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Agricultural communication: A theoretical perspective

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Abstract

Modern agriculture has become much more demanding and diversified than ever before. Changing environmental and societal needs have increased the challenges for the farmers. To meet the challenges of modern agriculture, farmers seek more information from varied sources. Agriculture researchers always remain on their toes to find innovative ways so that agricultural production can be increased in a sustainable manner. This research paper gives a glimpse of various theoretical perspectives of agricultural research and development. An effort has been done to explore various communication theories in relation to agricultural needs. Three major communication theories namely 'Two Step Flow theory, "Multi Step Flow Theory" and Diffusion of Innovation Theory has been discussed in context of agricultural development to find trailblazing ways to interact with farmers and to make agriculture a profitable venture for farmers.

Keywords: Agriculture, development, communication, theories, framers

Introduction

Post World War II, till the end of the 1960s many communication theorists started realizing the importance of communication in the process of development. Wilbur Schramm and Daniel Lerner were some of the earliest scholars who talked about the usage of communication to bring developing countries out of the plunge of poverty, illiteracy, and hunger. They said that communication can transform the ways of life of people by introducing them to modernity. Learner (1958) emphasized the importance of communication in changing an individual's behavior which ultimately leads to the change in the behavior of the entire society. Learner was of the view that to control underdevelopment, efforts should be done to substitute traditional ways of thinking with the modern ways with the help of mass media. He argued that no modern society can function efficiently without a developed system of mass media. Mass media exposes the masses to an imaginary universe of modern ideas, and this exposure leads to the origin of desire, when many people experience the same desire it leads to modernization and development. Wilbur Schramm the father of modern communication, in his various works on communication emphasized the role of communication in the development process. Schramm said that communication plays a vital role in the socio, economic and political development of a particular nation. Considering media as a 'Magic Multiplier', he added that the increase in the flow of information can plant the seeds of change. He considered media as an agent, which facilitates the process of development by informing and persuading people. (cited in Adams, 1965) ^[1]. Everett Rogers says that communication increases the level of mass media exposure amongst the nation's citizens and creates a favorable climate for development, and also supports a particular program or notion. (Chaudary, 2011).

Development Communication is a time-specific, value-oriented and advocative concept. It gives much emphasis on value development alongside the material development of the society. Bofo (1985) defined development communication as the planned, conscious and systematized use of communication strategies that are used to bridge informational and attitudinal gaps amongst different sections of the society. (Cited in Prasad, 2009) ^[15]. United Nations in many of its reports and charter gave significant importance to communication in the process of development. UNDP in its human development report (1993) said that the full potential of development programs could be realized only with the help of people's participation and proper sharing of knowledge and technology with the target groups. This report considered communication as an effective tools to motivate people towards the achievement of developmental goals.

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Communication has taken a central stage in the planning and implementation of all the developmental programs. It helps the planners to identify the problems in a better way by communicating with the people and then designing the development program accordingly. Modern development planners do take into account the needs, attitudes and traditional knowledge of the local people to make the project beneficiaries principal actors in the development programs. If any development program considers its masses as passive recipients, that program generally fails to reach its goals. These days' multi-level communication strategies are being used by the planners and implementers. Communication is not confined to question-answer sessions only. Many innovative communication strategies are being employed like meaningful discussions by the trained workers, use of audio-visual tools and use of mobile technology to yield the maximum results out of the development programs.

While formally explaining the concept of the use of communication for development, the United Nations stressed the requirement to support two-way communication systems. According to United Nations, Communication systems encourage discourse between the two parties, allow the target communities to speak out their minds, express their aspirations and enable them to participate in the decision-making process of the development of their area (UNDP, 2009) ^[21]. In 2007 World Congress on Communication for Development defined communication for Development as a societal process that is based on dialogue with the help of various tools and methods. It is a process that enables the people from minorities and disadvantaged sections of the society to participate in the decision-making which affects their lives. Communication for development is all about seeking change through listening, building trust, sharing knowledge, and learning for sustainable change. The core value of this phenomenon lies in the human rights-based approach to development, where equal opportunities are given to underprivileged sections of the society so that they could speak-up about their rights and developmental needs. It is an effort to include them in the mainstream development process with the help of communication and media. In many third-world countries, this approach is being used to eradicate various social problems like poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, women's rights, children's rights, and enormous other social issues. Communication for development approach has made many social development programs successful in various third world countries thus provides a big hope for a better, equitable and sustainable world in the coming years.

