

**'PARI' AS AN ALTERNATIVE MEDIUM TO REPRESENT AND DEVELOP RURAL INDIA: AN ANALYSIS OF THE TREATMENT OF RURAL ISSUES BY THE MAINSTREAM AND ALTERNATIVE MEDIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Communication for rural development has been studied by communication experts like Everett Rogers, Jan Servaes, Linje Manyozo and others with an added focus on the participatory nature of communication. While rural development seems to be a process that depends on the development of people from the country side in terms of their state of well being subjected to the efforts of the government and policy makers, it becomes the responsibility of the media to create an awareness of the existing realities in the rural world among the general public on a regular basis. The mainstream media seems to pay little attention to the content from the country side, while PARI, ( People's Archive of Rural India), an alternative digital medium, is found to highlight the untold stories from the rural world with a liberated approach and a democratic way, highlighting the content that has been practically excluded by the former.. Therefore it becomes important to study the media representation of underprivileged masses in India and the inequality persisting in covering the important aspects that afflict the rural front. This study aims to analyze the inequality existing in the Indian media and the alternative role played by PARI in bringing to light, some harsh realities from the rural world that deserve to be told. PARI is found to make an extraordinary contribution towards providing an equal opportunity to the underprivileged masses so that they represent themselves through the digital archive. A qualitative content analysis of selected news stories related to rural development in the mainstream media shall be done along with that of a selected set of stories from the digital archive, PARI to identify the extent to which the mainstream media and alternative media render equality and justice in covering the issues from the rural front.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Communication for rural development is a very important area of discussion that remains relevant to countries like India over a few decades. While speaking about rural development in developing countries, Everet Rogers rightly points out that the distribution of population in these countries is uneven and remarks that the 'majority' of the same 'usually lives in rural areas' (Rogers, 1969). Rural Development is also bound with communication and a proper strategy could take a developing country like India towards attainment of sustainable development goals. Everet Rogers was one of the pioneers who linked communication research with rural development. He says, " One method of bridging the hiatus between rural

populations and governing elites in less developed nations is communication research" (Rogers, 1969). In the Indian context, development is accompanied by an inequality with the urban-rural divide found to be existing over a period of time and Shiv Mehta, a researcher in the area of rural development in India says that the 'growth and development of urban areas has been at the expense of rural areas.' (Mehta, 1984, p.13). Communication for rural development has also been studied by other experts like Jan Servaes, Linje Manyozo, Srinivas Melkotte and others with an added focus on the participatory nature of communication. Jan Servaes remarks that development communication "is the sharing of knowledge aimed at reaching a consensus for action that takes into account the interests, needs and capacities of all concerned. It is thus a social process" (Servaes, 2008, p.15).

India's development largely depends on the well being of the population from its rural

regions, which are spread over a larger area, when compared to the urban regions and therefore deserve more attention than the urban world in terms of development and desirable social change. From the lines quoted above,

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the phrase, 'For all concerned' advocates for democracy and equality in sharing knowledge towards the betterment of society, incorporating all the sections. In reality, the stories from all sections of society do not find place in the mainstream media and the focus mainly rests on the urban world and its issues. This disparity and inequality in terms of communication has been discussed for quite a few decades now with no concrete solution taken. UNESCO as early as 1976, identified this problem at a conference held in Nairobi and Bella Mody expresses her concern over 'inequalities in the direction and content of information and communication flows' in her book titled *International and Developmental Communication*. (Mody, 2003, p.10). While rural development seems to be a process that depends on the development of people from the country side in terms of their state of well being, depending on the welfare measures

and necessary action taken by the government and policy makers, it becomes the responsibility of the media to create an awareness of the existing realities in the rural world among the general public on a regular basis. The mainstream media seems to pay little attention to the content from the country side, while PARI, an alternative digital medium, is found to highlight the untold stories from the rural world with a liberated approach and a democratic way, highlighting the content that has been practically excluded by the mainstream media. Therefore it becomes important to study the media representation of underprivileged masses in India and the inequality persisting in covering the important aspects that afflict the rural front.

