

KNOWLEDGE COMMUNICATION IN TAGORE'S MODEL FOR RURAL RECONSTRUCTION: AN OVERVIEW

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Rabindranath Tagore, the world-famous poet, is also considered as the pioneer of rural development programme in India. He started rural reconstruction project at Sriniketan in 1921 aiming to make villagers self-reliant and self-respecting, and competent to make efficient use of resources for the fullest development of their physical, social, economic and intellectual potential and abilities; and to get them acquainted with the cultural tradition of their own. For this purpose Tagore laid full emphasis on collection and dissemination of information. The present paper is an attempt to highlight how information on rural Bengal was collected, disseminated and utilized for preparing rural development plan and its implementation. It also tries to highlight the functions of the Rural Reconstruction Centre to the dissemination of information to rural masses.

INTRODUCTION

Rabindranath was sent to look after his family property at Silaidaha and Patisar (now in Bangladesh) around December 1880 when he was 19 years . There he acquired first hand experience about the socioeconomic conditions of rural Bengal. Many years later, referring to those early experiences of village life, Tagore wrote, "People used to come with their joys and sorrows, their claims and complaints. All these enabled me to form a true picture of villages. The outward appearance with rivers and wide plains, rice fields and huts nestling in the shelter of trees became familiar to me as also the inner story of rural life. The sufferings of the people became more and more intertwined with my daily work." He continues, "gradually the sorrow and poverty of the villages became clear to me, and I began to grow restless to do something about it...from that time forward I continually endeavoured to find out how villagers mind could be aroused, so that they themselves could accept responsibility for their own lives"[1]. From his first experience Tagore realized that the villagers had lost the ability to help themselves and both research and technical assistance (for communication of

research results) were necessary even to teach them how to rescue themselves from their decay.

Tagore purchased a house and land at Surul [2] from Lord S P Sinha of Raipur in 1912 which formed the nucleus of his rural reconstruction model. The house was in need of repairs and was surrounded by jungles. "It was clearly a deadly breeding place for malarial mosquitoes"[3]. The idea could not take shape until Mr. Elmhirst [4] arrived at Santiniketan (Abode of Peace) in November 1921 and later took charge of Sriniketan (Abode of Sri Lakshmi) as its first director. Thus, Sriniketan started its activity with the direct involvement of three great personalities –Tagore, with his vision and dreams; Elmhirst with his leadership, sympathy and love for poor villagers of Bengal and Mrs. Straight [5] with her gift of money.

The programme started with a general survey of rural life and proper investigation into the economic and social problems of village life. The question of ignorance and diseases were addressed and solution to the problem of communication of knowledge to the villagers sought. The information thus gathered was utilized as an essential tool for decision-making before the real work started. The underlying principle was "we must liberate these few villages in every respect so that all may receive education, a breeze of joy may blow once again, songs and music, recitation from epics and scriptures may fill them, as of yore. Would just these few villages...." [6]. The main objective of this rural reconstruction programme according to its creator was "to try to flood the choked bed of village life with the stream of happiness." To fulfil this objective Tagore appealed to "the scholars, the poets, the musicians, the artists to collaborate, to offer their contributions." [7].

BIRBHUM

When Tagore took up the programme of rural reconstruction, Birbhum district was a backward region with the village conditions worse than most other districts of Bengal. The soil was of very poor quality, being of red laterite desert (known as *khowai*), and the land was eroded by rain for miles because of deforestation. The peasantry was poorer and more backward compared to their counterparts in other districts. Physically also, the people were off-colour as malaria joined hands with other social and economic evils. Various small trades and crafts of the villages were gradually driven out by big industries. The condition of the region was well summed up by its first director as "When Dr Tagore handed over to us his farm at the village of Surul in the Birbhum district, as the basis of our operations for the founding of a school of Agriculture and the study of village economics, we were compelled to examine not merely the conditions of the soil around us, but the history, social, economic and political aspects which lay behind that condition. The press is constantly giving you strategies showing the increasing death rate, the all powerful sway of malaria and disease, the grinding poverty and the frequency of famine in this area." [8].

