

# Informally informative

IS India an information society? No, according to the book, but it is well on the way to becoming one. What is an information society? One where the information workers exceed the number of agriculture workers. According to this norm, India does not qualify to be called an information society now or even in the next few decades.

Yet there are several million urban-educated people in our country whose lifestyles are similar to those of information workers in the Silicon Valley (the famed high-tech electronics centre in northern California, US), Tokyo or Cambridge. Information workers are individuals whose main responsibilities are to gather, process or distribute information or to produce information technologies like computers or telecommunications that are used by other information workers.

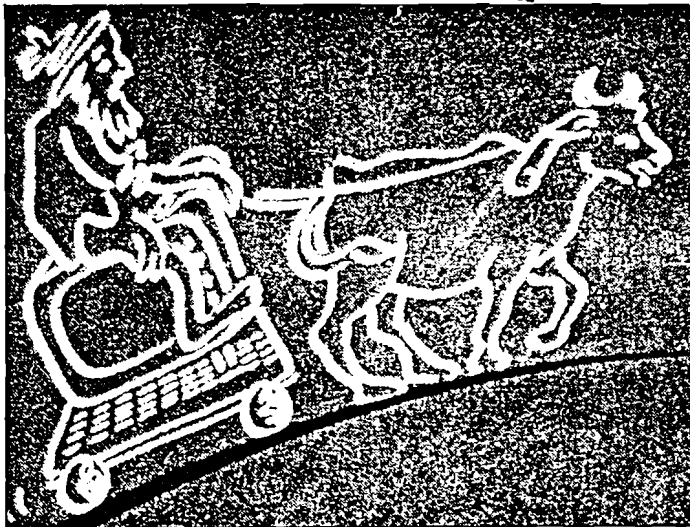
Our own Silicon Valley is in Bangalore where high-tech companies are concentrated (the other concentration being in Pune). Bangalore is considered the country's science and technology capital having the highest concentration of scientific institutions and technical personnel. It is also the country's fastest growing city.

It has been India's argument that technology information and modern mass media should be used for the development of its people. Unfortunately, this has remained unfulfilled mainly due to the lopsided policies followed which have not been in consonance with the declared intentions. Witness the gross backstepping on the use of the TV for development.

Information, which could be a major tool for social transformation, could also tread the path of TV if care is not taken. The explosion in the recent years of the number of market research companies which gather data for TV ratings and provide audience profile to media and advertisers is a case in point. Ironically, communication research in India today serves commercial interests much more than develop-

**INDIA'S INFORMATION REVOLUTION:**  
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mental interests, just as TV serves the urban elite's interests.

The information revolution which can increase the disparities and inequalities between the 'information-rich' and the 'information-poor' could very well usher in a new colonialism not merely between different countries of the world but also within our own country, accentuating the gap between the rich and the poor, the urban and the rural, the privileged and the under-privileged, since information control confers monopoly, power and privileges.

This information hegemony could be prevented if information is used for development, tackling rural problems, illiteracy and so on. Information could be the best ally of a sincere Government in improving the over-all quality of life of the entire society.

India's information revolution takes a peep into the processes of the communication evolution in India and traces the relationship

between information and technology and brings out the implications of the revolution on social and economic development of the country. The strong point of the book is the series of case studies of the individuals, institutions and experiments which have in no small measure contributed to the communication revolution or rode on its first waves to emerge as leaders in their respective fields.

We are thus introduced to Jugi Tandon, an overseas Indian who became a multi-millionaire at the age of 47. His wealth was entirely created in a mere twelve years as he plunged into the manufacture of magnetic recording devices that are used in computer floppy disc drives and developed a process which reduced the time and costs involved in manufacturing magnetic recording equipment for computers.

Gulshan Arora's story is that of catching the audio revolution in India at the first note. Arora,

India's undisputed king of audio was in 1982 a fruit seller. He started to produce and market cassettes and recorded music. Today, he owns four factories which produce not merely audio and video cassettes but VCRs and low-cost black-and-white TV sets. Arora's Supercassettes has a monopoly over the new film music in India. Strangely, the audio mogul continues to sell fruits. Twice a week, Arora returns to his Dariagunj fruit stall in Delhi to sell fruits. In his Mercedes!

THE use of information is brilliantly brought out through illustrations. For instance, Kittur village in Karnataka changed the perception of a telephone as a necessity rather than a luxury even in a village. The setting up of a telephone exchange in the village and giving 74 telephone connections saw an increase of 80 per cent in cash deposits at local banks, an increase of 20-25 per cent in local business incomes, easier and more rapid access to doctors and faster information and news flows.

Yet another illustration of the use of modern technology in reaching across and breaking bureaucratic barriers is that of Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) of Ahmedabad. When the municipal corporation of Ahmedabad provided an alternative space for the vegetable vendors of Manek Chowk who were mostly women, SEWA video-taped the meeting held to inform the women of the municipality's proposal. The women reacted, discussed the suggested solutions. Later when the videotape was shown to the municipal commissioner, the agitated faces of the women, their fear of the police, their distrust of the municipality and their sense of solidarity convinced the commissioner of the problems the women would face. He dropped the proposal.

The informal, easy-to-read style makes the book engaging. Its advantage lies in being, like its subjects, the first to record the dawn of the information age in India. It provides a point of departure for more research and a deeper study of the implications of an information revolution for our society.