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The concept of inequality has been discussed by Amartya Sen in 1992, in his book, *Inequality Re-Examined*. The book speaks of equality in terms of the heterogeneous nature of man and the factors that distinguish the privileged and the underprivileged sections of society.

According to Sen, "Equality is judged by comparing some particular aspect of a person (such as income, or wealth, or happiness, or liberty, or opportunities, or rights, or need-fulfillments) with the same aspect of another person" (Sen, 1992, p. 2). Inequality in terms of treating various social groups based on class, which is congruent to the rural urban divide in India has been discussed by the author who says that the 'classification that has been, traditionally, most widely used has been that of economic class—either defined in terms of Marxian or some similar categories is associated with class struggle' (Sen, 1992, p.117). Another aspect of such inequality is exploitation which can be seen as the 'enjoyment of one person of the fruits of another's labour' (Sen, 1992, p.119), which can be fit into the rural contribution to agriculture and the farmers remaining poor. Yet another social inequality, according to Sen is rooted with communal prejudices which are common in India. He says, "Race or caste can be a factor with far-reaching influence on many aspects of day-to-day living—varying from securing employment and receiving medical attention to being fairly treated by the police" (Sen, 1992, p.122).

In case of rural population, the above said discrimination exists and this aspect has been brought out by P.Sainath in his book 'Everybody Loves a Good Drought'. This book employs humour, sarcasm and persuasive communication to highlight the issues related to the unequal treatment of the government meted out to the rural counterparts. The title 'Everybody Loves a Good Drought' alludes to the governmental bodies that take advantage of the situation in the rural areas, by earning hefty figures by compromising on attending to the needs of the humble and poor population, as a result of which development seems to be an impossible goal in the rural sector.

Farooq Kpreogi reflects on the Marxist media theory and draws a theoretical reflection of Marxist media theory based on Adorno's insights and those provided by Marx and Engels. The article explores the assertion of Marx and Engels with regard to functions of media in a capitalist society. The author further elaborates on the assertion thus:

Control over the production, processing, and dissemination of ideas is disproportionately concentrated in the hands of capitalist owners of the means of production; that their convictions, values, and points of view are privileged in everyday consciousness because the media interminably perpetrate and reinforce

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them; and lastly, that this domination plays a crucial role in maintaining, consolidating, and continually asserting the hegemony of the ruling class over subordinate groups in the society. (Kperogi, 2015, p.63)

Jan Servaes speaks about the communicative concept that characterizes rural development. He refers to the process as a 'double-edged sword' and 'a fifth wheel in the car of development' (Servaes, 2008, p. 67) thereby moving on to the concept of participatory communication and rural journalism.

From the literature reviewed above, it can be seen that there is a research gap that can be tapped by analysing the nature of inequality that prevails in the coverage of rural news in the mainstream media and the alternative media offering a solution to the problem.

### **OBJECTIVE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study aims to analyze the inequality existing in the Indian media and the alternative role played by PARI in bringing to light, some harsh realities from the rural world that deserve to be told. PARI is found to make an extraordinary contribution towards providing an equal opportunity to the underprivileged masses to represent themselves. The main research questions shall be as under:

1. How does the rural-urban divide create a hiatus in representing the real problems of the rural world to the general public?
2. What is the role of PARI in bridging this inequality by representing the problems of the rural world?

The research interest lies in analyzing the content of mainstream media and PARI, pertaining to coverage of news related to rural development and highlighting the differences that prevail due to an unequal treatment of rural themes.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Various communication theories can be found to form the epistemological background for this study and the most important of them is the 'Marxist theory'. Karl Marx 'believed that elites dominated society primarily through their direct control over the means of production, the base (or substructure) of society" (Baran & Davis, n.d., p.139). The Marxist media theory reflects this phenomenon in the media that are occupied with the news which is told in the perspective of the dominant class of the society, thereby creating an inequality.

### **METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

A qualitative content analysis of selected news stories related to rural development in the mainstream media shall be done along with that of a selected set of stories from the digital archive, PARI. A comparative analysis of the two tables shall be made in order to identify the extent to which the mainstream media and alternative media render equality and justice in covering the issues from the rural front.

