

## Community Building through Multi-Media Communication Centres

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We start by asking: What is our preferred future, as far as communication processes and media are concerned?

In answering this we need not embrace the "wired city" model so enthusiastically advocated by Western futurologists whose life experiences and national economies are dominated by corporation-devised continual new technological products. Perhaps the new electronic technology can be used, when it has been adequately mastered and incorporated into our own model of the future. But let us first describe this preferred future more generally

It will have the characteristic of having less hierarchical, more participative, **team work organisations** in government and industry. In the preferred scenario for Rural Development, we project a more equal participation by all sectors in both economic and social life. Rural areas will be innovative, adaptive, productive both in economic and in human terms.

All these have in common the theme - indeed the value or ethic - of greater participation and more equal sharing, particularly by rural people. This can only come about if information / knowhow / problem-solving ability are widely disseminated and shared.

Another part of the preferred Future which should be of special interest in this Seminar is the greater due of relevant technology. This means **modular technology** rather than monolithic technology; people-scale technology rather than technology accessible only to large corporations or government; we see wide availability of telephone service with personalised "beepers" linking upto shared channels. We see a public telex-telegram service providing an alternative to trunk telepho- ne channels. We see mass production and use in rural areas of FM receivers for local development-and-community-service radio devices.

We see mass production of cassette tape recorders for personal and institutional use. We see mass production of Super-8 film projectors for educational and training purposes. We see use of color TV, video-tape and cassette as teaching devices.

We see the proliferation of community owned and operated offset printing plants in rural areas, and of similar competing privately owned units in urban areas providing the base for a wide spectrum of special-interest pamphlets, booklets, magazines and local newspapers. We see the greater metropolitan newspapers

functioning, in competition, with differing styles as daily magazines, with much more broadbased community participation in the pages of the paper and service to special-interest groups, different professions, and differing points of view.

We see an 'ethnic' boom - a resurgence of interest in man-made art and music. We see dance and drama thrive at the community level in villages and urban neighbourhoods, encouraged by community-owned multipurpose "Communication Centres" whereby the difference between the warmth and immediacy of a staged drama or event is well appreciated over the slick and smooth (but cool and distant) filmed version.

We see **life-long learning** as the pattern, supported by the aforementioned **Communications Centres** and libraries.

A creative people is one which has its own problem-solving capability at the local level. This knowhow can be nurtured by creating a Communication matrix centred in each rural region (say, revenue district), so that it has its own resources of (a) printing facilities (b) a district-wise local radio transmitter (FM 5kW) and (c) a rudimentary (public) telephone service. On this technological base, locally relevant informational and instructional materials can be developed and distributed to raise local productivity. On it, local initiative can grow and flourish.

That this can be done with a very small fraction of the budgets presently allocated to "rural development" is demonstrated in detail in the paper "**Regional Radio Service**" prepared for the **NCST Panel of Futurology for the Verghese Committee on all India Radio**, and published in the IPAG Journal in 1975. This paper spells out the economic advantage of using (locally assembled and) mass-produced FM receivers which can be used at home or carried everywhere to receive a local district-wise FM station.

The paper also identifies the advantages for implementing agencies concerned with area development if they can address specific target groups through the Regional Radio Service, refer to local events and places, tie broadcasts to local training and demonstrations, etc. All this can be done for much less money than is proposed to be spent upon the relatively small number of TV sets under the Satellite TV program for mass-media coverage of village India, and at an infinitely lower social cost than the present government's plan for saturation TV coverage.

It should be pointed out here that a decision on the use of FM as a broadcast medium is due anyway since the AM broadcast band channels have become overcrowded in India. The conventional approach has been to introduce FM first in the metropolitan cities of Madras, Delhi, Bombay, etc. as a profit-making venture for AIR to broadcast film music and commercials. On the other hand, integrated thinking about priorities will demonstrate that this technology should be used as part of the System of rural development which is now receiving administrative attention and which requires media support in rural areas in a way they have not received hitherto. When this imbalance has been corrected it would be appropriate next to considering the use of the FM technology also for 'community-building' purposes in urbanised areas - where a separate channel can be created for different purposes such as

adult education, on-the job training courses, daytime programs for women at home, industrial background music, ec.

Below is a brief economic comparison on a social-cost basis of a balanced mix of rural communication services compared with the present plan to invest in a satellite-based broadcast system.

