

Towards an information society

India's Information Revolution. Arvind Singhal and Everett M. Rogers. Sage Publications, 1989. 244 pages. Rs 90.



The 'cart' in the bullock-cart on the cover page is a computer. The cart rider looks rather decrepit and forlorn (it can't be very comfortable sitting on a PC), but the bullock looks cheerful enough. Singhal and Rogers are telling us that 'India's information revolution is getting ready to happen'.

The 'revolution' started happening in the 1980s: computers came in in a big way in India, Doordarshan services expanded dramatically, the space and telecom sectors made impressive strides and the audio and video cassette industries boomed. And India's white collar (information) workers, who account only for 10 per cent of the country's workforce, earned 42 per cent of its GNP.

India's Information Revolution discusses the elements of this approaching revolution (the choice of the word 'revolution' might surprise, but 'information revolution' must be recognized as the successor of 'industrial revolution'). The book contains plenty of lucid writing (in particular, numerous case illustrations which break the monotony), detailed statistics (organized in 12 figures), and a sincere effort to build and defend a certain hypothesis. In fact, in many ways, the book reads like a very

good thesis (how I wish more Indian theses would read and appear like this book; we still favour poor imitations of the British style instead of the crisp American style adopted here).

There are, in all, eight chapters of which the first two (on communication and development, and on the importance of information) are educative but harder to read. They contain theoretical details, tributes to the great personalities in communication, but also interesting vignettes (about how the Iranian revolution was achieved via the 'little media' of newspapers, radios and audio cassettes; about how the Sabre airline reservation software package gave American Airlines a competitive edge in the early 1980s, etc.), and observations (despite having a very well-developed university system, India has hardly any avenues for serious communication study).

The best writing appears in the next five chapters (devoted to the television, video, telecom and computer 'revolutions' in India). The story of Indian TV is very well told: starting with the SITE programme of 1975-76, the authors take you right up to the *Ramayana* serial of 1987-88. The discussions cover INSAT's expanding network, the coming of the Indian soap opera, TV's promotion of new values of consumerism (the selling of Maggi noodles, for example), and pose uncomfortable questions about the present rôle of Doordarshan. An entire chapter is devoted to the *Hum Log* serial. Although well researched, this chapter spoils the flow of the narrative. *Hum Log* was certainly a vastly successful serial of the genre which both educates and entertains (called 'pro-development soap operas'), but to devote 34 pages (about 14% of the entire text) to this discussion appears to be an aberration. To be fair, the *Hum Log* discussion is interspersed with notes about similar successful pro-development operas in Mexico, Peru, Venezuela, Nigeria, Kenya, etc. And the message is that such soap operas can be valuable in moulding public opinion and instilling good value systems in Third World nations. (I have never understood, though, why such pronouncements are so often restricted only to the Third World)

The chapter on the video revolution also contains a lot of good reading. The profiles on Dhirubhai Shah (Bombay's video pirate who earned over Rs 50 crores in two years) and Gulshan Kumar (whose T-series audio cassettes constitute the first major threat to HMV) are interesting. The case study called 'The Miracle of Manekchowk', however, appears a trifle naive; it is hard to accept that videotapes can, in the normal course, persuade municipal commissioners in India to change their mind. But the power of the videotape is not to be underestimated. After all, Mohamed Amin's video clip on the Ethiopian drought, described elsewhere by the authors, led to the hugely successful song *We Are the World*, which, in turn, raised millions of dollars for the cause; and, more recently, a videotape set off riots in Los Angeles, not very far from where Singhal and Rogers probably still reside.

My favourite chapter in the book is the one on high-tech microelectronics. The descriptions of Silicon Valley make excellent reading ('Over a glass of California chablis they chat not just about their families, sports or hobbies, but about bits and bytes'), and the story of the success of Hewlett and Packard is wonderfully inspiring. The discussions on venture capital and technopolises are lucid, but the narrative falters a bit when the authors turn to India (as a resident of Bangalore, I find the description of the city to be banal, and I certainly cannot forgive the lapse of referring to NAL as 'National Aeronautics Laboratory' or, for that matter, to the MiG as 'MIG').

In fact, Singhal and Rogers seem to tire a little as they reach the end chapters. The telecommunications revolution, for instance, seems to only centre around C-DoT and Pitroda, and the computer revolution too appears to be merely the creation of Rajiv Gandhi and some of the US-returned IT boys. If the authors had looked around, they could have found many more success stories here: to mention just two, the election coverage of Prannoy Roy's team on TV and the remarkable effort by U. N. Sinha and his group at NAL in developing India's first parallel computer at a cost that the authors would probably describe as 'peanuts'.

But as one reaches the end of *India's Information Revolution*, one has to

admit that Singhal and Rogers have written a very significant book. Never mind if the authors have their favourites (we all do!): Rajiv Gandhi, Vikram Sarabhai (to whom the book is dedicated), Sam Pitroda (but of course!), *India Today's* Aron Purie, Wipro's Azim Premji, and the graduate from the IIT (who can apparently do no wrong!). Never mind if the authors sometimes go overboard (while it is entirely fair to credit Pitroda with the initial successes of C-DoT, it may be less than fair to suggest that Pitroda is designing the architecture for a fifth-generation, state-of-the-art supercomputer at C-DAC; elsewhere, the authors quote CDIL's successful executive vice-president Sanjiv Narayan as saying 'our decision to establish new semiconductor operations in Srinagar was thought through

very carefully'. One is not aware of the current fate of CDIL's Srinagar operations, but would be well justified in fearing the worst). Never mind even if the authors occasionally appear guilty of excessive hype (in fact, in an unusual argument—which merits attention—the authors argue that *such hype is, in fact, sometimes desirable*; the argument roughly goes as follows: hype leads to media interest, which leads to popular interest, which, in turn, reinforces positive role types—which of course is a nice thing to happen! Singhal and Rogers, on their next visit to India, will be happy to note that the hype hypothesis now has plenty of takers in India, notably in the government departments!).

The only real criticism is that the book is already badly dated (it first appeared in 1989). Rajiv Gandhi is no

more, Pitroda is no longer actively involved with Indian telecom, *Hum Log's* successor of sorts, *Humraahi*, is doing poorly and cable and satellite TV are now an important new variable in the television and video revolutions. But India's information revolution, which Singhal and Rogers were among the first to spot, marches forward inexorably. There can now be no looking back. In fact, the illustration on the cover page says it all: a bullock willing to climb a steep gradient with its tail awagging must, after all, be quite sure of finding something very worthwhile at the end of its odyssey.

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Erratum

Sulphur enrichment in a sediment core from the central western continental margin of India

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Divisions on the X-axis of Figure 3a (0, 1.00, 2.00, 3.00, 4.00, 5.00 and 6.00), on page 576, are incorrect. Read them as 0, 1.00, 1.50, 2.00, 2.50 and 3.00.