### **DISCUSSION**

Print newspapers and television news channels can be considered to be two major components that directly come under the classification of mainstream media. In a country like India, the news are variegated and these media increase the appeal for the same for better circulation and increased viewing. Advertisements form a major source of income for these media and the commercial aspect of covering news cannot be ignored. Some of them maintain a fine balance by including news that are educative and informative, representing all sectors of life. Newspapers like 'The Hindu' and 'Times of India' are being operated successfully in the country, striking a balance in terms of commercial and non-commercial factors, adhering to media ethics and paying heed to social obligations and responsibilities.

These papers cannot be criticized for their content as they cater to the subscribers and include various segments like politics, major events of the nation, news from the states, sports news, editorial pages, educational column, literary segment, business section and others. 'The Hindu' contains some special features titled, 'Metro Plus', 'Text and Context' and 'Opinion' pages which contribute to intellectual development. The editorials focus on development communication and disseminate valuable messages to the society by printing evaluative and

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scholarly articles on various issues relating to politics, gender, health and so on. Almost every area of discussion is covered in the editorial column and the forum is opened for recording the readers' views and suggestions. In spite of such relentless efforts towards serving the mass, development communication accounts for less than 10 percentage in these dailies and rural development less than 1 percent. This study takes a few issues between 04.

05.23 and 06.05.23 of the daily, 'The Hindu' to study the general pattern of news before a comparison can be made with two news stories concerning rural development with that of the alternative medium PARI.

After an analysis of the newspapers from 4 th May to 6 th, the following general observations were made. The front page gives the headlines. One page is dedicated to the city and nearly 4 pages for the states. Nearly 4 pages are dedicated to sports, one page to business affairs and one page to cover the world news. and The editorial content and size differ from day to

day. The editorial contributes to development communication and is restricted to one page in a few editions. The feature 'Text and Context' delivers useful and educative content. In all the three issues starting from May 4 to 6th, news on election campaigns are covered with an increased zeal and fervour, owing to the upcoming elections in the state of Karnataka. These news stories do not contribute to development and simply report the events associated with campaigns and constituencies.

### ANALYSIS

A content analysis of news stories related to development and rural development leads to the following observations:

**TABLE 1**  
*Analysis of the pattern of news in 'The Hindu'*

s.no	Date	Appearance of the majority theme in the pages.	Pages dedicated to Development Communication	Pages in which news stories on Rural Development appeared
1	04.05.23	Politics and Polling. News stories appear in 8 out of 16 pages. (50%)	3 pages out of 16, which accounts to 18.75 %	0
2	05.05.23	Politics and Polling. 6 out of 18 pages (30%)	2 pages out of 16, accounting to 12.5 %	1 ( Less than 1 percent approximately)
3	06.05.23	Politics and Polling. 7 out of 18 pages (8.8%)	1 page out of 16 accounting to 6.25 %	1 ( Less than 1 percent approximately)

From the above table it can be understood that the distribution of news related to politics dominate the pages of the daily. In each of the page where news related to politics and elections appeared, the news stories ranged from 1 to 3. The news story which carries a relevance to the rural development that appeared on 5th May contains a picture with just one line of narrative text. The content that bears a direct relation to communication for development dwelt on topics like loss of privacy due to CCTV cameras, artificial intelligence,

sportsmanship, and political debate. The analysis of the stories related to rural development can be analysed as under:

**Table 2**  
*Analysis of News stories pertaining to rural development in 'The Hindu'*

Date	Title	Author	Page	Picture	Tone	Narrative	Nature of Communication
05.0	Summer Boost	Unknown	1	1	Positive and Optimistic	One descriptiveline	

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5. 23				Depicts Cultivation			Persuasive
06.0 5 23.	MGNRE GS workers may get text message confirming their attendance	Shobana K.Nair	12	1 Depicts a protest	Sarcastic	6 paragraphsof text.	Informative

In the above analysis it can be seen that the first news story is just a picture related to the beginning of farming cycle in Araku valley, one of the most promising zones in rural India that has recorded a development. The ginger plantation is depicted in the picture and the tone is a very optimistic one. Further it can be seen that the story appears in the front page of the daily. This pictorial story presents the optimistic side of rural development. The narrative text is practically absent and the explanation is given in one line. The communicative style is persuasive in nature.

