CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION
1.0 Background

Information is now considered a vital resource for overall development and to improve quality of life in all human society. It is the major resource particularly for policy-makers, planners, decision-makers, scientists, R & D organizations, technologists, economists, executives, researchers, professionals, business houses, and the general masses. Informed citizens are in a better position to analyse and find solutions to day-to-day problems and can make sound judgments and effective decisions. Every development process and contemporary human conditions depend greatly on the access to information that is precise, relevant, accurate, adequate, expeditious and timely available.

The most spectacular events in the course of human civilization have been witnessed during the 20th century which ushered in rapid progress in all fields of human endeavour, particularly in the scientific, technological, political, economic, educational, social and cultural fields. Such global changes have been possible largely due to the advancements in the generation, dissemination, and utilization of information through highly efficient and sophisticated methods and media. In other words,
mankind’s new-found capability to communicate and exchange ideas and information across geographical, political and cultural boundaries can be attributed to the accomplishments in the areas of information and communication technologies. The application of modern technology to communication and transmission of information has greatly enhanced the speed of generation, storage, processing, retrieval and dissemination of information. From the ancient papyrus rolls and stone engravings to the modern printed and digital forms, the modes of information communication, indeed, have undergone complete transformation. This has been possible largely due to the emergence of modern digital computers, advances in telecommunications, and the appearance of interactive multimedia technology such as CD-ROM, DVD, VCD and high-capacity optical devices which are capable of handling millions of bits of information in audio, video, textual as well as in graphic form. Another outstanding by-product of information technology is the INTERNET with its powerful feature of interactivity through the World Wide Web, which has left its profound impact on the modern information society. Indeed, information technology has enhanced the value and significance of information. Today, the notion of information has changed
from something to know to something to have as any other resource. Baker (1984) was right in this regard “Until very recently information was output, it was read in newspapers and books. Now it is raw material, as important as coal, steel and petroleum. As such it can generate wealth by enabling resources to be better exploited.” No wonder, the present age has been rightly called the “information age.”

The role and importance of information in modern society has become multi-dimensional as its impact on the individual and the society as a whole is felt in an increasing measure and in diverse ways. In fact, there is no field of human activity in which information is not an essential ingredient. Today, importance of information in bringing about changes and development in society is the major emphasis of information scientists, researchers, administrators, academicians, social scientists and others.

1.1 Information in rural development

An inevitable trend in every society today is change and progress in which information plays an indispensable role. A society can only be
considered developed when its members are well-equipped with information pertaining to all spheres of life. The multi-dimensional role and value of information in modern society is not only apparent in urban areas, but equal emphasis need to be given to the role of information in rural settings in order to bring about an all-round development. The non-availability of relevant information through appropriate media for relevant purposes remains a major obstacle to any attempt at reaching the benefits of development to the rural masses.

In India, most of the rural populace is being deprived from accessing to information relating to education, health, economic, agriculture, politics and socio-economic benefits extended by the government. It is, therefore, essential to revitalize rural people by providing them information, which they implicitly and explicitly need. Thus, the role of information in rural development may be discussed under the following headings:
1.1.1 *Educational scenario*

Education plays a pivotal role in the development and progress of modern society in which information forms a key ingredient. Comparatively now human life has become more complex, the education system is under constant pressure for continuous improvement and adaptation to the changing needs. To ensure reasonable standard and quality of education where constant interaction with the latest trends is required, access to relevant, adequate and didactic information has now become indispensable.

In a rapidly developing country like India, where the bulk of the population consists of illiterate rural folks, the benefits of modern education, regrettably, is yet to reach the masses. Apart from formal education, non-formal education through distance education programme, vocational and training courses have become increasingly relevant to the adults in the rural areas. The powerful modern educational facilities including application of educational media and tools such as computers, televisions, radios, audio-visual equipments and other non-book materials for the delivery of software and access to courseware written for specific
subject areas need to be brought nearer to the rural people. In fact, the role of modern educational technology is more crucial in rural environment than in urban areas.

