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The Voice of the Voiceless: Community Radio and its Paradigm

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Abstract: Communication theorist, Marshall McLuhan has once viewed radio as an effective medium, most intimate from person-to-person offering a world of unspoken communication between writer-speaker and the listener. Compared to other new media, Radio still dominates in reach, impact and accessibility.The liberalization of the Community Radio policy has created both anxiety and interest in civil society.Although the state owned public service broadcaster, AIR has turned 75, broadcasting in our country continues to be governed by archaic laws and uncompromising bureaucracy (Pavarala and Kanchan 2007*)*. Community Radio as the third type of radio, an alternative to the State radio and commercial radio is now a reality in India. Compared to the limited reach of television, radio's reach is extensive in rural areas. Radio is also the preferred media for young people who listen to news, sports commentary, film songs, radio drama and discussions. This medium of grassroots communication is extremely relevant in today's world dominated by global media conglomerates that seek to impose alien values and cultural norms. The proposed paper highlights and elucidates the various success stories of community radio in India and how it impacts the lesser known groups and serves as a powerful tool of developmental communication.

Keywords: broadcasting, community, functions, India, radio, success stories**.**

Introduction

> In this digitized global age the role of the mass media as a catalyst for change can no longer be denied. The paradigm shift towards equitable, sustainable human development certainly cannot be achieved in the near future if mass media, particularly the electronic media, is not involved in the process. (Chakravarthy 2006)

According to World Association of Community Broadcasters, Community Radio responds to the needs of the community it serves, contributing to its development in favour of social change. It strives to democratize communication through community participation in a different form. Community Radio means radio broadcasting with the objective of serving the cause of the community in the service area by involving members of the community in the broadcast of their programmes. Community Listeners would mean people living in the Coverage Zone of the Community Radio Stations, i.e. in the broadcasting service of the licensee and having interest in the content. It offers a unique advantage of receiving transmission through low cost, battery operated portable receiving sets.

Community radio broadcasting has served to create and foster political and social change worldwide, including improving human rights and spreading democracy. "In almost all cases we find a correlation between the emergence of community radio and political change toward greater democracy" (Youngs 2009). He further asserted that community radio broadcasters are activists "who continue to operate in sometimes very dangerous conditions," facing intimidation, physical violence and even death. The Programmes of Community Radio should be of immediate relevance to the community and focus on issues relating to education, health, environment, agriculture, and community development. At least 50% of content shall be generated with the participation of the local community for which the station has been set up. Transmission of sponsored programmes shall not be

permitted except those sponsored by Central & State Governments and other organizations to broadcast public interest information.

The coming of Community Radio in India

> Attempts were made to provide community listening sets in the villages. While this was left to the initiative of the provincial governments in the pre-independence period, community listening was included as part of the five year plan in 1950. (Chaterjee 1987)

Several non-governmental organisations and media-activist groups campaigned for nearly a decade for the right to set up local radio broadcasting facilities to support their community development work. They also networked to further the cause of community radio in the country. This network, soon after the announcement of the community radio policy, came together in January 2007 to constitute the Community Radio Forum (CRF) of India.

CRF has espoused the mandate to support and promote the setting up of community radio stations in India and to lobby for policy changes that would amplify the progressive nature of the community radio policy and further simplify and democratize the licensing procedures.

The Bangalore-based communication campaign group, 'VOICES' convened a gathering of radio broadcasters, policy planners, media professionals and not-for-profit associations in September 1996 to study how community radio could be relevant to India, and to deliberate on policies appropriate for such an action. A Declaration calling for the establishment of community broadcasting was signed. A suggestion that AIR's local stations should allocate regular airtime for community broadcasting was put forward. Requests were also made for grant of licences to NGOs and other non-profit making groups for running community radio stations. Subsequently, UNESCO made available a portable production and transmission "briefcase radio station"(source: Ministry of information and broadcasting)kit to

VOICES to do experimental broadcasts of programmes for a hands-on learning experience towards the objective of setting up an independently-run community radio station.

A UNESCO sponsored workshop, hosted by an Andhra Pradesh NGO, Deccan Development Society (DDS) from July 17-20, 2000 in Hyderabad issued the 'Pastapur Initiative' on community radio, that urged the government to take its intentions of freeing broadcasting from state monopoly to its logical conclusion, by making media space available not only to private players but also to communities. This landmark document urged the government to create a three-tier structure of broadcasting in India by adding non-profit community radio to the already existing state-owned public radio and private commercial radio.