Recognizing the importance of information as the basic input for planning proper rural development strategy, a survey was conducted in the village of Ballavpur in 1926. The survey classified 24 families as shown in Table 1[9].

Almost all the people including the Brahmins were engaged in agriculture. Paddy was the main crop, potatoes and sugarcane were also cultivated. The total area of the village was 3,744 bighas (about

Table 2 — Area of various types of land

Area	Bigha* (s)
Wasteland and Khowai (eroded)	2,748.36
Homesteads	42.00
Tanks	42.00
Fallow and left for grazing	201.00
Under Cultivation	457.00
Other Lands	255.64

* One acre = about 2.5 bighas

1,500 acres) which was divided as shown in Table 2.

About one hundred bighas of land could be brought under cultivation. Twenty-three out of twenty-four families were in debt excepting the tanner family which was debt free.

TAGORE'S MODEL OF RURAL RECONSTRUCTION

Tagore realized that problems of rural reconstruction were manifold and the problems related to health, economy, education, etc., are interlinked with each other. So all the problems were to be attacked at a time, instead of dealing with them in isolation. The objectives of the programme, in the words of Elmhirst evolved as follows: "from the outset, we had two main objectives, to survey the economic, social and scientific needs of the cultivator in his home, village and fields, and secondly to carry out our own laboratory experiments in health, education, craft, cultivation and animal husbandry" [10]. Tagore gave equal importance to health, wealth, knowledge and peace. According to him rural upliftment is only possible if we "bring to the village health and knowledge, wealth and peace in which to live, wealth of time in which to work and to rest and enjoy." [11].

Accordingly Tagore laid emphasis on economy (with special emphasis on agriculture and local handicraft), education, health, village organization, research and training and also on different methods in knowledge communication mainly based on traditional folklore of Bengal. Regarding economic development Tagore's aspiration "was to make the cultivator self-confident in his own ability..." and he felt that "the right of the agricultural lands should

Table 1 — Categories of people

Higher Castes		Backward Castes	
Category	Family(s)	Category	Family(s)
Brahmins	6	Tanners	7
Weavers	3	Hadis	2
Potters	1	Doms	3
Barbers	1		
Tamils	1		

vest with the peasants....There cannot be real improvement of agriculture unless we adopt collective and co-operative farming on scientific lines" [12]. Tagore considered educational development as foundation of rural reconstruction and "reform of education and regeneration of villages are the major tasks of my life" [13]. The poet further observed "a natural bond between education in the schools and colleges and the country outside them is immensely necessary"[14].

The village welfare department of the institute from the very beginning took the programme of health and sanitation in the surrounding villages. In the year 1929, the institute treated 6760 patients [15]. Tagore firmly believed that poverty, disease, depopulation, joylessness and backwardness of rural area could be removed only through co-operative efforts of village organization. "I pray for the victory of the co-operative principle" the poet wrote from Soviet Russia in 1930. Sriniketan from the very beginning laid special emphasis on research, training and knowledge communication which is expressed in its objectives reproduced below.

1. To take the problem of the villages and the field to the classroom for study and discussion and to experimental farm for solution.
2. To carry the knowledge and experience gained in the classroom and farm to the villagers in their endeavours to improve their sanitation and health; to develop their resources and credit; to help them to sell their product and buy their requirements to the best advantages; to teach them better methods of growing crops, and vegetables and of keeping livestock; to encourage them to learn and practice art and crafts; and to bring home to them the benefits of associated life, mutual aid and common endeavour [16].

The model is presented in Fig. 1.

KNOWLEDGE DISSEMINATION

According to Tagore "knowledge is the greatest factor of unity among human beings."

