

Rural Library as Community Information Service Centres at the Villages

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Abstract – The role of knowledge and information as inputs to development has been recognized and accepted beyond debate. In the age of Information Technology (IT) Revolution, information centres could prove to be the propellers of development in IT powered which fruits of development may take shape. Thus they may function as womb of developmental activities. Trickle-down effect may certainly start from these information centres. It is thus quite obvious that rural libraries may play vital role to boost development by disseminating information related to agriculture, marketing, and health and hygiene etc. The rural libraries in West Bengal that are lying almost defunct in many cases may be reshaped as village information centre to meet the need of country men in west Bengal and other parts of India too.

Keywords: Information Service Centre, Rural Library, IT Revolution, Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs), and Trainers' Training Centers (TTC)

I. INTRODUCTION

Today we live in a radically changed world where a profoundly significant paradigm shift has commenced in almost every sphere of life, though quite late in India. Following the invention of computer, the old views faced with a tremendous jolt that necessitated an unprecedented knowledge movement towards a revolution worldwide. While recognizing importance of knowledge in the new millennium it's rightly said "In the 21st century, a new society is emerging where knowledge is primary production resource instead of capital and labour"... Dr. A P J Abdul Kalam (India 2020: A Vision for the New Millennium). There emerged the challenge of mighty tide of information defining an era. India has responded to it, though recently. Unfortunately for the people of Independent India, the rule of the country has pursued an inequitable path of development which has awarded the gulf of economic gap, leaving the staggering millions of indigent masses far behind the march and the nation faces the bare faced dichotomy that needs an urgent redress. The Mahatma recognizes the unique means to

rescue when he says "Our salvation can only come through the farmer. Neither the lawyers, nor the doctors, nor the rich landlords are going to secure it" (Mahatma quoted by Jack, 1956, p. 133). Villages of farmers make India; without empowering those lots we cannot make a progress. They have got lands and labour to till them. They want the innovative knowledge, for old ideas work no longer. Consequently the world has thrown down the gauntlet.

II. LITERATURE SURVEY

It has been noticed throughout the under developed and developing world that rural communities constitutes the larger share of the population whose information and developmental needs are not adequately met and consequently they have not been able to productively participate in the development process and enjoy the benefits progress made in the society in terms of development in science and technology (Kamba, 2009, p. 2). The importance of information is so much that Kamba (2009) opined "In addition to this, utilisation of information in a coherent form can raise aspiration, through arousing people from fatalism, fear of change, desire for a better life and the determination to work for it. This creates an intellectual climate, which stimulates people to take another look at their own current practices and future perspectives. Ideally, information brings about knowledge, and a knowledgeable community is also an informed community. This signifies that no community can develop without knowledge, and a community can only become knowledgeable if they recognize and use information as their tool for development" (Kamba, 2009, p.3). Similarly, importance and relivance of information centres for agricultural and rural development has been studied by any scholars. In India M S Swaminathan Foundation, Chennai has made several such experiments. An examination of the importance of the social and cultural context in analysing the meaning and relevance of information for the individual and society, it explores the interaction between communications

technology, human information processing, the representation of information and the attendant problems of storage and transmission. The social implications of knowledge engineering are also discussed, together with the ethics of information and its relevance to the information professional of the next century (Mcgarry, 1993).

The Rural Information Center (RIC) established by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) were so designed to act as a rural assistance information clearinghouse and they were assigned to act as a nationwide information provider to rural officials and communities. The center's goal is to meet rural information requirements by placing the best and most timely information available in the hands of public officials and community leaders responsible for making informed decisions and implementing community programs (Nakazawa & John, 1993, pp. 62-65).

While in India Kalam visualized that the rural folks equipped with knowledge would "Transforming the nation into a developed country, five areas in combination have been identified based on India's core competence, natural resources and talented manpower for integrated action to double the growth rate of GDP and realize the Vision of Developed India (Kalam,)." In this context the rural libraries acting as rural information service centres may play some key role. The five areas in which information service centre may proved to be useful as identified by Dr. Kalam are:

- Agriculture and food processing;
- Infrastructure with reliable electric power;
- Education and Healthcare;
- Information and Communication Technology and
- Critical technologies and strategic industries.

III. RURAL LIBRARIES AS THEY ARE THERE

The governments, central and state, set up rural libraries along with the literacy and mass education campaign in seventies of the last century. Still we can trace some remnants of those libraries where youths, the cronies attached to the clubs or sometimes, political party office in particular are found playing cards, chessboard or the like, but nothing having to do with reading books. These days our youth welfare ministry or the Panchayat sends gift wraps to those 'meaningful addas' instead of books. Thus the dream by our political leaders and executives 'the reconstruction of villages' has met with its fate. Otherwise, a network of rural

libraries could have played a significant role in reinforcing mass education, and if we kept them functioning we could materialize Kalam's vision of knowledge-building and Mahatma's dream of solution by channeling the tool of so called mass education through the rural library system.