**Typical District Population - 2,000,000**

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <u>Present Plan -</u>                     | <u>Balanced Rural Communication Plan which includes the following elements:</u> |
| <b>10,000 TV sets @Rs. 5,000 each:</b>    | (i) 50,000 radio sets<br>@Rs. 200 ... 10,000,000                                |
| <b>Capital Investment: Rs. 50,000,000</b> | (ii) District Cooperative<br>Offset Print Plans ... 5,000,000                   |
|   | (iii) Multimedia Communication<br>Centre ... 5,000,000                          |
|   | (iv) 200 additional village<br>telephone @Rs. 1000 ... <u>2,000,000</u>         |
|   | <b>Total (i) + (ii) + (iii) + (iv)    22,000,000</b>                            |
|   | -----   |
|   | Annual running deficit <b>2,000,000</b>   |

That are the advantages of the alternative Plan?

- (a) **Local employment:** Hundreds of jobs will be created at skill levels which are feasible in rural areas, including in electronics, the small-unit technology of the future.
- (b) **Local problem-solving and Solution-disseminaton network:** The grid of telephones will enable development problems to be known quickly at the relevant nerve centres. The local radio service enables in immediate and locally relevant response to be made, while an adequate local printing plant permits relevant pictorial and written materials to be quickly generated and distributed on the same subject.
- (c) **Infrastructure for literacy:** Successful literacy programs require locally produced literature which is responsive to the developing needs and consciousness of the neo-literacy.
- (d) **Growth in Knowledge:** Local production of photo-offset technology of pamphlets, booklets and posters as well as periodicals will result in greater penetration of knowhow into the community. Commercial and agro-business news-sheets circulating among the local merchants and farmers will raise alertness and productivity. Regional weekly or monthly 'farm' and cultural magazines will provide vehicles for sharing of experiences, as well as create competition in growth and utilisation of knowledge.

A '**growth centres' strategy** has been identified by all state governments as best for rural areas; the importance of a demographic drift away from metro regions is now widely accepted. How is this to be achieved? Clearly it needs factors that increase the absolute amount of information in rural areas and encourage dynamic information flow and exchange within the rural areas so as to draw out existing knowhow and make it more broadly utilised.

We recommend that, at district level, and related on the one hand to the **District Cooperative Offset Printing Plant** and on the other to the **Rural Radio Service studios** should be a multimedia communication resources Centre. This Centre would acquire or make, store, repair and rent out to schools and local organisations.

- (a) Cassette tape recording of cultural and educational interest
- (b) Super8 movies of cultural and educational interest
- (c) Videotape cartridges (as the technology develops)
- (d) Theatrical costumes and equipment
- (e) Musical instruments

In addition it would:

- (f) Rent out stage space and/or properties to amateur groups
- (g) Provide training in all aspects of practical theatre productions
- (h) Provide a lending-library service in all kinds of educational audio-visual and library material, the last by means of one or perhaps two or three Mobile Libraries which constantly tour the district.

The Centre would not only serve high schools and training centres in the district but also village and block theatrical groups. It may maintain its own resident company of actors and musicians. There is evidence from the **I & B Ministry's own Dance and Drama Division** of the cost-effectiveness of live drama in creating change. Other countries' experience (c.f. UNESCO reports) strongly support this. Rural artists do not require a subsidy, they require exposure, which means more events, and they require a stage. (This latter can be simply arranged by having a simple open-air stage and amphitheatre built for every group of villages of 8-10,000 population). If the villages can obtain on rent the necessary costumery, etc. they can be relied upon to support the system.

Whereas Cinema is Passive/Cool/Addictive, and very expensive, Theatre is Active/Warm/Adaptive and non-addictive. As a community focus it has many advantages over a cinema hall or TV set! The possibilities for interaction between performers and audience, leading to learning and to growth are very important.