Application of information technology to modern education has been gaining momentum day by day, particularly in improving the educational system. This technological revolution, reiterated Kaula (2000), indeed, has opened up new avenues for education by widening the boundaries of the classrooms and enabling access to education to those who are unable to afford for formal education. Hashim (2000), in this regard, lauded the concept of ‘Connected Learning Community,’ developed by Bill Gates of Microsoft Corporation in which use of information technology to improve the education system was emphasised. It involves use of computer technology to enhance and promote teachers’ creativity and efficiency in teaching and creative thinking and learning skills by the students, parents and the extended communities. This type of e-learning provides every student a personal computer and access to information online, while they are allowed to pursue an individual path of learning best suited to his or her needs. Emphasis is also on learning not
only from access to information alone but from continuous and dynamic interaction between teachers, students, parents and the extended community. Such a system facilitates sharing of knowledge and information through global interaction. However, in India, this kind of system is yet to receive its prominence though it has its relevance not only in urban areas, but is equally pertinent and important even for the most far-flung rural areas. Modern educational facilities, which involves the use of information and communication technologies will not only enhance the value of education but also accelerate the progress and uplift of the rural populace. Therefore, to bring about an overall national development, it is imperative on the part of the policy-makers and those involved in rural development to give immediate emphasis in reaching with the required modern educational facilities to the rural populace. In short, the availability, smooth flow, access and proper utilisation of appropriate information play a decisive role in the overall educational attainments of any progressive society. Thus, computerized information products and services relating to formal and non-formal education should be made easily accessible to rural population for their development and progress.
1.1.2 Socio-cultural scenario

Information, as a crucial factor for raising the cultural standard and all-round progress of the society has its prominent place in the socio-cultural transformation. Advancement of modern society requires that each member of the society stays well-informed in matters relevant to day-to-day existence. Information raises the level of awareness and augments insight of the average member of the community. Information also enhances interpersonal relationships and sense of accommodation cutting across social and cultural barriers between various groups and communities, thereby, facilitating peaceful co-existence.

No society or cultural group can afford to stand in isolation in this age of globalisation where every change and development process is information-intensive. An inevitable result of exchange of ideas and information across geographical, political and cultural boundaries is acculturation, which has become a powerful phenomenon that no modern society can avoid and this forms an important feature in rural development. However, a large rural population in India is still being deprived from interacting with the outside world mainly due to poor
communication facilities, poor transportation, illiteracy and adverse geographical conditions. It is, therefore, essential to give the due emphasis on facilitating exchange of ideas and information among different socio-cultural groups that has its profound role in transforming distinct groups up to the grassroots level.

1.1.3 Political scenario

The role of information in the political life of a nation is equally important. It is the source of innovation, policy formulation and of executive functions. Freedom of access, use and dissemination of information lead to a political process characterized by increased participation and consensus. It also ensures political awareness, enlightens and broadens the scope of one’s thinking and makes one a better and responsible citizen. By and large, well-informed politicians can bring in reformatory and constructive schemes and programmes in the society. At the same time, only well-informed electorate can exercise their political rights and duties by participating in the political process rather than remain mere passive spectators.
The greatest threat to democracy like ours, however, is ignorance that leads to exploitation of political rights of the citizens by a few vested interests coupled with the exploitation on the basis of class, caste, religion, etc. This, in fact, is a common feature of the rural populace. It is at this juncture, that political education, which involves giving the citizens relevant and adequate information through appropriate media, on their political rights, duties and responsibilities, has its prominent place in reforming the political system of a society. In a democracy, the political process involves all members of the society starting from the grassroots level to the national level. It is, therefore, imperative on the part of the political leadership as well as the electorate to have access to the right information at the right time within each level of the socio-political hierarchy. Further, appropriate sources and media of information must be channelised to meet the specific needs at every level of the political structure. Emphasis, therefore, should be on the optimum utilization of information that is relevant, adequate and timely to bring about a higher level of political consciousness to all members of the political system.
1.1.4 Economic scenario

The increasingly decisive role of information in determining the economic well being of a society is being felt throughout the world. The generation and use of information results in scientific and technological development and the further dissemination of such information creates financial resources in the forms of foreign exchange as pointed out by Moorthy and Karisidappa (1996). In fact, “Information society” has already become a cliche in the advanced countries where the bulk of the labour force is engaged primarily in the information sector of the economy. The latest trend in industrialised and information-based society is the emergence of ‘knowledge industries’ engaged in production and distribution of ideas and information rather than goods and services. The emergence of e-commerce and e-business is a by-product of modern information technology, in which, exchange of information across the globe forms a major part. The organized generation, systematic flow and use of information enhances the economic strength of a nation. It is also an integrating factor for capital markets at the national and international levels and increases the market competition and market efficiency. Information also creates awareness of economic opportunities that lead to
entrepreneurial activities and emergence of new areas of economic activity.

Today, information has become a major resource for business houses. Their organisational success mainly depends on right and effective decisions, in which availability of relevant information and access to it has become crucial. In today's fiercely competitive economic scenario, only those who are well-equipped with critical information can have an edge over others.