IV. TURNING RURAL LIBRARIES IN TO RURAL INFORMATION SERVICE CENTRE

Today, when the call of the Millennium Goals smiles upon our doors, we must improve upon the ignominious lot of our innocent people huddling across the country. The tusk being of an uphill urgency, we cannot entrust it on a faux bonhomie. We want to scintillate our village people into 'awakening' in the true sense of the term. We have to make the perspective of libraries to deliver instructive knowledge to be inputted into production aiming at an inclusive growth.

Until recently, the discipline dealing with library related affairs was denominated as, usually, library science. Currently the discipline has been newly named as 'library and information science'. The trade obviously doesn't refer merely to the collection of books for the use by students, research scholars or the public. Not only renamed, it has been redefined to reconcile to a changed scenario with a profile widened. In a country like India to develop two parallel subjects, library science and information science is not feasible. No doubt, the common books can play a very important role in furthering mass education and cater to the need of exercising literacy by the newly literate adults. But, to come along meaningfully, we require exploiting the global surge of information and database. It involves some technical difficulties to be overcome by an adequate training; computer application and software techniques remain the hurdle in the way of the training. Besides, the communication in English is well-nigh essential for undergoing the training in the trade. The trainee should be conversant with villagers and comfortable in communicating them and their needs.

- Our countrymen, farmers by and large, know little about their soil and water scientifically, although they have to spend their days tilling the soil and growing crops with water. Still to them the cliché of conservation of soil and water doesn't count. On the other hand, it has become, in the age of globalization, urgent to recognize everything scientifically. For, everything around them has turned frail to sustain their livelihood and they can take on the challenging time only by getting equipped with scientific knowledge and IT. Apart from this, they are the custodian of the resources that provide

for the sustenance of entire humanity. Let them know about things around, else they shall be bound to play havoc.

The rapidity of movement and puzzling complication in generation of information caused strain on the capacity of emerging communication systems. Fortunately, the innovation of computers, the fastest electronic devices, in the fifties of the 20th century and the consequential application techniques in the field of communication technology have been of great use, enabling the users to have the access to the required information at expedience. We, however, have to accept the inconvenient fact that the stakeholders in our country are far from being primarily literate, not to speak of computer literacy. So, in view of working principle of the information communication technology (ICT) based on computers, the modus operandi should be quite different from that in the developed countries where the stakeholders have got computer literacy by and large; in those countries, unlike in India, technology transfer can be done easily. The peasant in a developed country like the USA or Japan being a well-to-do entrepreneur possessing huge landholding and the state providing an adequate infrastructure to facilitate his farm-enterprise, the exploitation of an access to technology can be a smooth business. That, however, in our country involves a very composite and multipronged program. In order that the problem could be put in place Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) has issued the mandate that includes planning, promoting education, research and its lab-to-land transfer. The country's population having gone above the billion mark, the second Green Revolution needs to be initiated towards food security, considering the need for both more provisions and nutrition availability to all throughout the year. The achievement involves reorientation of research and mechanism for greater availability of technology products, know-how services and opens access to information with a view to optimum use of bio-physical and socio-economic resources of millions of the indigent farm holdings in rural India. A network of Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs) and Trainers Training Centers (TTC) functioning under the technology transfer programme of the ICAR were initially imparting farmers training. Now they have extended in-service training to use to knowledge in operating new tools and devices and provide the youth with vocational training in this regard. The project aims at bringing scientists in close contact with the farmers' folk. The defunct rural libraries can be reconstructed into information facilities to be inputted into the system of KVKs.

It can be poised that a junction between the rural libraries and this institution mechanism under the project could be of great utility, and the KVKs can serve the society and rejuvenate our agriculture already fallen sick, in particular. In a country like India where the mainstay of economy remains agriculture which is the pursuit of over 70% of its polity, agriculture needs to be urgently uplifted to the optimum level in terms of modernization in order that the country can take up the challenge of the 21st century. To follow Gandhi's assertion, "India lives in its villages", now it is obvious that we shall empower our farmers i.e. our villages by channeling today's innovation in farming techniques and information that is capable of bringing about a sea change in the pattern of utilizing the basic resources. In this direction, information plays a key role, notwithstanding the fact that our country people have got almost nothing of its kind. In the face of a straitening crunch, we should poise our village libraries to be remolded into the sort of KVKs. Though the rural libraries are meant otherwise, it a pragmatic view, these facilities should no longer be left to the so-called users finding their ways between racks to locate the thing providing them with 'amusement' at the end of the day's ordeals, or to be merely considered as the collections of useless 'documents'. Today we can transfigure those remnants into the rural people's activities getting them in the process of transmission of the potential information from the sources lying in the university and institution labs, provided the merger between the conventional library function and its information service delivery is initiated in right sincerity and zeal.