Through knowledge one became conscious of human unity, which transcends difference of time

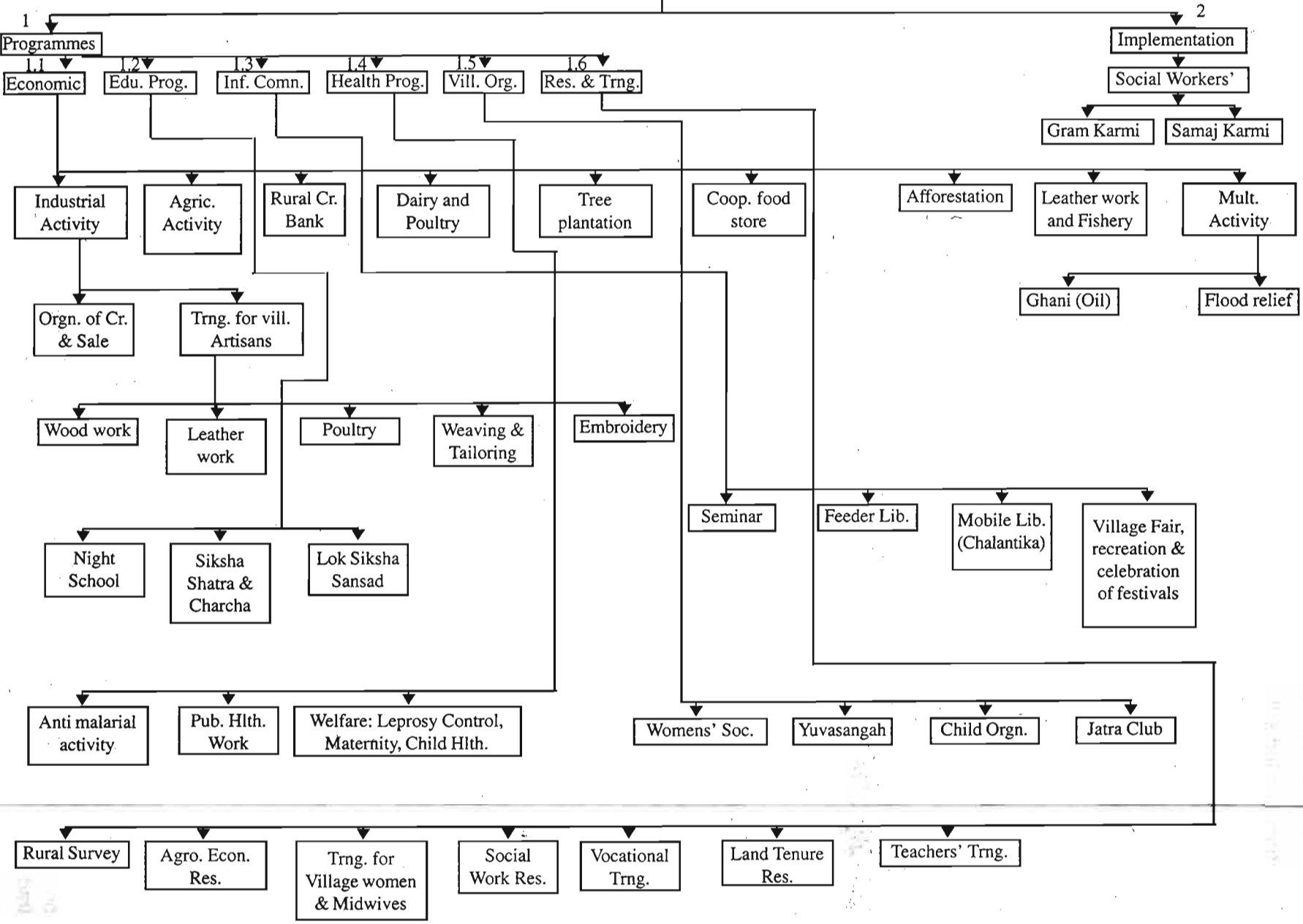
and space. Learning about its utility, no one should be deprived of the joy that issues from the consciousness of this unity"[17]. Tagore always laid emphasis on importance of information. In his address before the students of Sriniketan in 1905 he appealed to them to assist the Bengal Literary Society in gathering information on poems, songs, folklore, ruins of temples, old manuscripts, village festivals, religious scriptures, method of cultivation, etc., in order to discover our country [18]. Again in his Pabna address in 1907 he urged that the first task of the proposed rural branches of the Provincial Conference would be the collection of all kinds of information in every part of the country. For "knowledge is a necessary prelude to action." And it is the only tool to know the conditions prevailing in real field of work [19]. Similarly, in his *Call of Truth* Tagore insisted that full information on all relevant points should be collected first in order to decide which economic programme would be best to meet the needs of rural population [20].

