



Review Article

COMMUNITY RADIO: A PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION TOOL FOR STRENGTHENING AGRICULTURE EXTENSION

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Abstract- Agriculture Extension acts as a linkage between research system and farming communities. It has been making consistent efforts in transfer of technology to the grassroots but owing to its limitations fails to do so. Also looking in context of rural development, agriculture extension and transfer of technology has been a critical concern. Therefore, series of efforts have been made to strengthen the structure and function of agriculture extension setup through innovations. Information and communication technology has emerged as a pertinent tool to support this process. The concept of community radio that emerged on 1995 in India; is such an innovation, which tends to serve the community through localized and need-based radio broadcast. Recently, Participatory communication approach has found a distinguished place for itself not only in agriculture extension but also in sustainable rural development, and community radio with 'participation' as its key characteristics is emerging as a potential tool for strengthening agriculture extension. Community radio has emerged as an efficient medium for community development & technology transfer being location specific, focused and adequately participatory. The paper observes that it seems pertinent and essential to rely on participatory extension approaches for sustainable agricultural and rural development. Moreover, obvious reasons reveal that information and communication technology has to be adequately entertained to support agriculture extension services to reach up to the grassroots. If utilized systematically, this medium will go a long way in fulfilling the requirements of formation of knowledge society among villages of the country.

Keywords- Agriculture extension, Transfer of technology, Rural development, Community radio, Participatory communication, Participation and agricultural information

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Introduction

Transfer of agricultural technology has been a critical concern for rural development in India, and there have been consistent efforts to strengthen the structure and function of agriculture extension setup through various innovations. Information and communication technology has emerged as a pertinent tool to support this process. Later in the year 1995, the concept of community radio was introduced in this regard to serve the community through localized and need-based radio broadcast. Since then about 200 community radio stations are operational across the country. A shift from largely centralized radio as All India Radio to the community-based radio is a result of shift in focus of the approach of communication for development from top down towards participatory communication. Community Radio which work on the principle of "community participation for community empowerment" act as the voice of community. Internal cohesion, shared objectives and close relationship among the community members characterizes the classical concept of community [1]. Nowadays more than 850 million people in developing countries do not have access to a wide range of information and knowledge, the rural poor in particular remain aloof from both traditional media and new information and communication technologies, which could improvise their livelihoods and development pattern [2]. In this case also Community radio, which caters the need of specific communities, act as the source of information for them, bridging the vast gap of information. Various issues shared on community radio relate to the preferences and lifestyle of its community. India, which is majorly an agrarian economy, with most of its population residing in rural areas, has its prime focus on rural and agriculture development. Therefore, looking into agriculture, which is an indispensable part of the lives of rural people and an important source of their livelihood, many

community radios kept their major focus on agriculture apart from other issues. For the purpose of agriculture development, many researches are performed in the premier research institutions of the nation but farmers do not use most of the findings from the research institutions and laboratories. Farmers do not use research information on improved seed varieties, better farming techniques, post-harvest handling and marketing either because the information did not reach them, or because the implementation of the received information is not clear. Agriculture Extension though acts as a linkage between research system and farming communities but owing to its limitations fails to do so.

Participatory Communication for Agriculture and Rural Development

Agriculture is the prime source of livelihood for more than 58% of Indian Population and it is a primary occupation of people living in rural areas. Therefore, Agriculture and Rural Development are interdependent. The multiplicity paradigm of development emphasizes that there are no universal models of development, and that development is an integral, multidimensional, and dialectical process that can differ from society to society [3]. Thus, each society must attempt to define its own strategy for development, as development itself is looked as holistic, as inclusive of social, economic, cultural, and religious elements. Looking into development as an end, communication appears as the means of development. Communication has a crucial role to play in development. The ability of communication to persuade, inform, entertain, influence, mobilize and bring behavioral change has distinguished it as an exclusive tool for development. J.P. Leagans defined Communication as a process by which two or more people exchange ideas, facts, feelings, or expressions in ways that each gains a common understanding of meaning, intent and use of message.

