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Public Communication on Science and Technology: Nepal's Experience

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Background

Nepal is just like any other developing countries where illiteracy (65%) and superstition prevails. Over 90% of its 19 million population live in 4000 villages which are scattered on the craggy labyrinthine of 147,181 sq. km. that is Nepal.

Over 66% of the population here subsist below poverty line. Agriculture is the prime source of livelihood. They are very poorly served by mass media. For them modem farming means excessive use of pesticides and im ported fertilizers.

Problems

Some 500 newspapers are published but none of them contain any information on science and technology. The problem is lack of information and trained science journalists to prepare it. Illiteracy is the main villain when it comes to benefitting from the printed materials.

The most effective media of mass communication in Nepal is radio. The only broadcasting station, Radio Nepal, covers about 90% of the kingdom through its medium and short wave transmission. It broadcasts 30 different programs 14 hours a day. Of the 30 programs 14 deal with science and technology directly or indirectly, but reflect lack of professionalism. So, they don't serve their purpose and some time even confuse the listeners.

Television is relatively young inexperienced, and busy being a channel of government propaganda. It serves to about 7% of the population. Its uninteresting programs divert viewers to Indian transmission which could be easily tuned with the help of a disc antenna.

Beginning of Science Communication

If it was ever necessary disseminate the information on breath taking advances being recorded every second in the field of science and technology it is now. Only science and technology could rescue the suffering Nepalis from their present plight. Science and technology is the answer to change the traditional cultural practices, and taboos. Realizing this Royal Nepal Academy of Science and Technology (RONAST) with the financial assistance of International Development Research Centre (IDRC) o f Canada launched a 26 month long pilot project to popularize science and technology in 1985.

To enhance a scientific culture by training a cadre of science communicators who could spread the news of science to the grass- root level through existing channels of mass communication in Nepal. To cater to both the literate and illiterate masses through channels of communication was the objective of the project. It marked the beginning of an era of public communication on science and technology in Nepal.

The Services/Programs

Besides utilizeing the existing channels of mass communication such as newspapers, radio, television, etc. it also adopted a number of innovative approaches to popularize science and technology.

Publication of a jargon free science features - RONAST Vigyan Lekhmala - on fortnightly basis and its free distribution to all the media organizations, a 15 mts. long science show over radio, a fortnightly science program on TV in an experimental basis. On the Spot Science Quiz, science essay competition, quiz contest over radio, question and answer and attractive awards ranging from inflatable globe, geometry box, general knowledge books, pens and solar calculators motivated people to participate. The project receives over 400 letters every month from its clientele from 74 out of 75 districts of Nepal and even from some parts of India.

Evaluation/Conclusion

An evaluation of the first phase activities shows that about 80% of the information made available were used in one way or another. More and more newspapers are giving column space to science news on a regular basis. Nepal Press Institute and a number of other institutions have started publishing special features, and others are giving priority to radio program. Nepal Television wants to broadcast science programs with the help of Science Popularization Project on a regular basis.

The project is now entering a Ilnd phase again with the aid of IDRC. More innovative approaches such as mobile science exhibitions, use of science kit, close communication campaign, regular science exhibits, and screening of popular video films in the rural areas, and in television are some of the main features which will be added to existing programs. The second phase could even be called a Rural Science and Technology Popularization Program.