Based on this philosophy Tagore was convinced that what the villagers needed most for their own salvation was knowledge, a cooperative spirit and encouragement to self-help. Recognising this aspect to gather as well as to disseminate more practical knowledge different studies, surveys, experiments were conducted on handloom industry, agriculture, etc. Sudhir Sen, another director of the institute wrote "I therefore launched on a study, among other things, of the economics of the handloom industry to determine under what conditions it could be rehabilitated and made not only viable, but also sufficiently profitable" [21]. An intensive study on agriculture was conducted by the institute and the result was published in a volume called *Land and its Problem* [22]. To green the earth, to bind the soil and conserve moisture of Sriniketan and nearby villages, Sen conducted a study of trees of the compound of Mr. Cheap and "made an inventory of all the trees, by species and number, which were still standing in the compound and suggested that an effort be made to reforest the whole place ...The idea behind the proposal was to build a miniature forest for demonstration purpose"[23]. Later on in order to encourage the problem-oriented research and planning and to help economic and social

Figure 1

Tagore's Model of Rural reconstruction

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development in India, three research organizations were established namely: Visva Bharati Economic Research (VER), Social and Economic Planning Association (SEPA), and Indian Society of Agricultural Economics (ISAE). Knowledge is not an end but a means to an end. Theoretical knowledge is not enough, it is to be communicated and shared. Subjective knowledge becomes complete only when learning is brought down from the realm of abstraction to the world of concrete experience. To disseminate knowledge Tagore not only laid emphasis on seminar, library, research and training but also on fairs and festivals, recreation and village organization. Tagore observes, "according to us the poverty problem is not so important. It is the problem of unhappiness that is the great problem." [24].

In this context he wrote to Elmshirst "I hope, you will establish an annual *mela* (fair) of your own at Surul and encourage the holding of lantern lectures and of games during it as well as the usual dramas and dance" [25]. As a result, agricultural fair at Sriniketan started. To disseminate information the Institute also took part in other fairs of the district. The diary of Elmshirst dated 10 February 1922 reads "tomorrow we pack up and all leave to attend the annual *mela* (fair and agricultural show and demonstration combined) at Suri, Birbhum District Headquarters. At 8.30 a.m. I was round to the tents and then the boys to the *Mela*, or Fairground... There we were able to fix up a most interesting programme, trips to local sugarcane plots, demonstrations in tanning, weaving and silk culture, with peanut oil extraction as well, and with lectures as well on veterinary science, hygiene and agriculture, and from officers of the Bengal Government" [26]. Organisation of regular lectures was a part of the activities of the Institute. "The second lecture on our local problem is finished. The poet keeps pestering me to get the first one into final shape so that he can translate it into Bengali"[27]. In 1929 twenty-six such lectures were delivered in nineteen villages, with a total attendance of 6, 000 people [28].

Tagore laid emphasis on extension of education through folk education and folk entertainment. He believed that only through folklore i.e., through traditional culture we would be able to plough back

our stored knowledge into the soil of mass mind. For this reason Tagore revived traditional rural recreational functions like *jatra* (an open-air opera performance), *kirtan* (act of singing the names of God), *kathakatha* (act of narration of scriptural and mythological stories), etc, and organized different festivals to celebrate various seasons, e.g., *varshamangal* to celebrate rainy season. He believed that "culture can accomplish the faculties of mind from the deepest core. A cultured man becomes spontaneously successful from within.... Through the influence of culture men naturally possess a disinterested love for knowledge and a dispassionate encouragement for activity"[29]. "Knowledge associated with joy and satisfaction increases our power of learning, consequently our power of reception, apprehension, thinking and judgment develop easily and naturally."[30].

