadcasting agriculture programmes in particular and rural development programmes in general covering 60-100 minutes per day on an average.

With the emergence of district radios, community radios, narrow stations, wind and play radio sets, the radio revolution is taking a rebirth. Competition with TV channels is only adding value to the quality of the programmes.

However, lack of professionals in farm broadcasting, inadequate network are cause of concern. But, there is definitely scope for introducing innovative programmes through farm broadcasting.

Television : Undoubtedly, television is the most powerful media close to the rural masses. In this background, news on green channel is a boon to agricultural extension.

The first telecast originated from a make shift studio in the Akasvani Bhavan, New Delhi on 15th September, 1959. A transmitter of 500 W power carried the signals within a radius of 25 kms from Delhi. The regular service with a news bulletin was started in 1965. Television went to the second city Mumbai, only in 1972 and by 1975 Kolkata, Chennai, Srinagar, Amritsar and Lucknow also had television stations. At present, Doordarshan has a three-tier primary programme service-national, regional and local.

Currently Doordarshan, the national television of India, is one of the largest terrestrial networks in the world. The flag ship of Doordarshan-DD1-operates through a network of 1,042 terrestrial transmitters of varying powers reaching over 87 percent of the population. There are 65 additional transmitters giving terrestrial support to other channels. Doordarshan uses a large number of transponders on the Indian National satellites (INSAT) and other satellites

to network its terrestrial transmitters and also to extend coverage. Doordarshan has established programme production facilities in 49 cities across the country. The agriculture media is further strengthened by more than 100 private TV channels. Even though present focus of these channels is on other areas, scope is always there to utilize the media for agriculture extension.

Advanced technologies, large number of public and private TV channels, attractive presentations, support of business groups in launching new programmes, availability of trained agriculture professionals, increased interest of rural mass in television, supportive government policies and availability of technologies generated by research organizations waiting for extension provide conducive atmosphere for utilization of television for transfer of technology in agriculture.

But, focus of television channels on non-agriculture areas, support of business groups to non-agriculture programmes, inadequate trained agriculture personnel in production of agriculture programmes, lack of concerted efforts of all stake holders, absence of network to gather information are some of the serious bottlenecks in utilization of television in transfer of technologies in agriculture.

Television and radio can utilize common network of farmers and institutions for production and dissemination of agriculture programmes. Application of creativity exercised by television professionals in production of attractive programmes in non-agriculture areas in Agriculture would certainly attract the attention of farmers. For example, the approach adopted in “Kaun Banega Crorepathi” is applied in making a agriculture quiz programme with the sponsorship of agribusiness companies, it would certainly generate interest among farmers.

Information Technology for reaching the Unreached: Computers are the greatest discovery in the recent times. Internet has made the world into a global village and provides the channel for exchange of information quickly. Unfortunately the usage of information technology as a powerful media in the field of agriculture is yet to take place effectively.

Recent trends indicate that computers and internet are slowly moving towards rural areas from research stations and rich and qualified people. Few attempts are also made in the field of agriculture extension to utilize information

technology. Information village concept of M.S. Swaminathan Foundation which provides integrated information support to rural people including farmers, gnan dooth pilot project of Madhya Pradesh, which provides e-governance facilities to villages, Pandicherry government initiatives to connect all the agriculture markets in the state,

Varna wired village project of Maharashtra which provides cyber extension facilities to farmers, market tele intelligence reports provided to farmers of Andhra Pradesh, one way video and two way audio interactive sessions conducted in Madhya Pradesh with the help of ISRO, Bhoomi project of Karnataka in which entire land records are computerized are few examples to quote.

Private sector too has taken keen interest in using Information Technology for the benefit of farmers. E-choupals of ITC, Rallies kisan kendras of Rallies, Kisan Bharath Kendras of United phosphorus Limited, cyber extension services of EID parry's are few good examples to quote.

Added to this, many agriculture websites are operational in service of farmers www.agriwatch.com, www.commodityindia.com provide market intelligence information to farmers, www.ikison.com provides technologies of production. Likewise, all the prominent agriculture research and training institutes have their own websites.

Internet provides information without loss of time and quality, instantly and distance is not a barrier. Specially with respect to market intelligence, information and instant problem solving information, Internet is the best bet.

To make full use of the ocean of information for the benefit of farmers in our context, we need to focus on overcoming few serious bottlenecks.

The first on the series is, need to computerize all the technologies generated by various research stations. Required infrastructure and skilled manpower is the need of the hour. Secondly, telecom network which is a pre-requisite for extended use of Internet is yet to reach remote parts of the country. However, the satisfying development is that the network is expanding at a fastest pace with government support and private sector involvement. Thirdly,

the information delivery points in village which are needed in very large number for country like ours. It requires investment, infrastructure and trained manpower to man them. Fourth and most importantly, the need of technically trained agriculture professional at this delivery point to interpret the information to solve the problems of the farmer.

Above all, most importantly we need the attitude change to act upon in this direction among all the stake holders i.e. policy makers, administrations, extension and research professionals and farmers.

Video conferencing is introduced on a large scale in recent times which could be used effectively for agricultural extension. The contribution of National Informatic Centres (NIC) and National Institute Agricultural Extension Management (MANAGE) is worth mentioning here, NIC connected all the capitals of the country where as MANAGE connected reputed agriculture research, teaching and extension institutes in the country. Even though it took years to make a beginning, the expansion is taking place in a quick manner.

Video conferencing provides a personal touch to extension which is very much required in Indian farming set up. It provides interaction which leads to problem solving which is very much required in extension. Video conferencing not only connects institutes horizontally but also connects to policy makers and farmers vertically. It saves time, travel cost yet does not dilute the intensity of extension services.

Mobile Video Conferencing facility is one step ahead in taking the services to the fields and doorsteps of farmers. Quality of communication is not diluted due to satellite connectivity.

Traditional media like songs, dances and dramas still have relevance in the Indian context. Governmental and non-governmental efforts in utilizing traditional media in educating rural masses in education and health yielded very good results. The traditional media through Radio, TV, Internet and Video Conferencing would certainly add value to extension services provided and also reach large number of people in less time and less cost.

Summary

Increasing literacy, growing number of television channels, rebirth of Radio, fast growing Internet are sure to facilitate growth of agriculture media in India. But need of the hour is supportive policy at the top, change in the attitude of extension professionals in the middle and establishing mass media co-ordination committees with the participation of all stake holders in the bottom. If it happens, undoubtedly agriculture media is sure to provide cost effective and efficient value added extension services to the farmers.