



Self-help journalism

People who have experience aren't writing. Those who write don't have the practical experience of farming. This in a nutshell is the tragedy of farm journalism in India.

Shree Padre

We have hundreds of farm journals for namesake. All these are published by government research organisations or agricultural departments. The writers are scientists or "subject matter specialists". They write what they think is useful to farmers. Seldom do they bother to identify the information needs of the farmers. Nor do they take pains to meet farmers and document their experiences in black and white. Most of the articles that appear in such journals are run of the mill, library-borne and of no purpose for the community for which it is purportedly intended.

Not based on needs

While writing about a crop, the writer will explain the suitable temperature range, soil condition, diseases, pesticides to be sprayed etc., but never about the actual marketing prospects or the opinions of the farmers who have already grown it. Journalism requires the writer to have commitment towards his readers. Even in the so called "popular" farm magazines,

which are meant for farm readers, you don't see any concern towards the farmers. They are far from being need based.

Ban technical jargon!

The scientists and experts find it very difficult to write without their usual technical jargons. As one popular feature writer has put it: "from a layman's point of view, instead of saying that a particular insect's egg is 0.25 mm, it is better to say that it is of the size of the full stop put at the end of this sentence." The scientist appears to be helpless to find out easy alternatives and simple ways of expression for his technical jargon. Difficult, it may seem, but the only alternative left to the farmer is to get educated as to what these usual jargons like "ppm", "in situ", "clone", "genepool", "sterile", "biodiversity" etc. mean.

Lack of experience

The lack of farming experiences, especially understanding pains and stage by stage challenges involved in raising a crop or maintaining a dairy farm results in exaggerated write-ups like "cocoa - the brown gold", or in statements like "by spending 3 rupees for the mushroom spawn (seeds)

you can get a return of 75 rupees". Many of our farm writings project half-truths. The farmer who is attracted by the rosy presentation of half-truth, is left to explore the other half which is more than often bitter and frustrating.

This sort of unbalanced, uncommitted write-ups, written with an eye on academic credit have lost credibility among farmers. That's why even if journals which cost 8 or 10 rupees by way of production cost are offered at an incredibly low (subsidised) price of 1 rupee, no government farm magazine has a circulation worth mentioning.

Communication gap

There is a big communication gap between farmers amongst themselves, between the farmer and the outer world and between the farmer and the government. If there is a revolutionary development on the other side of ones fence, say growing cabbages without chemicals, the farmer on this side doesn't even get to know it. When the price of an agricultural product reaches very high, say tomato price jumping to Rs. 25, everybody in the society around thinks that the tomato farmer has struck the goldmine. Nobody knows

exactly how much he gets and what were his problems to grow it, why the price has jumped. When there is drought in a region, the government gives fertilisers in subsidy or constructs new roads to "generate employment", without caring to know where to apply the ointment to heal the wound. The media don't gather the farmers public opinion that they need water conservation projects to solve the crisis, not new roads. The moot question is: who is to bell the cat? Naturally it has to be the farmer, if he cares for his allround sustainable development.

A new magazine

If farm journalism is to be need based and useful, the best way is this: farmers should start expressing through their pens. Only those who wear shoes know where it pinches. We have made a humble attempt to translate this objective into implementation. The idea was this: to encourage and train farmers to write, drawing from their field experiences. No theoretical writings. The yardstick for acceptance of an article is that how useful or informative - in that order - it is to the farmer and not who has written it.

Our association, the All India Arecanut Growers Association, a 50 year old apolitical farmers' welfare organisation started publishing "Adike Pathrike" in vernacular Kannada language. Since the start many general magazines and dailies reproduce our stories with due credit. "Adike Pathrike" is for sustainable agriculture. We have had stories on biocontrol, vermicomposting and a series on successful non-chemical farmers, to name but a few. The publication is not a mouth-piece of the association. All the editorial board members, including me, the honorary editor, are practising farmers. From writing articles and editing to publishing and even selling (we have nearly 200 news agents spread over 6-7 districts) farmers play the key role. An experiment which probably has no parallel in our country.