Education is the greatest instrument for purposeful development of communication in village life. Tagore laid emphasis on the education of village boys and girls. The poet believed that the success of entire rural reconstruction scheme depended upon them as they were the future leaders of knowledge generation and dissemination. For this the institute established various formal and non-formal educational wings like night school, *Siksha Satra*, *Siksha Charcha*, etc. The poet stated: "reform of education and regeneration of villages are the major tasks of my life"[31]. According to him the objective of education is the full realization of all ideals in life through work and wisdom as "the highest education is that which does not give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence" [32].

PRESENT ACTIVITY FOR RURAL RECONSTRUCTION

With the passage of time Sriniketan laid greater emphasis on new programmes of rural education and extension keeping in view the changing socioeconomic scenario. The idea is to encourage the villagers to become self-reliant through formation of Self-Help Group, Youth Organisation, *Mahila Samities* (Ladies Clubs), etc. Presently the Institute follows the U.G.C. guidelines of 1988 and 1992, i.e., the area-based approach to rural education and extension. The present operational

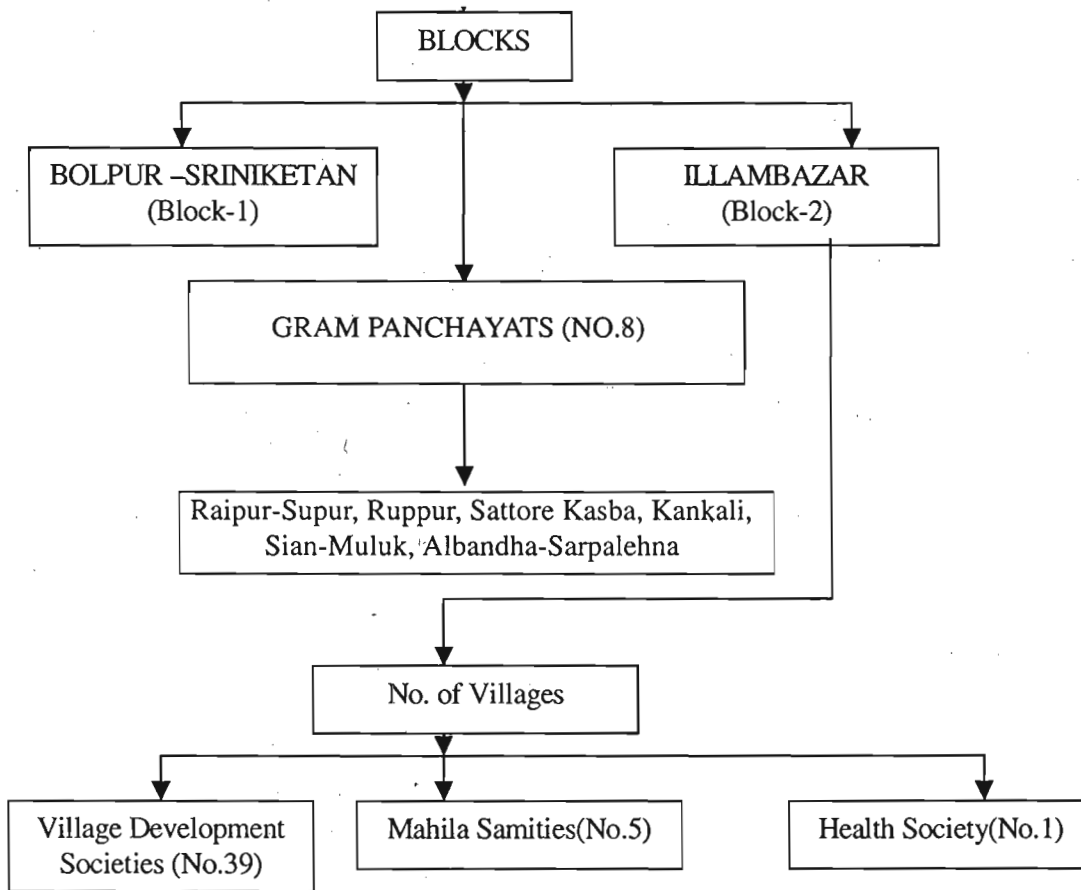


Fig. 2 — Functions of Rural Extension Centre

area of Rural Extension Centre is diagrammatically represented as in Fig. 2.