Today, in the age of rapid growth, it should be mandatory to furnish the special libraries with the documentation cells to provide the required type of information to the particular group or community of users, with a view to accelerating the exploitation of information through retrieval and dissemination and catering to the needs of the country people with regard to farming, hygiene and other community concerns. Many countries, under the aegis of the UNESCO, have already set up such centres to provide information services to the people of different livelihoods/pursuits. The Indian National Scientific Documentation Centre (INSDOC), and National Social Science Documentation Centre (NASDOC) are such organization functioning at national level. The information unit under the Department of International Economic and Social Affairs of the UNO furnishes the Development Information System affording information services to all the members worldwide. Now we have to pull in the advantages offered by the global agencies with a view to meet our people's destiny.

V. HOW TO MAKE THEM OPERATIONAL IN THE FIELD?

Now, the question pertaining to this issue is how to tap these emerging potential resources in our agriculture, when it lies at the bottom of the development process in terms of infrastructure. Given the limit of the fund allocation by the government for extension of service sector, we should go in for reorientation of the existing set ups, e.g. the rural library services, the panchayets, the rural healthcare unit, the agriculture extension, and the like. Through the synergy by these tools already in operation we can make it easy to an effective extent. The panchayet can play the role of the nodal agency in extending the significant information services to the rural multitudes and the rural library services can be the main channel in the mechanism. Indian Council of Agriculture Research (ICAR) has mandated to plan, promote and coordinate research and its application in agriculture in response to the exigency of breaking through the stagnation in the spiraling want of food and nutrition for ever exploding population of the country. The situation demands an urgently coordinated effort assuring a phenomenal change. The re-orientation of extension to an appropriate mechanism for greater channeling of knowledge and information as well as research is a must, which can be done through an integrated programme involving information services centres functioning at village level. We can press the rural libraries into the perspective mechanism to the very consequential task of moving our innocent, yet potential masses towards the mandated millennium goal.

Internationally, there are several such illustrations of successful stories. USDA efforts in this direction, is one of the mention worthies, In view of voicing concerns of rural officials and citizens about the information gap in rural America to congressional members, USDA took special initiative to address the concerns. As a result, in April 1987, Congress proposed in House Resolution 2026 that the USDA establish a National Rural Assistance Information Clearinghouse at the National Agricultural Library (NAL) located in Beltsville, Maryland. The purpose of the clearinghouse would be to:

“provide and distribute information and data to any industry, organization, or Federal, State, or local government entity, on request, about Federal, State, and local programs and services, and programs and services operated by private nonprofit organizations or institutions, under which individuals residing in, or organizations and State and local government entities operating in, a rural area...may be eligible for any kind of assistance, including, but not limited to, job

training, education, health care, economic development assistance, and emotional and financial counseling” (H. R. 2026, 1987, Title II, 202[b]).

The clearinghouse is designed to provide officials and leaders of small rural communities with rapid and direct access to current information on funding programmes. The service would link local officials with the appropriate federal program or funding source and eliminate the often difficult and time-consuming effort required to track down this information.

On May 19, 1987, the month following this congressional proposal, in testimony before the Conservation, Credit, and Rural Development Subcommittee of the House Agricultural Committee, Deputy Secretary Peter Myers announced USDA’s Six-point Rural Regenerative Initiative outlining the department’s new plan to address the problems of rural Main Street.

“An information clearinghouse will be established at the National Agricultural Library with an 800 telephone number. Rural community officials will be able to get up-to-date information about Federal programs available to them in a single phone call and will be referred to the appropriate agency for follow-up” (Mayers, 1987, p. 9).

The Rural Information Center in USA caters to the need of providing products and services as follows:

- a. Provides customized information products to specific inquiries, including assistance in economic revitalization issues; local government planning projects; rural health topics; funding sources; technical assistance programs; research studies; and other related issues;
- b. Processes a broad array of literature and funding source information on such topics as;
 - Successful strategies, models, and case studies of community development projects;
 - Small business attraction, retention, and expansion;
 - Housing programs and services;
 - Tourism promotion and development ;
 - Sustainable communities and energy programs;
 - Community water quality;
 - Health programs and services; and
 - Rural research.

- c. Provides Internet access to rural information, products, and services through the RIC web site and Web 2.0 media.
- d. Refers users to organizations or experts in the field who can provide additional information.
- e. Furnishes bibliographies, Rural Information Center Publication Series titles, and other RIC developed information products.