Getting farmers to write

From the beginning, we believed in the wisdom and knowledge of our farmers. There is no dearth of it. We gave this offer: "if you have something worthwhile about farming that you want to communicate with your fellow farmer, feel free to write it. Don't bother about the style. If there is content, we will try our best to rewrite and present it, with your co-operation. We wanted to see every new development or new crop or technology or plant varieties, devices, machine etc. from farmer viewpoint. So when embryo transfer in cattle started making news, we had a friend veterinarian with farming background to describe and analyse the technology and give an inkling of how useful it is from an ordinary farmer's viewpoint.

We call this kind of journalism "self-help journalism". We had a hope that once you

create a platform for farmers to write, articles would flow like water that flows on gravity. But that was not to be. We had to dig borewells each time to get water. After decades of being taken for granted, farmers are happy to allow others to talk and write on behalf of them. It is like a patient who has fractured one leg. He needs a lot of physiotherapy to teach his legs walking before he can resume walking on his own.

Within a few months of starting the magazine, we realised the futility of pinning our hopes on known staff journalists, most of them based in cities or towns, who lack a clear understanding of farming profession and its problems. Even some in rural areas couldn't offer new content. Instead of relying on such sources, we thought it better to give some interested farmers a training of journalism.

A course for writing

So far, we have conducted 3 farm and rural journalism workshops in 3 districts, in calm village centres. A lot of pre-planning has gone into this. First, we called for applications, a sample write-up on anything farmers feel strongly about. Based on the answers to our questionnaire and their write-up, the trainees are carefully selected.

Local farmers participate in a series of preparations, meetings held at village centres. This convinces them that this is something very essential for them. They are requested to host one or two trainees during the workshop. This arrangement facilitates a dialogue and exchange of farming



The journalism workshops are held in calm village centres. Local farmers help in the preparations and are host to one or two trainees. In this way, there is a dialogue between farmer and trainee and the trainee gets off-class training too.

knowledge between the host and trainee. In the 4-day workshops, the trainee gets off-class training too. Apart from dialogue type lecture sessions on "identification of subjects", "how to write", "how to improve your writings", "development journalism", "farm journalism and the environment" etc, there used to be three writing assignments, followed by evaluation and suggestions for improvement. The last assignment is one where the trainees are taken to a nearby farm. Using the knowledge and tips they received in the last three days, they have to interview and collect information pertaining to one selected subject seen in the farm. During night the trainees write their feature. Next day, it is evaluated. During the evaluation, one by one, some trainees are asked to read their article aloud. Positive criticism and specific suggestions are invited from fellow trainees. In conclusion the panel of faculties would give their advice. If 10 trainees read their work, all the 25 will get at least 40 good tips.

The effects

Out of 76 trainees divided over three workshops, at least a dozen write often, not only to our magazine, but to others as well. The subjects they have selected are such that it would otherwise unnoticed by the media. After the workshop, a trainee could identify a subject in the "lateral pipe" that was fast replacing the troublesome "emitters" in drip irrigation. The success story of a farmer who has shown that instead of a pair of bullocks you can very well plough almost similarly by a single bullock was another local trainee's scoop. In our last 6 years of experience, there were hand-counts of such sweet successes.

Farmers are like an old box of locked up wealth of information. Unfortunately, we ourselves don't know that we have so much knowledge. Others have made us to believe that we have to only "hear" and "read" and that we aren't capable of "talking" and "writing". If we, farmers, are able to come out of this mental block, with the active co-operation of concerned scientists and an in-depth study of the world around us, we ourselves can fulfil our information needs to a good extent.

All said and done, there is still a weak point in our undertaking. Though there is good appreciation from subscribers and readers, this is not reflected in our balance sheet. Writing and sharing responsibility by the beneficiaries is not upto the mark, making the magazine dependent on the sacrifice of some.

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