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Role of Community Radio in India

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Abstract

This paper looks at the role of community radio in India especially in small town and rural areas. The role of NGOs is also described in this paper to provide community radio services in India. Advantages of community radio over the Television, AIR & FM are also described in this paper.

Key Words: *Radio, local radio, programmes, audience, NGOs, community, participation, development.*

Radio is a fascinating medium among the various mass communication media because of its special characteristics. It continues to be as relevant and potent as it was in the early years despite the emergence of more glamorous media. It is a truism that in the first phase of broadcasting spanning three decades from the early twenties, radio reigned alone or was the dominant player. However, over a period of time, the media scene has changed drastically. Television with its inherent strength of audio-visual component has captured the imagination of the people. The advent of satellite television, the Internet and the convergence of technology have added further dimensions in media utilization patterns. However, despite the presence of a plethora of media, there is room and scope for each medium. Experience has revealed that 'new technologies add things on but they don't replace'. One medium is not displaced by another - each medium reinvents itself in the context of changes in the communication environment. In the changed media scenario, radio is reorienting itself with more innovative programmes and formats.

Unlike the live medium of the stage, where there are live performers (speaker, actor, etc.) and live audience, radio is a 'sightless' or a 'viewless' medium. In radio, the performer does not see their audience (called listener) and the listeners cannot see the performer, the talker, the actor, etc. That is why radio is sometimes called the blind medium (Vel Geilgud, BBC Drama Chief, 1952). Since it is a blind or sightless medium, the performer (announcer, newsreader, discussant, narrator, etc.) has to creatively conjure up images of their listeners. The listeners too have to imagine the performance creatively. But the performer must spark off the imagination of the listeners with expressive performance or communication.

The role of the mass media is to provide the audience information, education or entertainment or all the three balanced in different proportions. The role of radio, as a medium of mass communication varies from country to country. There are radio networks which devote themselves exclusively to entertainment. They are commercial enterprises which are run with profit motive serving trade interests. They carry a large number of advertisements along with programmes. There are radio networks operated by educational institutions, which specialize in educational programming. The third category of radio broadcasts are community broadcasters. The local

communities or NGOs serving them operate radio service for the benefits of the local community. The most important and universally recognized category of broadcasting is often referred to as Public Service Broadcasting which uses radio for public service by providing a blend of programmes of information, education and entertainment in accordance with the communication needs of the people it serves. Alfred Smerdits, noted communicator after a survey of broadcasting in Europe, observed that the public service media must perform the "democratic task of providing independent, free and pluralistic information and promoting cultural development." Pierre Juneau, of the World Radio & TV Council visualized a larger role encompassing not only information, education and entertainment, but also cultural enlightenment.

In communication, there are certain things which the people want and some other things which they need. Radio can bring about the convergence between the two through appropriate programming mix. To Lord Reith who helped the BBC to develop as a public service broadcasting organization, information and education were its predominant components. Merlyn Rees, Privy Councilor, United Kingdom setting out the parameters of public service broadcasting observed that the public service broadcasting must be the one which is available to the entire population. It must be universally attractive. In other words, it must be concerned with as many interests and tastes as possible. Minorities and disadvantaged groups who suffer discrimination must receive special attention. Broadcasting must be distanced from vested interests.

Radio has certain unique advantages for development communication under Indian conditions. However, this potential has largely gone untapped. Unlike the press, radio gets through to an illiterate population. Compared to television or film, radio is relatively cheap and portable, so radio broadcasts can be localized to each community, thus appealing to local people. Radio can also effectively reach individuals with less formal education and lower socio economic status; these individuals are usually the priority audience segment for rural development, family planning, and public health initiatives. Even though radio only appeals to the sense of hearing, it is still most effective channel for reaching the vast audience of rural poor.

In developing countries, the radio is looked upon as catalytic agent for development. The Vidyalankar Committee constituted by the Indian Planning Commission in 1963 envisaged an active role for radio when it observed "our development task is so great and our population so large that only by the most efficient possible programmes of public information can we hope to reach our people often enough and effectively enough to activate on the needed scale, discussion processes and subsequent actions in the cities, towns and villages". According to a policy document of the Government of India, "radio should become an input in the nation building tasks and must strengthen the confidence of the people, promote the concept of self-reliance and encourage forces of unity and national harmony."