The spirited campaigning for communities' right to access the airwaves and innumerable representations by organisations, academicians and individuals resulted in the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting organising a workshop supported by the United Nations Development Programme and UNESCO in May 2004 in New Delhi to design an enabling framework for community radio in India. The workshop brought together a large number of community radio enthusiasts, academicians, NGOs and policy makers, who worked out a set of recommendations for a new community radio policy, one that would allow community groups to run their own radio stations. When the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) issued a consultation paper later that year, they arrived at largely the same formulations for community radio.

In July 2004, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting prepared a draft policy based on the May consultations. Subsequently, community radio groups in India launched an online petition campaign, urging the inclusion of the right of communities within the community radio policy thereby ending the discrimination against rural and poor communities. In October 2005, the draft policy was referred to a group of ministers, who took about a year to give its approval after deliberating upon several contentious issues such as advertising, news and information, licence fee, and spectrum availability.

These intense advocacy efforts and passionate debates about community radio broadcasting for the social sector finally capitulated into an inclusive community radio policy approved by the Union Cabinet in November 2006.

According to the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Government of India, the current status (as on 25 April 2013) of Community Radio in India is as follows:

- No. of applications received so far, from 2004 to 05 Feb 2013 (including 104 under 2002 CR Guidelines): 1200

- Letters of Intent (LOI) issued: 428

- Grant of Permission of Agreement(GOPA) signed: 191

- Operational Community Radio Stations: 148

- Number of applications rejected: 545 (Source: Indian Ministry of Broadcasting – community Radio Stations)

The principal functions of Community Radio:

• To reflect and promote local identity, character and culture

Community Radios are Cultural ambassadors which bridge varied traditional ethnicities of our country. It acts as a medium for cultural expressions through local music, dance, poetry, theatre and storytelling. Local performers are encouraged to go on air uninhibited by considerations of the 'professional standards' they may have acquired from mainstream media.

• To create a diversity of voices and opinions

Our Country's cultural discourses of unity in diversities are broadcasted in more harmonious and democratic ways through Community radio. Community radio tries to air objectively all sides of a

discussion without being biased and it definitely acts as the voice of the unheard.

• To encourage open dialogue and democratic process

It provides an independent platform for interactive discussion about matters and decisions of importance to the community. In essence, the core of democratic process is the ability of people to hear and make them heard. Community radio provides the forum for that to happen, with the decentralization process in many countries that aims to bring democratic decision-making closer to the people concerned. And what is happening at the grassroots level – as portrayed by the community radio programming – can be heard by local government and private institutions, as well as being relayed to policy makers, thus making it possible to design development initiatives that best meet the aspirations and needs of the people.

• To promote social change and development

In marginalized communities, people have their individual perceptions about their situation, but what is required for change and development is a collective perception of the local reality and option to improve it. This collective perception can only be achieved through internal discussions to analyse specific problems, identify possible solutions, and mobilize the appropriate groups for action. Community radio provides the perfect platform for this internal discussion.

• To promote good governance and civil society

Community radio plays as a community watchdog that makes local authorities and politicians more conscious of their public responsibilities. The marginalized and the oppressed normally have no way to complain when authorities take advantage of them, but community radio gives them a voice to air their grievances and obtain their due rights.

Types of programmes that can be broadcast on Community Radio:

The Programmes of Community Radio should be of immediate relevance to the community and focus on issues relating to education, health, environment, and agriculture and rural and community development. At least 50% of content shall be generated with the participation of the local community, for which the station has been set up. Transmission of sponsored programmes shall not be permitted except those sponsored by Central & State Governments and other organizations to broadcast public interest information. It shall not broadcast any programme which relate to news and current affairs and are otherwise political in nature.(Source: Indian Ministry of Broadcasting – community Radio Stations)

The voice of the voiceless: Success stories of Community Radio

Community radio Station has also helped communities during calamities and natural disasters like tsunami, floods, and earthquakes, etc.So far, 125 CRS have become operational in the country till December 2011 of which 37 are operated by NGOs, 78 by the educational institutions and 10 by Krishi Vigyan Kendras. In the last two years, Letter of Intents (LOIs) increased from 186 to 363 and the number of operational CRS increased from 64 to 125. Tamil Nadu has the highest number of operational CRS in the country. (Sur 2008)

Although success stories of the CRS are available in abundance, a few of which cannot be missed out include Radio Mewat, Radio Mattoli, and Jnan Taranga from the North-east. The biggest success of Radio Mewat has been in the revival of the dying art form of 'Mirasi'. Mewat is well known for its Mirasis, the Muslim folk singers who can narrate epics like the Mahabharata. These Mirasis are the symbols of religious tolerance.

Radio Mewat, a community radio station, has contributed in promoting this dying art form and has given broadcast space to the Mirasis in several programmes. In fact, they have written lyrics for songs of education, health, hygiene and sanitation etc. which indeed is an indication of the success story of the radio.