However, Communication is considered as a two-way process but for long only one-way communication was utilized for development purpose with one end as the sender and other end as the receiver of message. The inception of participatory communication can be traced back to 1950s when Paulo Freire campaigned for adult literacy among the poverty-stricken peasants of Northeastern Brazil. Freire's literacy work led to empowerment of landless peasants to formulate their own demands for a better life and to liberate themselves from oppressive conditions. From this experience, emerged the two-way dialogical communication. Unlike the conceptualization of participatory communication by Freirean, the UNESCO approach promotes emancipation within processes of communication. It is often referred to as the participatory media approach of development communication and is theoretically based on Mcquail's (1989) participatory democratic media theory which advocates that all citizens have the right to communicate by allowing access to local forms of media to express their concerns, needs and find common solutions to local problems. Participatory communication has been observed as an approach, which utilizes facilitation as a tool for encouraging people's involvement in decision-making regarding issues influencing their lives. It is also defined as a process capable of catering specific needs and priorities relevant to people and at the same time assisting in their environment [4]. To prevent the communication monopoly, public participation is utmost important. It increases media autonomy and encourages diverse opinions. Thus, communication facilities may serve not only those who are in power & have authority but a society or community as a whole [5]. It is evident that whenever local stakeholders are not involved from the initiation of the intervention, the chances for drawbacks and problems rise manifold. There are multiple examples in which communication could not attain expected changes due to people's initial lack of involvement or limited understanding of issues by various stakeholders [6].

In context of Agricultural development, sharing of agricultural information with farmers is of key importance. Here, emerges the discipline of Agriculture Extension that plays an important role in country's agricultural growth & development by creating linkages between the farming community and research system. In spite of its greater role, in many developing countries extension services have been criticized both for failing to reach the majority of farmers and to communicate successfully with those that fall within the range. Many developing nations had their own experiences of agriculture extension system, which led to a shift towards advisory and facilitation-based approaches [7]. The corresponding shift towards approaches of participatory development [8] signifies that a greater apprehension of community perspectives is required to identify the local resources that can be built on to cater local needs. Likewise, efforts to strengthen agriculture extension have focused on innovations in communication to improve the points of interaction between research, extension and farmer to promote a greater sharing of information. This stresses on to replace the top-down, one-way transfer of technology approach widely perceived to have failed to improve the prospects of most farmers and their rural communities. Therefore, a breakthrough in the field of agriculture is not possible without an effective communication support to disseminate the agricultural information and technological knowledge. The participatory communication approach gives significant attention not to the extrinsic technology and knowledge transfer, but to the furtherance of self-reliance in terms of local knowledge and local capability. Research into farming systems that recognized the knowledge farmers possessed of their own systems and livelihoods were another strand of the development of participatory approaches.

Community Radio as a New Media for Participatory Communication

Earlier All India Radio had its monopoly on the airwaves followed by emergence of various commercial radios. However, Radio had wider acceptability and reach but still the major drawback of radio was its one-way approach, largely centralized content and commercialized purpose. Thereafter, appeared the concept of a new media i.e. 'community radio' with its major focus on community. Community radio aims to cater those particular needs of the members of community, which are neglected by the mainstream media [9]. However, the rapid spread of community radio, as well as the growing popularity and acceptance of digital radio and

interactive radio program formats lead to revival of the participatory potential of radio technology.

'Participation' is often highlighted as a key characteristic, distinguishing community radio from most other kinds of media [10]. The campaign to legalize community radio in India initiated in 1990s, soon after which the Supreme Court declared its judgement in February 1995 that "airwaves are public property". Community radio service is a model of radio broadcasting, which is beyond commercial and public service [11]. Community radio broadcasting attends geographic communities and its interest. Community radio stations are community owned, also driven and operated by communities they serve. Three essential principles of Community radio are Non-profit making, Community ownership and management, and community participation [12].

Amongst various media for communication, Radio has been instrumental for social change. It has been also identified as an avenue for participatory communication and as a tool relevant in both economic and social development [13]. Among different communication tools, radio is one of the oldest communication technologies used to disseminate information, education, and entertainment and it has emerged as a key instrument for empowerment [14]. People in rural areas, often find word of mouth information to be better than the written word [15]. Community radio which is owned, controlled and programmed by communities is seen as the ideal institutions for people's participation. Thus, participation is an important factor for the success of any community radio station [16]. Community participation should be an ongoing and continuous interaction between the radio station and the community. In addition, it helps a community to become self-reliant and feel free from dependency while it acts as an empowering experience [17].

As radio gained popularity for development initiatives and as a participatory communication tool, radio listening clubs and forums started emerging as support initiatives to community radio. Radio listening clubs or radio forums refer to small listening and discussion groups comprising of selected members of communities that meet on regular basis to listen and then discuss the issues raised in a certain development or educational programmes, after which they later take suitable action in catering the issues raised and discussed [18] & [19]. Radio listening club or forum, is an innovation in the concept of community radio assisting in the participatory approach of rural communication that encourage rural communities to involve themselves and take action in the issues represented in the programmes.