Staff time is also devoted to developing new Web content and maintaining existing items on the RIC Web site. The RIC Web site provides more than 4,000 resource links covering key rural subjects, and houses 50 online rural publications. RIC also maintains a Rural Calendar area that provides information on current meetings and events covering rural topics (Reynnells, 2010, p. 3).

In India some efforts are being made to establish such clearinghouses in rural areas. In the ICAR document 'Vision 2030' mentions 6th focus of the document as "Improve knowledge management system to act as an efficient clearing-house of technology, knowledge and information in agriculture and allied sectors" (Vision 2030, ICAR, p. 10). Village Information Centres set up by the Tamil Nadu Veterinary and Animal Sciences University in villages of the state. Aimed at providing "...newer, faster, cost effective, easy to understand methods and efficient ways of dissemination of technologies and its related information for the economic benefits for the rural farmers and stakeholders" (TANUVAS), Village Information Centres were established by the University on research mode. Three multimedia Village Information Centres were established in Tamil Nadu at Chitteri, Kuzhumani and Pudhuthamaraipatti villages at Vellore, Tiruchirapalli and Madurai districts, respectively. The District University Centres were established as Hub Centres. A Senior Research Fellow and an Information Specialist were appointed in each Village Information Centre. Day-to-day activities of these staff were to provide basic computer knowledge, needed information, organising, conducting committee meetings, revenue accounting, collecting survey details and micro planning at Village Information Centres. These hub and village centres were equipped with computer, printer and other accessories, telephone, Internet connectivity either by dial up or by WLL technology, audio and video equipments, library with printed books, newspapers, educational audio and video compact

discs containing Animal Husbandry practices and related technologies. Based on the need of these communities, technological information were posted on exclusive web pages and hosted in the university website. The impact of this experiment was highly encouraging. A study carried out by an NGO 'Information for Development found that the aim of VIC were fulfilled in all most all the sectors stating from disease control to production enhancement together with women's empowerment and improvement in general literacy as well as computer literacy.

Gujarat is also ahead of many states in terms of establishing village information services centre though in different name. The Project Village Information System (VIS) which is implemented by Gujarat Informatics Ltd in 100 villages of Patan and Mehsana district in Gujarat are aimed at achieving the followings (http://www.nisg.org/docs/Project_VIS.pdf).

- Enable prompt servicing of citizen requests and reduce time, effort and cost for availing the services;
- Bring the world's knowledge at the doorstep of villagers through the Internet;
- Enable access to various Government applications by providing communication facilities at the booths to link villagers to the local intranets;
- Capacity Building of Village officials and entrepreneurs;
- Awareness and Publicity regarding the benefits of IT and e-Governance;
- Provide information on health care systems;
- Provide Information on educational facilities in the nearby towns and in the State Capital;
- Provide information on various job opportunities which are suitable for the local people;
- Provide information about various government and NGO supported programmes which will enhance their livelihood options, and
- Provide IT enabled education to rural masses.

Our rural libraries in India may be pressed to cater to the need of rural community. The libraries may be equipped with internet connections to provide information related to different aspects of agriculture such as soil, irrigation, fertilizer and pesticides etc. Information related to weather and climatic hazards and forecasting are immense

significance to the farmers. Marketing of surplus production of farmers is another area in which information centres may play a vital role by providing information on current prices of agricultural goods. Similarly, information related to different rural development, anti-poverty and social security schemes may be made available through these centres. Crop calendar as well as calendar of events related to agriculture and rural development may be of great use to the rural folks. The schedule of proposed events that may help agriculturalists and others may serve a great deal.

Facilitate accelerated dissemination of improved technologies, knowledge and information.

- Develop and pilot effective delivery systems and evolve institutional models to link research and development system with farmers and other stakeholders in the value-chain for accelerated adoption, cost-effective post-harvest management, value-addition and processing and efficient marketing through information and communication technology and e-extension;
- Provide state-of-the-art scientific facilities in laboratories and infrastructure;
- Establish institutional mechanisms and governance structure for linking technology generation and dissemination system with back-end service providers; and
- Link research and development system with society by improving science communication. Awareness and sensitization programmes would be developed addressing benefits of science and food safety concerns of the society.

VI. CONCLUSION

As it is obvious from the above discussion that in the age of rapid growth it is almost mandatory to furnish rural libraries to provide the required type of information to a particular group of users with a view to accelerating the exploitation of fruits of information through retrieval and dissemination and catering to the needs of the country people with regard to their farming, health and hygiene and other community concerns. Many countries, under the aegis of the UNESCO, have already set up such centres to provide information services to the people of different livelihoods/pursuits. The Indian must not lag behind in this respect to avail the advantages of development in information science. Now we have to pull in the advantages offered by the global

agencies with a view to meet our people's destiny.

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