

DEVELOPMENTAL HOMILIES

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"Science Communication and Development", by J.V.Vilanilam, SAGE Publications (1993), Rs. 235/-.

That science and technology (in the broadest sense), have something to do with development is by now almost universally accepted. From the discovery of iron to the harnessing of steam in the industrial revolution, technology has played a major role in determining the level of economic development of any era. This is as true today in the time of ceramic superconductors as it was in the time of Painted Grey Ware. The pace of technological change has obviously accelerated, the organization of technology has undergone a radical transformation and the scale of technological innovation is immense. All this has only made the linkage much more intimate.

On the other hand, communication, especially mass communication is widely seen as an important component of any developmental program. From literacy programs to public health, mass communication is regarded as a crucial tool for empowerment of the dispossessed. What are not so obvious are the linkages between science communication and development. Prof. Vilanilam endeavours to explore precisely these linkages in his book under review.

What role does science and technology play in a developing country and how is this different from the developed countries? The author argues that science and technology (S & T), like other forms of knowledge is culture specific and this view pervades the book. He tries to develop an analytic framework to understand the role played by S & T in general and by S & T communication in particular in development. Even though he touches upon almost all the important issues, he is not very successful in coming up with a conceptual framework within which to address these questions.

Through the seminal work of scholars like J.D.Bernal and J.Needham, it is now well accepted that science and technology was not the monopoly of the Europeans alone but was well developed in almost all cultures in the ancient world. There is a good survey of the history of Science and Technology in the Ancient World and in Ancient and Medieval India. These chapters are quite informative, though somewhat sketchy.

With the coming of the British, there was a tremendous growth in the number of institutions of science and technology. These institutions were not only responsible for a systematic survey of the natural resources available for exploitation by the colonials, but also played a major role in modernizing Indian industry. The introduction of these modern products and processes led invariably to a decline and ultimate extinction of the traditional techniques

and their practitioners. There is a good discussion of the British period and a fairly comprehensive survey of the institutions of S & T.

The post independent developments in S & T are taken up next. There has been undoubtedly a tremendous amount of growth in the scientific activities in free India. This is true whether we take industrial production or the number of research establishments. But has this phenomenal growth in our S & T activities really influenced development? This is indeed the fundamental question which the author asks. Has the opening up of world class hospitals got anything to do with health care in a country where preventive and primary health is of utmost importance? The whole development model has focussed on an essentially elitist consumer growth which the author rightly finds immoral. The phase of self-reliance and import substitution led to some dividends but a culture of indigenous research and development did not take root. The author does not explore this aspect in any detail. The foundation of any sustainable R & D activity has to be the Universities which produce the "personware" for science. In a glaring omission, there is almost no discussion of the role played by the universities in S & T related activities.

Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE), the country wide classroom of UGC, the Kheda community television project are some of the most innovative development communication related experiments done anywhere in the world. The author analyzes and provides a useful evaluation of these projects. Unfortunately, instead of offering viable strategies for the success of development communications, he bemoans the need for "selfless communication workers..".

The amazing success of Kerala Saastra Saahitya Parishad (KSSP)in creating a People's Science Movement is by now well known. There is a good empirical discussion of KSSP though one would have liked a much more detailed analysis of the factors responsible for its phenomenal success.

There is a lot of material covered in the book; Science, Technology, Communication, Development. And this is precisely the difficulty with it. None of the topics is covered in any detail and for the lack of any overall analytic framework, the connections are not fully explored. Sadly, a book by a professional communications expert on a subject of vital importance does not at all live up to the expectations generated by the title.