Radio Mewat was launched on September 1, 2010, in Nuh, Haryana, by an NGO – Seeking Modern Applications for Real Transmission (SMART). It broadcasts four hours a day and reaches out to over five lakh people in a radius of 25 kilometres. Mewat is a backward area, faring very low on all social indicators, with the literacy rate at an abysmal low of 24 per cent. Only 5 per cent households have a television set. Educating people about the very concept of a Community Radio was a Herculean task. The Radio Mewat Station has a tough job popularizing the radio station in a district where elders are suspicious of any new idea and are very protective towards their women folk. Also, there are power outages for days together. Moreover, being in the interiors, it is difficult to get experienced people to work on a regular basis.

However, Mewat has the highest penetration of mobile phones. This has served as an advantage for Radio Mewat, as most of mobile phones these days have FM Radio. Radio Mewat, according to annual report of the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, has been very active in interacting with the local community. Field workers regularly visit the villages for stories and also to engage with the communities. About 40 locals are actively engaged in creating a buzz about the radio station.

The programmes on Radio Mewat are need based. Besides regular programmes on education, health, women empowerment, safe drinking water and small family norms, Radio Mewat also broadcasts information about various schemes of development viz. MNREGA, microfinance, Public Distribution System (PDS) etc.

An exclusive programme called "Gaon Gaon ki Baat" gives an opportunity to every village to talk about their problems, achievements, unique heritage and their leaders. Radio Mewat uses all formats including jingles, songs, interviews, anchors and narrations depending on the subject. The feedback received through phone calls, visits by the Commissioner, District Collector and several others including the locals who come from distant villages to know about the radio and opportunities, is a pointer to the influence of the radio station and its reach. Maximum calls are received from women during the afternoon

transmission. Based on feedback received, the programming is modified. The station is now working on programmes which educate the people about their rights, etc.

Jnan Taranga, the first community radio of the North-East has been launched by Krishna Kanta Handique State Open University, Guwahati (Chittoor 2011). Though it is run by the University, it has been actively engaged with community to draw talent, design content and reach out to the audiences. Jnan Taranga broadcasts 20 hours a day. The studio has been set up at a cost of Rs.60 lakh. Expenditure includes cost on various equipments for the studio, transmission equipment, training (including in-house and on community), human resource, production and contingency. An amount of Rs.40,000 per month is being spent for running the CRS presently. Though the University is committed to bear the expenditure, generation of revenue in the form of advertisement is necessary to sustain the expenditure.

Programmes are based on community development on issues like health and hygiene, women empowerment, rights of the children, environment and bio-diversity, career counselling, governance, agriculture and entrepreneurship, etc. Community based programmes constitute over 70 per cent of the total broadcast of 'Jnan Taranga'. Educational programmes including awareness on the RTE Act and RTI Act are broadcast regularly in between the community programmes. Over 500 programmes of various durations have been recorded and around 1000 CDs of songs and feature programmes have been collected with the right to broadcast the same from the respective authorities. Hence, dissemination of knowledge, preserving culture, its diversity, is a key role radio station can play to ensure that this is truly a community radio serving people. Archiving and documenting the people's knowledge will build a valuable repository for academic learning.

Suggestions

- The huge network of Self Help Groups (SHGs) in various Indian communities should be encouraged to set up Community Radio and use this medium for development.

- The possibilities of making linkages between Common Service Centre (CSC) and Community Radio may be explored.
- Large and capable NGOs should be identified and sensitised to set up Community Radio Station.

CONCLUSION

Radio, the most affordable and accessible medium of mass communication is no doubt a viable weapon of public opinion in any democracy, especially in a developing country like India. Between 2002 and 2006, Community Radio in India had been equated with campus radio, run mainly by the educational institutions as an extension of the curriculum. But with the introduction of Community Radio policy in 2006, which embodied the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) as initiators of Community Radio, the reach and dimension of this platform has broadened immensely. Our world has been changing and communications are central to this change. The need of the hour therefore, is to create awareness among people about the immense potential of Community Radio (Shrivastava 2005). Community Radio is an extraordinary and an invisible medium to give voice to the voiceless. It provides an opportunity to the community to speak about issues concerning their lives. Community Radio Stations (CRS) are run by the community for the community. Kanchan Kumar also provides a comprehensive historical analysis of broadcasting policy in India, highlighting various Governments' actions since independence, caught between autonomy and control (2006). Community Radio Stations are considered to be essential for a diverse country like India. It can be an effective tool in bringing awareness to the people at the door step about various flagship programmes of the government. Hence, there is a need to provide greater push to the CRS movement in the country ensuring its reach in every nook and corner touching the lives of millions of people.

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