Agricultural communication

Agricultural communication is the process of sharing agriculture-related information amongst the farmers and amongst the people who are directly or indirectly connected with farming and agriculture. The only purpose of agricultural communication is to provide farmers with useful information which could help them in fetching maximum profits. Van den Ban (1996) ^[5] explains that agriculture communication helps the farmers in decision-making process so that they can make informed decisions and can realize their goals.

Agricultural problems cannot be generalized. They are both farm-specific as well as crop-specific. Every agricultural problem requires individual attention which can only be

possible with the help of varied communication strategies. Agriculture communication attempts to persuade farmers towards the adoption of new technology to get maximum farm outputs and profits. It is essential to associate communication with the skill-building program, as only skillful farmers can fetch maximum profits out of modern technology. Agriculture communication revolves around the impetus of bringing positive changes in the attitude and behavior of farmers towards the agricultural process. In the twenty-first century, agriculture is not confined to the local market. Along with other products, agriculture has become market-oriented where farmers have to meet the needs of global consumers. Global agricultural needs can only be fulfilled through aware and skillful farmers who are ready to accept and employ modern technology in their fields. Due to global market forces and demands, farmers know days don't just produce to fulfill the local needs; instead, they are under constant pressure to produce more quantity than the required and also of better quality. All these requirements can be fulfilled only by introducing new technology amongst the farmers.

Communication serves twofold responsibilities in agriculture. At the first level, it provides information to the farmers and at the second level, it equips the farmers with the required skills which are essential to bringing constructive changes in the farming. Bridar (2016) says that communication in agriculture involves sending a message from the source to the receiver, but by doing so receivers are just getting knowledge about the presence of new technology. That's why agriculture communication is just seen as the trigger and not a complete means to bring change. To make change happen farmers need to acquire the skills of using the technology which they are getting knowledge about through various modes of communication. Communication facilitates knowledge sharing, informed decision-making, and shared action by the target groups. Under the agriculture communication programs, technical assistance is given to farmers so that they can explore various modes of media to get the best solution to their farming problems.

Keeping in mind the importance of imparting skills amongst the farmers, governments and extension agencies keep on reinventing various communication programmes through which one-on-one interaction can be promoted amongst the farmers as well as amongst the extension agents and the farmers. Modern means of mass communication like TV, Radio, Newspapers, Mobile Phones, You Tube videos, PowerPoint Presentations, Informative DVDs are used to impart information and skills training amongst the farmers. Training and Visit programs are being promoted to enhance the intensity of skillful training.

Present agriculture framework is witnessing multiple challenges like climate change, overpopulation, overuse of insecticides, pesticides etc. All these challenges call for planned and methodical usage of a different mode of communication for agricultural development. Organized exposure to communication modes can confirm the impartial access to modes of knowledge and information by the farmers and will also ensure their involvement in the process of agricultural development.

Agriculture communication ensures the development of sustainable agricultural practices by making certain the participation of the farmers in the process of policy-making as well as policy implementation. It is certain that if local

communities take charge of leadership and ownership of the developmental projects, those projects are more long-lasting and sustainable as they become a part of the everyday routines of the target group, and they remain in the groups even after the withdrawal of the external help. Walter (1992) explains that communication can never be overlooked as a tool of sustainable agriculture development. He adds that communication of sustainable agriculture practices includes, creating and disseminating information about how to farm and consume sustainably and also includes the information on increasing farmer participation in production research.

Communication is still an under-exploited sector in agriculture. There is a need to enhance human and organizational capacities in the field of agriculture communication. There are a lot of opportunities to upgrade the services through local and personalized experiences to make agriculture a more sustainable process. Farming these days has become knowledge-oriented. Information is required at each step of farming, from what to sow, how to sow, when to sow, which fertilizers to use, how to protect the crop from various calamities, when to sell, where to sell, all these questions are required to be answered timely to get maximum farm outputs and also to fetch maximum profits. Generalized information cannot help much to the farmers, instead, information is needed to be designed keeping in mind local needs. It has to be designed in the local language keeping in mind the culture and educational status of the people. Rural people always lag in getting updated information because of many reasons like lack of resources, lack of access to the modern modes of communication, illiteracy, lack of connectivity through roads, lack of telecommunication services, and numerous other barriers. All these barriers lead to the exclusion of poor and marginalized people from the development process leading to the increase in poverty. Agriculture communication aims at increasing access of farmers to various modes of communication and also aims at involving them in the process of policy making and policy implementation. All these efforts save the farmers from going into the plunge of poverty and keep them in the mainstream process of development.