Bruce Girard proposed that the "most distinguishing characteristic of community radio, is its commitment to community participation at all levels" [20]. Community participation, for AMARC, refers to ongoing interaction between the community radio station and the community that leads to the outcome in the form of radio emerging as the voice of the community and prioritizing their needs, concerns and interests [21]. Community stations usually take the preferences and opinions of communities into consideration when deciding on formats and content. Moreover, these preferences are determined by the lifestyles and livelihoods of specific communities that community radio stations cater for and the problems they face [22].

Agriculture Extension and Technology Transfer through Participatory Communication Approach of Community Radio

Realizing the need of revamping agriculture extension system and looking into the potential of mass-media especially electronic media for transfer of technology/information, the Central Sector Scheme "Mass Media Support to Agriculture Extension" was launched on 21.1.2004 nationwide. Among various other mass media available to support Agriculture Extension, looking into the context of media that should be participatory, local & dialogical, community radio appears as the most prominent medium. Radio has potential to strengthen agriculture extension owing to its wide reach and ability to communicate agriculture related information in their own accent and language [23]. Radio not only broadcasts the technical information in local language but try to involve with farmers and get an understanding of how farmers' discuss their problems in community thereby providing them with information compatible with their own agro-ecology and culture. Community radio has wide popularity and acceptability among rural communities owing to its capability of coming to the level of farmers

and considering their culture, agro-ecology and indigenous knowledge. Rural farmers are in great need of information, knowledge and skills to improve decision-making and increase productivity [24]. In the developing nations, radio has proved its mettle by being an effective medium to project the information and knowledge related to agriculture [25]. Radio complements the process of agriculture extension by the provision of ways and methods of participatory communication focusing on direct communication with farmers' & listeners in their local language [11]. Radio has been proved as the important tool for the enhancement of agriculture in the rural area. As the farmers receive useful information from radio, gradually they bring change in farming methods applying new technologies [26]. Moreover, it was also observed that higher the dissemination of relevant and need based agricultural messages by community radio stations more was the access and listening preference to these programmes by the community [27].

Radio has been used to pass technical information about agricultural innovations, for instance, Paul Neurath created 'radio farm forums' in India, thereby creating cognitive and psychological climate for development [28]. Accessibility to relevant information enables farmers to make appropriate decisions and hence improve agricultural productivity [29]. Potential of Community radio stations have also been largely harnessed for integrated rural development. Promoting agriculture and sporting, creating health awareness and disaster resilience, ensuring good governance at local level and gender equality, protecting community culture and community empowerment has been taken as the social responsibility of community radio stations. The programmes of community radio seek a very high degree of participation from listeners; moreover, the people of community find the programmes interesting as the voices are either of their own or of their neighbors [30, 31]. It was also found that radio programmes made in local dialect are highly effective at the grass-root level as the mode of communication [32]. Looking into this potential of community radio in extension of agriculture technologies, eleven community radios have been started under various KVKs and State Agricultural Universities of India. These eleven community radios are specifically dedicated to sharing of agricultural information with farmers and are putting constant efforts for extension of technologies produced in these institutions.

Conclusion

Looking into the above perspective it seems pertinent and essential to rely on participatory extension approaches for sustainable agricultural and rural development. Moreover, obvious reasons reveal that information and communication technology has to be adequately entertained to support agriculture extension services to reach up to the grassroots. Community radio has emerged as an efficient medium for community development & technology transfer being location specific, focused and adequately participatory. Researches have revealed that this medium has been effectively utilized for information dissemination, information sharing, bottom to top communication, catering to knowledge empowerment of marginalized segments as well as on gender issues. It is also found that phone-in and phone out facilities of community radio as well as narrow casting support to community radio has significantly brought the element of participation in community radio broadcast, which have paved a way towards knowledge empowerment at grassroot level. If utilized systematically, this medium will go a long way in fulfilling the requirements of formation of knowledge society among villages of the country. As community radio believes that, communication lies at the heart of sustainable development. It is a transversal task for all, not a discipline for communicators only.

Application of review

Useful to understand the vast potential and scope of Information and communication technology particularly community radio in strengthening agriculture extension, which has immense role in agricultural and rural development. Moreover, the review also highlights that for community empowerment and agriculture & rural development participation of beneficiaries and realization of their needs by the change agency is of utmost importance.

Review Category: Agriculture Extension, Agriculture Communication

Abbreviations:

AMARC: World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters

UNESCO: The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

FM: Frequency modulation

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