In the next news story that appears in page 12, the workers who are enrolled in Mahatma Gandhi national Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme appear to be in protest. The picture depicts the workers in the Jantar Mantar, Delhi, holding placards which contains a message in Hindi that translate into , 'Save Rural India'. The narrative text elaborates on the complications that leave a speculation about the nature of the protest. The tone is very sarcastic and ambiguous as the narrative text describes the technical glitches in saving the attendance of the workers and it is difficult to ascertain whether the workers are genuine or not. The narrative style is informative and throws light on the issue in an evaluative way.

Thus it can be seen from the two analyses above that the mainstream media like 'The Hindu' tends to ignore the real everyday problems that haunt the rural world and the news coverage touches upon a few elements that are conspicuous and shallow.

The digital archive PARI, on the other hand, aims at bringing the rural stories to the world in a dedicated manner and acts as a perfect alternative solution for rural representation, which is not accomplished in the mainstream media. Two stories from PARI have been chosen in the same theme as the stories that appeared in 'The Hindu'. The analysis is as under:

**Table 3**  
*Analysis of News stories pertaining to rural development in PARI*

Date	Title	Author	category	Pictures	Tone	Narrative	Nature of Communication
5.07.23	In Anakapalli: Mango Season is Not so Sweet	Amrutha Kosuru	Farming	10	Pathetic	Long Elaborative text describing the farming crisis	Extremely Persuasive
5.07.23	Crafting Diwali Diyas for Eight Decades in Vizag	Amrutha Kosuru	Labour	11	Positive and sarcastic	Long narrative Describing the life of the potter	Extremely Persuasive

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From the above analysis it can be seen that the coverage of rural developmental stories in PARI is far more effective. In comparison with the optimistic presentation of the cultivation in Araku valley, the story from Anakapalli in PARI spells the real problems that haunt the farmers that pose a great threat to their economic sustainability. Ten pictures have been used in the story that highlight the real problems that are discussed in the story. The tone is pathetic in nature and the readers could sympathize with the subjects discussed in the story. It is also an extremely persuasive kind of communication. The next story speaks about a potter who is 92 years old and works for long time on the potters' wheel during the season of Diwali. Even though the story evokes positive feelings about the self sufficiency of the subject in spite of his old age, it also elicits a sympathetic gesture from the readers. Along with an optimistic tone, a sarcastic remark regarding the subject's plight of working at a very old age surfaces. The workers in protest from the story from 'The Hindu' revolt against the discrepancy in wages while the 92year old man stands as one of the best models of entrepreneurship. The disparities that have been analysed between the mainstream and the alternative media raise a question about the equal treatment of the different groups of people existing in India.

### **FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION**

Communication is considered to be a very important aspect in the concept of rural development. Media that are responsible for representation of facts from the urban and rural worlds, seem to falter in their responsibility of providing an equal stand in presenting the news to the masses. True to the Marxist observation of hegemony, the choice of subjects chosen for news coverage in the mainstream media reflects an ignorance of social responsibilities while representing the rural and urban worlds in a proper manner. As a result, the real problems that haunt the rural world do not get an expression in the mainstream media. PARI, on the other hand seems to bridge the hiatus created in the society and addresses the inequality prevailing in the coverage of news from the rural world. The qualitative content analysis of news stories from 'The Hindu' and the archive 'PARI' reveal the unequal treatment of news from the privileged and underprivileged communities by the

mainstream media set in contrast with the digital archive that serves as an alternative medium. This hiatus and inequality can be addressed if the mainstream media keep innovating, with rural development as one of the agendas. Whether or not, the communicative strategies used by the mainstream and alternative media cause a desirable change among the masses, is beyond the scope of this study.

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