The modular technology of tape cassettes, Super-8 film, and possibly videotape, is preferable for educational purposes to the monolithic technology of broadcasts over radio or TV This is because of the opportunities for greater versatility in timing, repeatability, variety of pace, student participation, etc. Inter-institutional activities, however, such as debates, contests, dramatics, etc. are better suited to broadcast media, e.g. the RRS transmitter Effective on-line feedback can be provided through a telephone hook-up from one or two particular classrooms to

the studio and "audience participation" thereupon would exist in the case of a visiting lecturer giving a broadcast to schools

There is today a strong inbuilt trend that favours the spread of the commercial 'Bombay film' cinema metaphor as the base of all entertainment and cultural communication. This can only happen at the cost of India's rich cultural tradition and of many values we take for granted today. One way to prevent this takeover is to revitalise the roots of art, music and drama in rural areas.

Through the facilities provided by Communication Centres. A detailed plan for such Centres would be based on a staff of about 50 and a recurring budget of Rs. 25 lakhs annually.

### **Centre Structure:**

#### I. Management and Coordination

1. Liaison with Communities, with Village and Block voluntary organisations
2. Liaison with FM radio station
3. Liaison with Educational Department and Schools
4. Liaison with Publishing program of Press
5. Liaison with Development Departments of Government

#### II. Library Department

1. Books and Journals and Cassette tapes and Mobile Unit(s)
2. Super-8 Projector(s) and Film Loan Unit
3. VCR tape loan department

#### III. Theatre Department

1. Training Programs, Script Group and Liaison with Community Groups and with Government
2. Resident Company
3. Theatre Equipment, Props and Costumes and Loan department

**Fundamental** to a participative society **is variety**, especially in the character of the information flows. Cyberneticists like Ashby, Beer, von Bertalanffy and others make much of the "Law of Requisite Variety" which says in effect that a system will survive and cope (and not be overcome or run down) only if it has more intrinsic variety than its environment has surprises. This is easy to appreciate in principle, but its practical application requires hard thinking and serious choices. A bureaucratic society by definition does not have sufficient variety because communications are mostly one-way. However it does cope by the simple expedient of **suppressing the surprises in the environment** by various administrative steps, **resulting in a relatively brittle statue-quo balance** which can be typified sociologically as "1960's East European", and which has, in fact, **been tried in India during 1975-77** with the tragic results we all know.

For India, whose entire Freedom struggle is saturated in the values of the participative society - especially the writings and actions of the principal founding father and political thinker, Jawaharlal Nehru - what does this require by way of policy decisions?

Rising prices, especially of printing paper have driven out of business dozens of serious periodicals in the last ten years. Strangely, there has simultaneously been a population explosion of film magazines. An extrapolation of this trend to the year 2000 is alarming, to say the least. Does government newspaper licensing and postage rates favour film magazines which serve no useful social purpose? At present yes, because the few serious publications cannot afford what they can. "Bad Currency drives out Good" is an immutable law of mankind.

It is therefore essential that (1) the scheme of concessional prices for white printing paper be extended from school text-books to technical, educational and cultural publications of all kinds other than 'film and fashion' periodicals (2) Concessional postage rates should be made applicable to all technical, educational and cultural publications (even if they are not monthlies), and to the carriage of other educational or informative materials such as books. (3) Research institutions should be able to post their reports and publications of a non-periodical nature at concessional rates.

**1982 prices of Communciations Services (local currency units)**

|             | Bus fare | Letter | Telephone Call | Taxi Fare |
|-------------|----------|--------|----------------|-----------|
| India       | .50      | .50    | .60            | 3.00      |
| Switzerland | 1.00     | .20    | .20            | 3.00      |
| U.S.A.      | .80      | .15    | .10            | 2.00      |

The table above shows that whereas abroad a letter is one-fifth as expensive as an urban bus ride, in India it costs the same. Abroad a telephone call is a fifteenth to a twentieth the price of a minimum urban taxi fare; in India it is about a fifth. The clearly shows that telephone and postage costs have already risen unreasonably high and are causing uneconomical use of energy in alternate ways of placing people in one-to-one contact. They should be brought down. This is true of urban areas. How much more so in rural areas? In rural areas **special 'intra-rural' postage and telephone rates are justified** at one-half the present urban rates, for all communications within the taluka or district. (This was the case in Travancore, fifty years ago, incidentally.)

The importance of radically expanding services and of lowering telecommunication prices within metropolitan cities is emphasised by the unnecessary crowding of streets (which would not occur if more could be accomplished over the wire) and the need to expedite business decision. Setting up of satellite cities such as 'New Bombay' can be done only by providing these centres with very extensive telecommunications facilities at much lower prices.

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