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**Title : Train the Stringer in Rural and Semi-Urban Nativity to Ensure  
Total Communication for Community Development**

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**Theme : Community Development  
Community-Based Learning and Outreach**

**Introduction :**

In this paper, I discuss how effectively social changes can be brought about by 'real news journalism' to ensure scopes for bettering livelihoods of teeming millions with native intelligence in rural and semi-urban areas. My basic reference stems from the Indian society, though the news gathering and dissemination cultures are more or less similar in South Asian and Developing Nations. Broadly, I would like to call it, the 'Real Journalism', uncommercialised.

(Cf. '*Real News Journalism*' was first propounded by Ms., Helen Thomas, the first Wire Reporter at White House, USA. She started during Late John F Kennedy's time, but only dwelt upon gender equity. This paper aims deeper goals -- to establish Total Communication and Methods. Ms., Thomas never saw Indian Dalit women's suffering, BPL youths' pangs and downtrodden's demoralization in this sub-continent. Her thoughts, therefore, do not match with what this paper aims to achieve through the talk 'Real News Journalism'.)

Real Journalism cannot prosper in non-democratic political system of governance. Yet in Democratic South Asian Nations, journalism could elicit only limited social changes for betterment. Seldom information has been a two-way communication process. Instead, it is ordained to be a one-way traffic, where consumers suffer disinformation and lack of care.

The result is visible. National Indian Poet Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore had once cautioned through his famous poem in '*Apamaan*', (cf. *Sanchayita*, an anthology of popular Tagore poems), that should you insult the grassroots people by your ignorance and ill-management, the same insult you'll have to bear one day in life. Today's problems like insurgency, naxalism, social ostracism, casteist backlash, regionalist myopia, nationalist parochialism, religious bigotry, communal fanaticism -- all are the expressions of backlash of the same insult inflicted onto the larger segment of disadvantaged from ancient times.

Post-Independent journalism in India, practiced by big news organisations seldom worked for grassroots empowerment through awareness. If they had done so, the picture of development in Independent India today would have been entirely different.

Awareness about natural rights, social needs, how livelihood can be bettered are all necessities of a country. Information about these at right time, in right direction through credible people, can

evolve changing processes. Indian journalism ignored all this, though it pretends doing so, because it is practiced from an ivory tower of ego and affluence, where disadvantaged masses go missing. (Similar thoughts were expressed by Journalist Mr, P Sainath, Magsassay Award winner, recently. Cf. *Mass Media: But where are the masses?* June 30, 2010 at IGNOU Silver Jubilee Lecture. <http://www.ignou.ac.in>)

We may examine the scopes to better the situations through grassroots community participation for total community outreach.

## **Community-Based Learning and Outreach**

### **Train the Stringers**

Stringers are not regular employees of newspapers, but contribute news against small payments. Most work from small-towns and are not trained. They are the primary school teachers, small-time rural or semi-urban reporter-editor-proofreader groups, unemployed youths, energetic literate housewives, educated newspaper vendors, patriots and old citizens who have concerns for grassroots people in their native regions. Their presence can be expanded to rural settings, through training and developmental initiatives.

Some speak and write coherently, some cannot but are able to find out what is what in a society, some have investigative knack and can tell you who, when, where and why about something that needs to be informed to people for total transparent communication.

### **Why are they necessary**

If you do not gather the real news from the masses, the society does not gain. Newspapers and bulletins would continue to frustrate people. Well-defined need-based skills are absent among most Stringers and Reporters. Most of them live in big towns and not in the grassroots situations, thereby, miss out on the basics about development needs in an assigned situation. They do not participate in the alleviation process of, but makes passing references to, the magnitude of the problems, which are as under :

- Literacy rates: Over 64.8 %. We do not know the intelligent quotient of the rest 32% of the people, who are illiterate.
- Growth of Educational institutions: Over 3.87 % p.a. at primary level, 9.06% at Upper Primary level, 5.29% at Plus 2 level, 6.33% at college level.
- Gross Enrolment in these three categories are slightly above 4.24%, 4.59% and 8.93%, respectively.
- Dropout rates: Over 31.5%.
- India today has massive unskilled workers, only 5% of whom have any formal training in skill-based situations, against 80% and 90% in advanced nations, South Korea and China. (Cf. *Mission Document*, National Skills Mission.)

This magnitude of problems occurred because :

1. Education is either absent or costly for the grassroots people in rural and semi-urban societies.
2. Ill-paid, less informed and/or lackadaisical teachers,
3. Absence of basic infrastructure such as electricity, computers, Internet.
4. Absence of the general culture of news reading or gathering.
5. Half-baked information by town-based reporters, who gather second or third-sourced news from the nativity.

**Stringers are best be used in :**

1. Two related jobs, counseling and gathering information for those who can write reports to news organizations.
2. Counselling women from rural and semi-urban areas about sending their children to community schools and those run free by NGOs.
  1. Counselling about nutrition, hygiene, prevention of diseases.
  2. Teaming up with village elders to stop migration and subsequent destitution of rural poor.
3. Carrying out sustained awareness drives about agronomical resources, rural banking facilities, market-driven activities such as handlooms, handicrafts, agro-processed products, Ayurvedic pursuits, participatory protection work for forests, prevention of smuggling activities on wildlife and endangered bio-species, child and women trafficking.
4. Grooming youths imparting free participatory training.

## **Open Education Resources: Models to Choose, Adopt and Adapt**

Stringers' task will not be arduous, if handled well, though identifying the youth groups -- for news gathering, news writing, news disseminating, news delivery, news reading, awareness campaigns and community radios -- is a challenging job. Stringers should be trained in balanced, democratic atmosphere through skill-based systems of pedagogy.

### **Private-Public Participation (PPP), or Bhagidari, for setting up Community Radios etc.**

Champions of private sector growth should be able to join local governments by engaging Stringer groups and assigning tasks. The provision should be made lawfully orchestrated, making mandatory for both the government and the private sector news organizations to allot funds for Corporate Social Responsibility, or face ban. After 63 years of Independence, and amassing of huge wealth, it should not be problems for the news organizations to return to the nation something which they should have started long back.

There are certain approaches to tackle this challenge.

#### **(i) ODL & Community Radios (CRs)**

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is a strong weapon to address heterogeneous situations. Combined with CRs, the scope of employability will develop interests in the grassroots people. This will also stem migration to big towns for jobs. Several other sops -- such as Internet kiosks in village panchayats, training joints at village clusters and regional centres -- would also train youths to be employable. Stringers have effective roles to play in these efforts for social change.

#### **(ii) Compulsory Mediation**

According to social scientists, migration of marginal workers to large cities in India for livelihood is likely to touch a new high by 2030. (Cf. a recent study by McKinsey Global Institute, McKinsey & Company's economics research arm, *India's Urban Awakening: Building Inclusive Cities, Sustaining Economic Growth*, April, 2010).

Most such people in India are construction workers, daily workers and homeless labourers. They are vulnerable to malnutrition, destitution and beggary due to low-paid and insecure jobs after arriving in big towns. If they catch disease like HIV/AIDS, which is frequent as reported by National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) and Delhi State AIDS Control Society (DSACS), they catch tuberculosis too. (Cf. Annual Reports, NACO, DSACS).

Stringers can mediate among them, counsel about the anti-retroviral therapy (ART) centres and sub-centres with CD4 testing facilities. They can ensure that the infected adhere to guidelines and do not migrate, create pressures on authorities and inform people all over through news

organizations for setting up ARTs and CD4 testing facilities in villages, adequate non-partisan government supports etc. Town-based reporters do not do all this.

Skilled-Stringers may play effective catalysts to correct following situations :

**(a) HIV/ AIDS in India**

- Total infected 2.27 million people
- Most infected age-group : 15 to 49
- Total ARTs in the country: 272
- Prevalence Rate : 0.39% against overall population

The percentage look is unimportant vis-à-vis the national population. The figure is important. The infected unorganized labourers are generally unaware of recuperative steps and medicines from the ART centres. Many are also unwilling to visit the centres fearing social ostracism.

**(b) Rural Electrification :** Rural Electrification is a pathetic joke in the country. It does not exist uniformly, except in railway stations in semi-urban areas. Therefore, the railway stations are good places to carry out projects on Internet Kiosks, ODL delivery, Counselling Sessions, Contact Classroom Programmes, ODL through TVs, CRs.

