

# REACHING THE WEAKEST: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO ACCESS AND USE INFORMATION

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## *Introduction*

Nearly 700 million people are estimated to live in about 600,000 villages in India where library & information services are almost absent with a few exceptions. In fact public library services are neglected even in urban India. However, urban population manages to get their information through various channels and sources by their own initiatives and efforts. Even then, information use and access in urban localities is also much below the expected level. Out of 4 people, 3 don't have access to information and knowledge useful to their occupation and solving their day-to-day problems. Nevertheless, we expect wonder to take place to change the fate of masses living in rural locations who remain deprived of many basic facilities including access to information.

India is proud of having '*Right to Information Act*' which provides right to access administrative information including information relating to decisions of public authorities. But what about the right to information/knowledge essential for occupation and living? How far this responsibility is being performed by the welfare state? Is it not unfortunate not to be able to solve problems due to non-availability and non-accessibility of information? Is it not the infringement of right to access such information which is important for survival? Such vital questions need to be addressed. Realizing that information is power and important resource, therefore, priority is to be given to make such information available to the common people particularly residing in rural locations, who have innumerable barrier to get right information. Equal opportunity to access and use information need to be provided both to the urban as well as rural population without any discrimination. Every Govt. or political party has an agenda of uplifting poor people living in remote villages through economic, social and political developments or reforms, but without any mention of role of information in this process. India had adult literacy programme, but public libraries which have been proved an important agency in this endeavour elsewhere have not been included in this campaign. One of the US senators

had once remarked that poor information management is one of the biggest threats to the government treasury, because it leaves government programmes susceptible to waste, fraud and abuse. Deprivation is more when people are not even aware that some information is available which may provide solution to their problems. The main difference between developed and developing countries seem to me that former made the best use of knowledge industry and information resource whereas latter remained deprived of knowing as well as availing such facilities, hence lagged behind in all sorts of progress. Today, in increasingly competitive and knowledge based global economy, only those nations have progressed and would continue further to progress which could use advanced information and communication technologies. The only way to bridge the gap between rural and urban population is to provide more and more opportunities to rural population to avail the use of every bit of information which is important to them and has the power to transform their economy and bring them at par with the urban population. In order to do so, some concrete steps need to be initiated:

### *Review of Present Scenario*

While examining the present scenario of public library services in general and rural / village libraries particularly in India, one may think as to why such services could not improve over the years. Even states with library legislation could not achieve their desired objectives. It seems that the library term does not appeal to those who matter in decision-making. It looks that 'Library' is 'no one's child'. Hence, is uncared child. The very image of library is so poor that the crucial role of libraries was hardly felt. Presumption is that things would move on even academics without the role of libraries. However, new terminologies like *Village Resource Centre*, *Kisan Call Centre*, *Community Information Centre etc.* *Village Education and Information Centre*, *village knowledge Centre* etc may change the age-old image, though performing the extended or the same functions of a rural library. Contributions of NGO towards establishing such information and library-oriented centers have been important. *Rajiv Gandhi Library Project* established in 1993, *Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeeth* and many others such organizations working in different states have been contributing towards village libraries. Still situation is quite discouraging. The attitudes of authorities for the development of library services have been either negative or passive. At the same time, there has not been

any demand and pressure from the beneficiaries also to claim it as a matter of right to get such facilities which implicitly means that we don't need information. Wherever, such facilities exist, utilization is poor. The job of library professionals working in such libraries is more challenging which needs leadership, vision, professional competence and good public relation. Only then right resources would be developed and utilized.

### **Assessing Community Information Need**

Every library has its own environment of functioning and different communities to serve with varied information need. Therefore, resources of one library may not be much useful to the other. Some may need more print media if literacy percentage is high, some may require print as well as non-print media like videos, CD's and DVD's etc. Subject of interest may also vary in spite of the fact that all are doing agricultural farming only, but dealing with different crops. Progressive farmers would be interested in new seeds, new methods of crop management etc. Some communities may be only interested in temperate horticulture and their crops. If occupation of some community is fishing, its information needs would be limited to fishing technology. Therefore, all such libraries would differ in their resources and services, which should be developed and provided. To provide need based information services, library has to be well equipped with suitable resources.

### **Integrated Approach**

If 'library' is presumed to be 'no one's child' it has to be changed into every 'body's child' having common responsibility to bring it up and nourish. *Krishi Vijan Kendras, Schools in the villages, Agricultural Universities, ICAR Research Centres, Department of Agriculture of state governments, Panchayats, Rajaram Mohun Roy Library Foundation* and such other organizations should unite together with a common purpose to serve the rural population with the right information for their overall development. Agencies associated with generation of information need to collaborate with disseminator of information for better results. Every research findings should reach from lab to land or to the place of their utility to the benefit of the consumers. But most of the research findings remain unknown to the beneficiaries. All agricultural Universities in the country have Directorate of Extension Education for the purpose of delivering research findings on agriculture to the farmers in addition to some state govt. agencies. Still information does

not reach maximum of the consumers in remote villages. In view of such situation, there is a need to have integrated approach to such problems so that work and responsibilities are distributed and shared.

### **Community Information Centres (CIC)**

The concept of CIC if implemented effectively may prove revolutionary. However, their scope has to be wider enough than the present one. This scheme became operational for North East in April 2000. Every block and district headquarters of the NE states including J & K are expected to have such centers. The main objective of these CIC is to bridge the IT gap between NE and rest of the country. As such, there are only 9 states being covered under this project. Remaining states don't have such facilities. If knowledge and information resources are combined together, these centers may be more effective. Combining these centers with the village and district libraries is worth consideration in order to deliver desired results by meeting day- to-day information needs of population residing in these blocks and district headquarters.

### **Village Educational and Information Center**

The concept of library is different to different groups of people. To some, it is gloomy not worth visiting place, some don't find their interesting material, some may meet their information needs from other sources than a library and so on ...However, information/resource center may be more attractive as it implicitly covers IT which is a buzz word in the present society. Therefore, let us put old wine a in new bottle and revolutionize the services by combining all resource material in all possible formats giving new terminology replacing the old one '*library*' and focus on getting best results by coordinating top administrative agencies. The envisaged center should develop resources strictly as requirement of the community in printed as well as non-printed forms such as DVD's, audio books CD-ROM, videos etc. so that every member of the community finds his/her much needed information/knowledge. Video productions should be made in the language of the community for effective communication. It should be noted that need driven resources should be developed or collected rather than technology driven.

### **Support of School Libraries**

The nearest school(s) should be made part of such center to collaborate and participate in the proposed project so that beneficiaries of the services are more and recurring costs are

also shared. Other agencies, which have the mandate of providing extension services to the rural people, should also join in this venture.

### **Issues for Discussions**

Issues and challenges of rural population are many; like poverty, illiteracy, lack of communication channels etc. Regarding rural libraries, lack of funds and qualified staff, poor collection, non-supporting attitudes of authorities etc. are some of vital issues. The attempt should be to outreach the weakest people and empower them by providing right information pertaining to their occupation and day-to-day problems. Every member of the community should be helped equally by serving him/her by the required information. Providing equitable access to their most needed information material should be aimed at. Some of the issues which need attention of the participants are listed below:

1. A task force at state level comprising of professionals, academicians, journalists, library authorities etc. may be constituted to prepare a Developmental Plan to outreach population in rural areas of the state.
2. To make an exact assessment of prevailing status of rural/village libraries, survey of all such functional libraries in the state(s) should be done in order to identify information needs of every community of the villages and study other relevant issues.
3. Feasibility study of integrated approach to information generation and dissemination should be mooted so that agencies like Agricultural Universities, Department of Agriculture of the state, ICAR research stations and centers functioning in the state and other such like agencies associated with library and information services join together and extend help to one another in information consolidation and extension of services.
4. Village/rural libraries may be named as Village Educational Resource Centre/ Information Centre which should also provide services to the nearby school(s).
5. Possibilities of merging proposed Village Educational Resource Centre/ Information Centre and Community Information Center (CIC) may be explored.
6. Funding agencies like NEC, State and Central Govt. could be approached for one time grant to establish such centers alongwith the plan of proposed project.