Anderson (2004) says that investment in agriculture extension has enormous potential to improve agricultural productivity and farmer income, that's why many developing countries are investing huge amounts of money in this sector. According to various data available, 90% of the world's extension workers are working in developing nations. After World War II many developed nations realized the importance of communication in the process of development. That's why various aided programs were initiated in different third-world countries. These programs were designed to keep communication at the center stage. The purpose of these programs was to take third-world countries out of the grip of poverty through agricultural development as well as overall societal development.

Theoretical perspective

Farmers are a very sensitive section of society. Historically they have been reluctant toward adopting new practices and innovations. Multiple factors like risk, uncertainty, high investments, lack of assets, incompatibility of technology, infrastructural constraints act as barriers in farmer's way of adopting new technology. That's why communication

theories need to be discussed specifically in the context of agriculture communication as well as from the aspect of the use of ICT for agriculture communication.

Two-step flow theory coined by Paul Lazarsfeld and Katz says that information from media does not cast a direct impact on its consumers. In the initial stage, information moves to the individuals who are active in society and pay good attention to media messages. These individuals were termed as 'Opinion Leaders'. Opinion leaders have a good hold and following amongst the people of their area. They are referred by the people of their area on various socio, economic or political issues. In the second stage, information is passed to the masses by the opinion leaders. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) consider opinion leaders more influential than others within their social networks. Opinion leaders can be termed as experts as well. They are generally asked for advice by the general public. Opinion leaders select information in the areas of their expertise and then pass it on to the people around them. In the process of reporting to others, they more or less consciously modify the information which they transmit (cited in Trepte & Scherer, 2010). Along with actual information, opinion leaders also pass their own interpretations to the people. This phenomenon was termed as 'personal influence' by the coiners of the theory. Opinion leaders help in altering people's approach, attitude and behavior toward important matters. So two-step flow theory tries to reframe the role of media in influencing the audience behavior and their decision-making process.

Two step flow theory

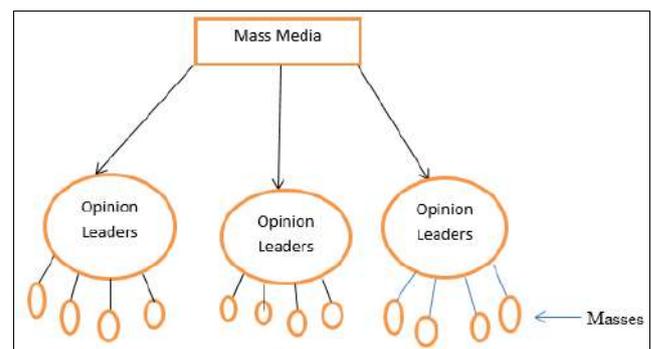


Fig 1: Two step flow theory

As far as agricultural communication is concerned, farmers have strong tendency of referring their fellow farmers or referring some opinion leaders of their area. In the villages of Punjab there is an age old tradition of 'Sath'. Where villagers get together at a common point of the village and do refer each other's opinion on various socio, political and agricultural issues. Village opinion leaders are also referred in these 'Saths' only. This 'Sath' tradition is a very good example of two step flow of information in the villages of Punjab. But flow of communication does not stop here. Information collected by the farmers from 'Saths' and other social gatherings is further disseminated to their fellow farmers taking the process of communication to the multi-step level. At this stage source of information of farmers is not only their fellow farmers, but other sources of media also. But usage of new technology by their fellow farmers and eye witnessed results reinforce other farmers' attitude and approach toward the adoption of new ideas and technology.

In the digital era progressive farmers have started making their presence felt through various digital platforms like WhatsApp groups, YouTube channels, Facebook pages etc. They keep on updating their fellow farmers through instant messaging. Some of these farmers do make videos of their farm success stories and post them on WhatsApp groups as well as on their YouTube channels. Farmers have started following opinion leaders on their digital platforms. As level of trust amongst the farmers and their opinion leaders is much more than any other form of media, farmers do employ the received suggestions in their fields.

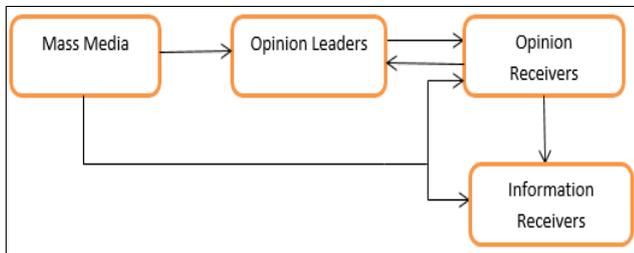


Fig 2: Shows mass media options leaders options receivers and its information's receivers

Percentage of farmers at digital platforms is very limited. Less educated and old farmers do not use social media or other digital platforms. But they do take notice of good results received by fellow farmers due to information gained from ICT modes, and eventually adopts that information after referring to their fellow farmers.