Information also can play a very important role in alleviating unemployment problem, economic inequality and improving the living standards of the rural communities. However, most of the rural population in India is being deprived from accessing to information pertinent in their day-to-day life. In this regard, Sambasivan and Rahiman (1984) pointed out that most of the rural craftsmen and artisans in India still follows the age-old traditional methods using the inefficient primitive tools and equipments, mainly due to the lack of awareness of using modern techniques, tools and processes, in spite of the fact that the country has
been able to made rapid advances in science and technology. This is due to lack of access to right type of information. Though, various development and welfare schemes and programmes meant for the rural people were launched from time to time, they are being exploited and deprived from enjoying the benefits of modern development and, thus, the pathetic economic conditions of the ignorant rural folks remain the same if not worst. Therefore, it is very essential to reach the rural populace with the relevant and timely information to enable them to improve their economic conditions.

Information pertaining to modern farming and agricultural techniques has become indispensable for a developing country such as India, particularly in the rural settings, where agriculture constitutes a major portion of the economic activity. The farmers today require to have knowledge on the latest and relevant farming technologies. There is also a great need for market information to ensure the rural farmers get the deserving returns of their farm products. Therefore, immediate emphasis should be given on the proper flow and utilisation of information and intensification of the crucial role of agricultural extension workers as the
main disseminators of farm information in the rural areas, particularly where no other channels and media for information communication are available.

1.1.5 **Health care scenario**

Information plays equally a very crucial role in health-care system. Health is a major determinant of human development and the quality of human life. Health does not imply the mere absence of sickness in the body, rather it is a state of complete physical, mental and social well being and not merely an absence of disease or infirmity as has been defined by WHO (1979). Thus, the concept of health encompasses from physical fitness to psychological and spiritual well-being. Health is not only a personal boon but it is an asset to the society as well. Issues related to public health form a major concern of governments and their agencies as well as the non-governmental organisations.

Provision of the right information at the right time to the right person can complete a lot of the required but strenuous preventive processes. Information covering prevention and eradication of
communicable diseases, sanitation, family welfare and child care, food and nutritional standards, community health, environmental pollution and its effects on health, and other pertinent issues must reach the rural masses through appropriate media. However, in India, most of the rural areas suffer from lack of medical and health care facilities such as lack of proper dispensaries and public health centres, lack of ambulances, inadequate number of qualified doctors and other health workers. Apart from this, there is also need for proper health education to promote awareness and to sustain reasonable levels of health care standards in the society. Indeed, timely, relevant and accurate information can help alleviate various public health hazards.

1.1.6 Conclusion

Information poverty is a curse to individuals as well as to the society and the nation. Today, the strength and welfare of a nation greatly depends on its information richness. The world is divided between the information rich and the information poor. Even within a society, people are divided into haves and have-nots of information— the latter usually being the ignorant and the downtrodden rural populace. The necessity for
compression and the fast flow of information from one corner to another
the world over has brought about revolution in the information
communication technologies which have attained the do-or-die
prominence. It is apparent in the emergence of digital computers,
advances in telecommunication systems, interactive multimedia
technology, information superhighways such as Internet, and so on. All
these advancements have cut across the distance barrier and have made it
possible and easier to have access to information regardless of the
location. Indeed, the progress and developments in information
communication systems is the main force that has turned today’s world
into one ‘global village.’

Reaching the rural masses with valuable and appropriate
information is the key to success for any attempt at bringing an all round
national development. In a democratic country such as India, where we
talk in terms of equality, justice and rights, duties and responsibilities,
liberty and individuality, self-esteem and improved living conditions, the
right to information has to be given the immediate emphasis and, thereby,
information poverty, particularly in rural areas is eradicated for the welfare of the rural community.

Information is increasingly being recognized as a keystone of social good of people improving overall development of the community. National Consumer Council (1997) recognized information access as the fourth right of citizenship, others being right to civil, political and social. Access to right type of information is to be exploited which is only possible if the Government initiates planning in this direction particularly to the benefit of the rural people living in remote locations. In this regard, Wakelin and Simelane (1995) reiterated that though in the urban areas, information through media and modern facilities is increasingly available, the rural-based societies continue to suffer from lack of information. In urban areas, people are enjoying facilities of e-commerce, e-business, e-learning, information brokerage and many other benefits of information and communication technologies. These facilities of accessing wealth of information and knowledge must reach every village of India for individual as well as national progress.
References:


