

## Power of information in the Indian rural set up – an analysis

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Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been with us for many years and have played an important role in promoting agricultural and rural development during the last few decades. The role of TV and radio in rural education and extension services has been well documented. These technologies will continue to play a critical role in and along with the new information and communication technologies. But what characterizes the new information and communication technology revolutions is the convergence of three technology sectors whose convergence has resulted in a qualitative difference in the way we can generate, disseminate and transfer knowledge and thus contribute to development.

### Methods of Information Dissemination

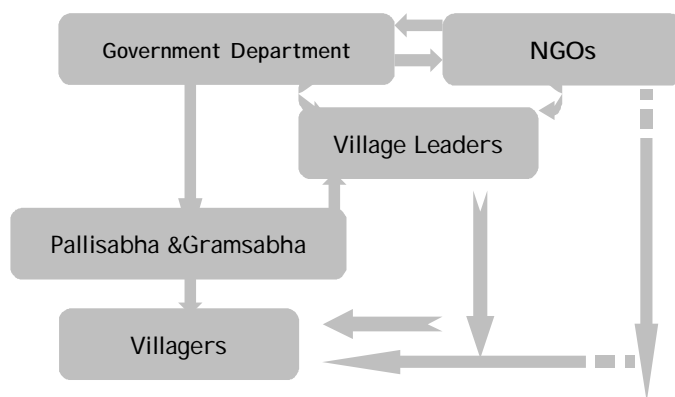
Traditional methods of dissemination of information still persist in the villages and are slow moving and time consuming. Not only that, there is a loss of information due to the involvement of large numbers of intermediaries in the process. Generally government officials and NGOs are the main sources of information for villagers. More than fifty percent of information comes to the villagers by way of the Sarpanch of the Panchayat through the Pallisabha and Gram Sabha. The Pallisabha is conducted every month. Villagers are asked to attend. The Sarpanch reveals information about different government schemes.

Apart from this, the Block Development Officer visits the village and provides information about different activities taken up by the Government and how villagers will be benefited by them. The main problem in this model is that it is time consuming and less information is actually communicated. It has been observed that hardly sixty percent of the villagers attend the Pallisabha. The reason is that generally information about different government schemes (construction of ponds, JRY, Indira Awas Yojana etc.) is declared here. Some villagers feel that they don't need some kinds of information so they do not want to attend the meetings. Also the information given by the government through the Pallisabha is not necessarily required by the villagers at that exact time. So attendance at the meetings is poor. Thereafter there exists interpersonal communication for dissemination of the message

supplied by the government through the Pallisabha. So there is a loss of information on the way or information gets biased somewhere and biased information is circulated.

Sometimes it happens that the village leader (school teacher, unemployed youth, government officials etc.) gets information from both government and non-government organizations and spreads that in the villages. There lies a problem in this model as the village leader does not always want to reveal the full information because he has some social prestige and he expects the villagers to come to him for information. If he reveals all the information at a stretch, then the villager may not come to him once he has received all the information. Moreover, sometimes the villager does not interpret the information correctly and the information gets biased. That biased information is then spread throughout the village.

Sometimes the villager gets information directly from government and non-government organizations but this happens in barely ten percent of cases. Also this process is limited to higher class and higher caste rich villagers. In this model the villagers get reliable information but the transaction cost involved in this model is pretty high.



**INFORMATION AVAILABILITY INDEX**

The information need vs Information availability was analyzed through an index. The observations show that for higher caste people, business men and village middlemen, the information need is high and the availability of information also high. For lower class business men, small and marginal farmers, SHGs and school students, information need is high but information availability is low. For

unemployed village youth, village touts etc. the information need is low but the information availability is very high.

**INFORMATION AVAILABILITY**

	<b>HIGH</b>	<b>LOW</b>
<b>HIGH</b>	Higher Caste business community Higher class business community Village middle man/Traders	Unemployed village youth Village tout Village school master and govt. employees
<b>LOW</b>	Lower caste business community Lower class business community Small and marginal farmers Head of the household (Old and illiterate) SHGs School students	Landless labourers Lower caste women

**INFORMATION NEED**

**Flow of Information through Caste and Class Structure**

All types of information is readily accessed by the higher classes and by higher caste people. Due to their high literacy level and higher influence in the village, these people get information earlier than

the lower classes and lower caste people. These higher classes and higher caste people act as a source of information to the lower classes and lower caste people. In this process of information flow, some information gets biased and some information gets lost. In a rural set up, these

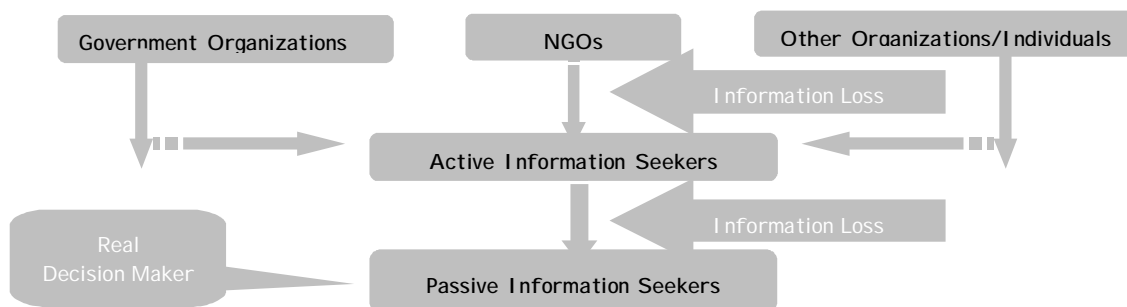
higher caste and higher class people do not always give out one hundred percent information. As most of the households are from the lower class, accurate information and real time information is a major problem. Sometimes it happens that the higher castes and the higher classes hide some information because they do not want others to get full information; they want them to always depend upon the higher classes.