**(c) Education :** If Basic Education falters in India due to irresponsibility of primary teachers in most of rural and semi-urban India, the Higher Education (HE) has been allowed to become increasingly expensive. The private universities are into amassing wealth through education business.

The result is : Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) to HE is hardly about 12% among college-going age-group 16-21. The government has many good plans in education sector, we await implementation.

**(d) Employment & Income :** India's per capita income is calculated in manipulative criteria, excluding the grassroots people's incomes, to show a pampered concept of development.

**(e) Lack of Funds**

Most development projects in India takes place when MPLAD funds are released. In the past that depended on parties in power. MLAs and MPs in power could develop their constituencies faster than those in opposition in India. This is a silent fact. This situation is slowly improving, as the Government for last five years are concentrating on merit-based proposals for the MPLAD funds.

**(iii) Setting up PPP ventures**

- To harbour urgency for correcting the social ills. Most scribes prioritise infotainments like sensational reporting, films, sex, foods, fashion. Most are after quick big money. Some even aspire to become a political leader so hobnob with powerful. One would not be surprised if some day some new scribes publish reports decrying India's Freedom Movement, because their bosses themselves would not be knowing their roots or the country's history. To them the only place on earth livable would be a country of the affluent West and not India.

PPP efforts can correct this situation by engaging :

- Stringers from Rural Newspapers. These newspapers are generally run by patriots, who know their roots and the history of the country. To them, real journalism is indeed development of all sections of people, without discrimination.
- Encouraging language newspapers/channels, which the colonial British rule had decried as Vernacular Press.

- Empowering small and medium regional newspapers/channels. Large newspapers in big towns should be able to hire these stringers for actual inputs for ensure effective real journalism and gainfully encourage them.
- Developing stringers among the small-town newspaper editors and scribes and CRs as discussed above, who would keep special watch on destruction of greenery, preservation of nature and native cultures, protection of Geographical Indicators for sustained Intellectual Property Rights.
- Setting up Community Radios in every two kilometers to generate employment, awareness, and societal support. The government must actively implement its CR plans. This will protect the villages and semi-urban areas.

## **Innovative Pathways to Knowledge Society**

Let us discuss a few models how can we take the call.

**A. Selection of Target Stringers :** The Training Objectives have to be varied according to situations. Therefore, selection of Stringers for real news inputs will vary in the exercise.

For example, a rural area devastated by floods or change of river courses requires its agricultural workers to inform what and how things happen and what should be done to stop or stem the adversities. Similarly, an area intrigued by land mafia activities, require brave individuals to silently inform the real news for exposition, and carry out silent awareness programmes. Or for an HIV infected ostracised by the family and the village society, the Stringer must not only inform, gather and write the real news input, but will also run awareness campaigns actively to remove social taboos. Most of these humanity will not obviously be able to write reports, but would give inputs to those in the news organisations who can file them.

**B. Training on Information Gathering.** A village or semi-urban locality has its unique aspects of economic and social life. Its youths can be encouraged to learn and describe these to the outside world. Situations like wildlife poaching, smuggling of Geographical Indicators and rare plant species, cultural adulteration etc. are all important soft subjects in which stringers must be trained. They rather should be groomed up as news gatherers of Traditional Knowledge (TK) effectively. They should be given gainful employment to sustain the TK and GI and other locale-specific uniquenesses.

**C. Timeliness.** A very important factor in training Stringers will be Timeliness of an information. As Stringers should ideally live in the nativity, they would be primary sources to tell the world when flood waters is likely to approach, or a river take devastating turns, or when the land mafia start cutting trees in forests or fill water bodies in a rural setting which sustain vegetation and ecology of the area. This would stop losses of jobs, green pastures, agricultural resources.

### **D. Proximity Factors.**

Stringers would be required to get training on proximity factors. Many important nativity stories are missed by big new organizations due to inability to identify the proximity relevance of a news item. That stops total communication.

For example, finding of an HIV case in a village and subsequent ostracisation of the patient is a news, which requires to be used for sensitisation purposes. Possible turning of a river course which would engulf certain landmass effectively stopping a few families' livelihoods are all news. Though at a far-off place, such news items require mention somewhere, maybe, in a snippet form. The feedback should come from the native stringers and not from the town reporters.