The present activities of Rural Extension Centre include the following broad areas based on Tagore's model of rural reconstruction and knowledge dissemination. These activities are:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 01. Broti Balak Programme 02. Rural Library Programme 03. Innovative Community Learning Programme 04. Self-Help Group 05. Adult Education Programme 06. Continuing Education Programme 07. Women and Child Welfare Programme | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 08. Women Empowerment Programme 09. Training Programme 10. Agricultural Extension 11. Games and Sports 12. Promotion of <i>Rabindrasangeet</i> (Tagore songs) 13. Promotion of Art and Culture 14. Promotion of Folk Culture 15. Awareness Programme 16. Economic Development Programme 17. Health Extension 18. Environmental Education 19. Days' Celebration [33] |
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Table 3 – Rural Library Service in 2002-03

Number of Books		60,725
Donated by RRRLF	45,149	
Donated by the villagers	15,576	
Number of Enrolled Readers		2929
Male	1781	
Female	1148	
Number of Readers using Reading Room only		772
Male	501	
Female	271	
Number of Neo-literate Readers		547
Male	318	
Female	229	
Total Number of Readers		4248
Male	2600	
Female	1648	
Number of Books Issued and Returned		19,187

RURAL LIBRARY AND MOBILE LIBRARY SERVICES

The mobile library (called *Chalantika*) started its operation from the very beginning of the Institute with the object of dissemination of information to the rural poor who did not have proper access to books due to financial and other factors. In the years 1925, 1937 and 1940 the number of books were 200, 1200, and 1504 respectively. In the years 1934 and 1939, the number of books issued totalled 2457 and 2793 respectively [34]. During 1929, seven hundred and twenty-nine books were issued in fifteen different villages. The increasing number of books issued shows the augmentation of reading interest of rural masses [35]. Several mobile library branches of the public library were also opened in different villages. At the initial stage there were two branch libraries at Bolpur and Goalpara in Birbhum district of West Bengal.

At present Rural Library Services (2002-03) are provided through a network of 36 rural libraries in 36 villages under eight panchayats and two community development blocks with a matching grant from Raja Rammohun Roy Library Foundation

(RRRLF) to strengthen literary programme. The objectives of the Rural Library Programme (including mobile library) are to:

- develop the reading habits among villagers
- use library as a cultural, communication and continuing education centre
- develop self-reliance and self-confidence
- provide all updated information regarding modern and advanced science and technology
- retention of acquired literacy skill
- development of knowledge power
- development of cultural sense among people
- development of habits for exchanging ideas and views
- development of science- tempered readers society.

The Mobile Library Unit of the Institute organizes regular meeting, exhibition, and competition among readers, library visit, and book collection drive from villagers as gift to library. On the Library Day (20th

December, 2002) the Unit organized a special drive for book collection. The latest data reveals that in the year 2002-03 the unit supplied 2777 books to thirty-five rural libraries.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the experience of rural life and analysis of the causes of poverty, Tagore showed the real path of rural reconstruction. He insisted on mass contact for knowledge dissemination; emphasized the need for cooperative activities for the solution of India's grave economic problem, and urged people to utilize traditional rural institutions like *melas* (fairs) and *jatras* (open air opera performance) for rousing popular consciousness and mass entertainment. Sriniketan was Tagore's project of rural reconstruction as he observed " I cannot single-handedly bear the responsibility for the whole of India. I shall conquer only one or two tiny villages. But if I can liberate two or three villages from the bondage of ignorance and incapacity, then on a small scale the idea would be established for the whole of India" [36]. Now in independent India the responsibility Tagore took upon himself has devolved on the shoulders of the Government particularly after the 74th constitutional amendment to spread democracy at grassroots level.

In addition to the first hand experience gathered by Tagore for the development of the rural community, we can add some basic objectives for the development of rural community and help them for lifelong self-education; and contribution to productivity by informing from top state level management to lower level management. The basic objective in Indian context should be to assist the general people to acquire knowledge for their personal development and social well-being and contribute to the communication of already generated knowledge for promoting the society and the nation as a whole.

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