It is therefore essential that real time information should be supplied to the lower castes and the lower classes and it should be supplied at their door steps so that they can take the right decisions at the right time.

### Loss of Information

If we analyze the decision-making process, we will find that the passive information-seeker is always the active decision-maker. Generally the head of the household is the decision maker. The head of the household may be a 50 year old man who

never goes any where to get information from any source but rather waits for the information to come to him. He then makes decision based solely on that information. Generally the active information seekers are the young members of the household who go to different sources to get information. Again the village leader who is the only source of information for these family members, hides some information to maintain his superiority and importance in the village. Village leaders get information from three different sources - government officials, NGOs and private agencies. As many village leaders are illiterate, they sometimes cannot receive full information. Thus in the process of flow of information, information gets lost at every step. By the time information reaches the passive information seeker, most of it has got lost and become biased. So the decision-maker frequently takes wrong decisions on that basis.



### Flow of Information to the SHGs

Generally, members of SHGs (Self-help Groups) are illiterate. They are ignorant about different government schemes. The only sources of information come from the NGO which initiated the group. The major sources of information for them are family members but the information received may not be appropriate or timely. So the only activity carried out by SHGs is savings and credit. Apart from that there is no productive activity.

### Information Dissemination in the Fishing Community

The entire south-eastern part of Ganjam district is dominated by fishing communities. Out of the 5 blocks which were studied, in three blocks, Khallikote, Rangeilunda and Chatrapur, the fishing community is predominant. There are two types of fisherman, one that goes fishing in the Bay of Bengal and the other that goes to Chilika Lake.

When these fishermen go to the deep sea, they stay at sea for 3-4 months. All types of trading are done in the sea on the boat. It is impossible for them return to the village and next day go back to sea as they cover more than 50 kms in order to catch fish. Traders used to go to the fishermen and trade out at sea. The fishermen have now lost their bargaining power. They are ignorant about the processing firms who could come to the deep sea and buy their product. The fishermen also cannot store their fish for long so they sell the fish, prawn, crab etc according to the demands of the local traders.

Another major problem is that these fisherman never get any timely disaster-related information. Generally, during any cyclone, storm or heavy rain, the district office informs the block office, the block office informs the GP office and then family members get the information which they send to the member who has gone fishing. The total

period in this kind of system is very long. By the time the fishermen get the information, the disaster has already occurred.

### **Migration – Root Cause Analysis**

Migration is a serious problem in the tribal blocks of Ganjam district. There are three major reasons for migration: low land holding households, non-availability of daily wage labour and lack of infrastructure facility in the villages. The villagers are ignorant about the production and productivity of the land and how to improve it. They have no information regarding this. Thus reduced production of crops leads to economic backwardness which leads to migration to distant places in search of jobs. Again, when the villagers decide to migrate, they never get information on places where they can get suitable jobs. Because of lack of information, these villagers suffer from many financial and psychological traumas.

### **Lack of Information – the middleman's reign**

In most cases, the villagers have ample resources of land, animals and forest and they are also skilled artisans and blacksmiths with expertise in some special skills such as mat-making. They have the ability to produce more products than the current ones. The only problem is that they are not aware of the markets for their products. Sometimes a lack of market leads to under production of these special products. For that, these illiterate innocent villagers are highly dependent on middlemen. These middlemen purchase their products at extremely low prices for the producers have very little bargaining power and sell them at very high prices in the urban markets.

In order to see how middlemen influence the producers, three cases have been analyzed. Three villages in the study area were highly dependent on middlemen for the marketing of their produce. Tulsipur and Pathera villages are from Khallikote block and Indrakhi village is from Rangeilunda block.

### **Right Information at Wrong Time**

Generally, there are various sources of information for farmers. These include the VAW, the agricultural officer in the block, the Pallisabha and Gramsabha, newspapers, TV and other mass media. However, accessing this information is not straightforward. Most of the time, the farmer can not understand what the agricultural officer is talking about. Psychologically, the farmer feels that the agricultural officer is less reliable. The farmer frequently stays away from the pallisabha and gram sabha, partly because of the social

structure of marginal farmers and partly because of heavy work load.

Even so, the farmer feels that the pallisabha is more reliable than other sources. For the illiterate farmer, TV and newspapers have less value as someone else has to interpret the subject matter. As agriculture is time-specific, most of the time the farmer get the right information at the wrong time because the information gets delayed. The farmer gets the right information about pest attacks and their remedy but the information gets delayed and the whole crop gets infested and damaged by the time he gets the information. The farmer develops a common perception that whatever information he receives is wrong and biased.

### **Conclusion**

Making information available including information other than prices can enhance production in isolated villages in other ways. At the most basic level is the ability to monitor whether expectations might enable farmers to plant and harvest at appropriate times. It might also allow important information to flow in the opposite direction. For example, a greater flow of information could allow farmers to gain trust and build reputations, which could enhance the functioning of credit markets. Information flows and monitoring by creditors could help farmers receive access to loans and other financial resources, which in turn could enable them to implement new production technologies.

In the long run, one of the significant gains in information could come through transformation of production processes. New technologies will be diffused in rural areas. Effective market changes should be initiated where information flows in all directions so that farmers can scan the market.

Middlemen often act as intermediaries between agents i.e., between farmers and consumers or more often between laborers and employers in distant localities. Middlemen may travel from city to village to purchase crops or sell inputs. Anecdotes and speculations about the ways ICT can help the poor are frequently involved in discussions of the role of middlemen. The common perception is that the middlemen gauge both buyer and seller and that ICTs can therefore help farmers by improving their bargaining power or by enabling direct sales and removing the middlemen.