**E. Relevance to Individual Groups :** Developing Stringers will eventually develop groups in such areas as health and hygiene, forests and rivers, wildlife and plant species, Geographical Indicators and Traditional Knowledge, small-scale cottage industries and marketing, agricultural inputs and warehouse issues, land mafia and hand-in-glove political power etc. The groups could be gainfully encouraged to work in their assigned areas.

**F. Obvious Factors :** There are certain obvious factors for which Stringer Groups must be trained to work. These factors are Development Community Interests sans Religious Bigotry and Parochialism, Community Backwardness, Community Harmony, Community Prosperity, Local Infrastructure Development, Panchayati Raj Programme Implementation, Rural Primary Education, Higher Education Opportunities in Villages and Semi-Urban Nativities and General Health and Hygiene.

Women and youths in the rural and semi-urban nativity are the best candidates as target Stringers to counsel and ensure feedback to news organizations on these subjects.

For example, general Muslims did not get enough access to Higher Education in India on merit due to their Madarsa education which is over a century-old system without modern merits. Madaras have so far only created dogmatic Muslims and not secular human beings. This system cannot be changed unless women in the Muslim community come forward to correct it. Total communication explaining insights in secular development is likely to be the effective result in such cases.

Similarly, merits of the BPL youths have never been discovered in this country. Many of them are highly intelligent but helpless about their educational empowerment. The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in rural areas take a specific call in these. In towns this area is by and large handled by NGOs. With the size of the BPL population, more efforts are still required.

### **Women Managing PRIs**

Probably, the PRI system should be assigned to women for total management. The rural women are hard-working, manage both their households and fields. They can enforce participation more effectively. In such issues as marriages, agriculture, education, female literacy and higher education, Muslim Girls' education, patriarchal dominance women stringers are likely to contribute more effectively than the males.

### **G. Modalities How to Disseminate :**

Stringers at rural and semi-urban nativity may also be groomed first as whistle-blowers and news-gatherers, then scribblers of salient issues and then writers.

They will be encouraged not only by their innate patriotism, but also ensure effective contributions to news houses -- for example All India Radio, Doordarshan, PTI, UNI, Reuters, Bloomsberg, The Times of India, The Hindu, Indian Express Group, Telegraph Group and large regional news organizations. With assured regularity of some income, effective spadework for development is possible for us to do.

### **H. Adopting Villages**

For initiation, a few villages and semi-urban localities can be adopted as model workplace. Training should be in the language of the native people. There should be absolute understanding among the Trainers and the Learners.

### **Methods of Training**

A policy or plan is good, if well-implemented. Training the Stringers cannot be done in isolation of the society or the education system in place in the country. Small town reporters would prove to be good teachers of Stringers drawn from BPL families, rural and semi-urban nativity.

**A. ODL through Optic Fibre Cable (OFC) Network.** The country has huge stock of optic fibre cables manufactured by Indian Railways and PowerGrid Corporation of India Limited (PGCIL). Much of it is left unused as idle asset. The OFC has wonderful capability to carry education in soft files to the destined location to be flashed onto a monitor as and when required. ODL disseminated through the OFC can reach railway stations of identified locales. The PGCIL OFC can reach a region where the railway stations do not exist, and create classrooms for sport-training.

In this direction, Indira Gandhi National Open University, the world's largest Open University, has already signed up with Indian Railway Ministry with a view to making the OFC available on demand. The university is working in this area.

The Rail Institutes which are already using the OFCs to train its staff members, have offered support to IGNOU through a MoU. The project needs to be speeded up in Indias, as damages have already been caused to rural and semi-urban nativity due to migration, loss of land and lack of jobs or livelihoods.

**B. Spot-Training Classes**

Locality teachers and employed reporters of various news organizers based in small towns can be excellent human capital to train the Stringers in their native places. This will best address the Language or Dialect problems in a country, in India particular. The OFC-mediated classroom teaching, training and academic counseling by local veterans would alternatively create a process hub of a novel knowledge society in each target nativity.

**C. Outreach through Mobile Telephones**

Recent move by IGNOU to use mobile phones to rope in students in the teaching-learning process is a novel augury of a great movement in education. Stringers would be more active with day to day assignments. The mobile phones would end up to be the most dependable alternative to rural electrification to ensure delivery of training and teaching Stringers.

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