Any innovation which is being designed to improve the lives of common people is required to reach them properly to cast positive impact on their lives. Many theories have been designed to explain this process. The Theory of Diffusion of Innovation is one of the earliest theories which explain the process of adoption by the people of the target group. The theory was given by Evert Roger in 1962. Roger (1983) defines diffusion as the process through which innovations can be transmitted amongst the people with the help of certain channels of the social system. He considered it as a special kind of communication, through which messages related to new ideas are being communicated amongst the people. According to Roger, innovation is a new idea, practice or object which is considered as new either by a single individual or a group of individuals who want to adopt it. Both interpersonal communication and mass communication do play a vital role in the process of diffusion. Mass communication modes along with the modern ICT modes like mobile phones, YouTube, social networking sites do help in spreading awareness about new innovations, while interpersonal communication help the individuals in the adoption of a particular innovation. Through interpersonal communication adopters learn from each other's experiences with the new technology, which help them in taking the decisions regarding adoption of a particular product.

The research on diffusion of innovation got acceleration in developing countries in 1960s, when extension agencies started searching for new alternatives for increasing agricultural outputs. Researches were done to know the potential of adoption of new innovations in increasing the crop outputs (Ban & Hawkins, 2002). Therefore, Diffusion is a kind of social change, which brings alterations in the structure and functioning of a social system. Whenever new

ideas are devised, diffused, and adopted or rejected, it always leads to certain reverberations and social changes (Roger, 1983). In his book 'Diffusion of Innovation' Roger gives five different stages to describe the process of diffusion of innovation. These stages are as follow:

1. Knowledge

Under this stage individual is provided with the required knowledge related to an innovation. At this stage only information is provided to the individual about new innovation, no further knowledge is provided to the concerned people.

2. Persuasion

At this stage individual or a group of individuals actually get interested in a particular innovation and try to explore more information related to that particular innovation.

3. Decision

In this stage individuals compare the advantages and disadvantages of using an innovation under consideration. And also take decision regarding the adoption or rejection of the innovation.

4. Implementation

This is the stage of practically using the innovation. At this stage individuals practically employ the innovation in their lives and try to find out its benefits. They also try to find out related information regarding the innovation.

5. Confirmation

At this stage individuals finalize their decisions about carrying on with the innovation concerned or not. This decision can be based on personal experience as well as on the experience of other persons of the group also.

Various extension researches reveals that different sources of information are required to give initial peace of knowledge regarding the new innovation as well as for making final decision regarding adoption or rejection of a particular innovation. In most of the countries mass media plays an important role in providing initial information to the farmers, but farmers do refer to fellow farmers, extension workers or any other person of their trust before taking the final decision regarding the adoption or rejection of a particular innovation (Ban & Hawkins, 2002). As far as adopters are concerned Roger says that not everyone adopts innovation at the same rate. Rate of acceptance of new innovation is different in different individuals as well as group of individuals. Various socio-economic factors also play a vital role in determining the rate of adoption of a particular innovation in a society. According to the rate of adoption of innovation, adopters have been divided into five categories called innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards.

The diffusion process is greatly influenced by the members of the social group. In agriculture also farmers keep a keen interest in the activities of other farmers. They do discuss their experiences with their friends and fellow farmers and also seek knowledge from fellow farmers. Progressive farmers of the village keep on experimenting with the innovations and they also share their experience with their fellow mates thus act as 'opinion leaders' in their villages. That's why Extension workers from various government agencies always try to tap the progressive farmers of the

villages to teach them about innovations, as they know that other farmers will follow the advice of the progressive farmers. These progressive farmers serve many purposes like:

1. They pass new information to the farmers of their group or village.
2. They interpret the information according to the requirements of the farmers of their group.
3. They employ the new information and technology in their fields, thus set an example for other farmers.
4. They act as advisors to other farmers when they seek their approval for the adoption of a new technology.
5. They are generally more educated than the other farmers and sometimes also enjoy better financial position as compared to fellow farmers of the group.

Conclusion

Above research indicates that opinion leaders act as bridge between extension agents and the farmers. Extension agents can impact large proportion of farmers by choosing opinion leaders from amongst them. Above discussion explains that communication is the core of every successful agricultural operation. There are multiple ways to communicate with farmers like interpersonal communication, group communication or communicating through one or other form of media. But to determine the success of the communication process it is important to understand the ground realities and situations. Any communication theory which is being designed in harmony with the local situations of the farmers and in consent with the opinion leaders of the community will definitely yield much more positive results.

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