In tune with various policy guidelines, the educational and information programmes of radio aim at preparing the people to receive and assimilate the new opportunities created for their advancement and well-being. They seek to strengthen the confidence of the people, promote the concept of self-reliance, encourage forces of unity and national harmony and help in the establishment of an egalitarian society. In the preparation of software to realize these objectives, the programme planners constantly bear in mind of what Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru said while addressing the Constituent Assembly (Legislative) on March 15, 1948. Referring to the approach in broadcasting programmes he said "If anybody is going to sermonize, I am not going to listen to that sermon . . . you must do it in an entertaining way." Bertolt Brecht, renowned playwright warned that

the 'one-way' nature of radio would condemn it to sterility. The organisation of Charcha Mandals in the early phase of farm broadcasting facilitated participatory programming. Akashvani's Farm school programme, the People's Forum Programmes are some of the later-day innovations to make radio a two-way communication medium constantly striving to "reach the people effectively enough to activate on the needed scale, discussions, processes and action. The Phone-in programme, Voice Mail Programmes, the People's Forum Programmes (which while voicing the grievances of the people bring the administration and the audiences on a common platform in the exercise for resolving problems) and the radio-bridge programmes connecting experts and the listeners situated in different places are all aimed at strengthening the two-way communicating system. Various educational programme projects have an in-built provision for listeners' participation.

Radio is the main source of news and entertainment for most of India. All India Radio is the top tier in radio coverage, as the public service broadcaster. Private FM has now become the second tier. Community radio promises to be the third tier, closest to the people.

Community Radio implies a range of terms like 'alternative', 'radical' or citizen radio. Traditionally in sociology, a 'community' is defined as a group of interacting people living in a common location. Community radio is often built around concepts of access and participation, and so the term 'community' may be thought of as often referring to geographical communities based around the possible reach of the signal, i.e., the people who can receive the message, and their potential to participate in the creation of such messages.

The significant development in radio broadcasting all over the world is the concept of Community radio. It has come to be known as the 'narrow casting' as opposed to 'broadcasting'. The introduction of the community radio is a milestone not only in reaching out to the remotest area but also persuading the citizen to share in the vision and excitement of development. With the avowed objective of developing itself as community broadcasting, the local radio strives to demolish the division between the broadcaster and the audience and serve as a link between the citizen and the extension agencies. In course of time, these community radio stations would act as a catalytic agent in galvanizing the local community into action for their own development.

In India, this concept can be effectively harnessed keeping in view the variety in region, background, culture, language, education and economic status. Community radio stations can be used to project and reflect the needs, desires, problems, joys and sorrows of a society clearly defined within a limited area. For example, the need to construct a new road, remove stagnant water, put down gang warfare or whatever problem is being faced by the people in a specific area, could be dealt with in a meaningful way, Fruitful negotiations could be held by the affected people with area development workers, local authorities and voluntary agencies. Similar background of, the people facilitates problem solving, and imparting instructions on various development related issues.

The mainstream media is unable to cater to the true information needs of the community, as it is primarily market driven and run with profit maximizing motive. Hence, the question of alternative media comes, which definitely has to have space in terms of localization of content, participation and involvement of the community.

Generally speaking, after the television appeared on the scene, radio listening has declined all over the world. Hence, radio had to change its style of functioning in order to meet the challenge from television. A lot of importance is given to broadcasting at the local or the grassroots levels in most countries. Though this local or community radio movement started in the 1960s and the 1970s in western countries, it reached the developing countries only in the 1980s and the 1990s. In India

,the campaign to legitimize community radio began in the mid-1900s,soon after the Supreme Court of India decreed in 1995 that “airwaves are public property.”

All India Radio is the state monopoly broadcasting organization in India. It’s centralized broadcasting and bureaucratic approach prevents people’s large-scale participation in broadcasting. The *Chanda* and *Verghese* enquiry committees had suggested the introduction of local radio stations with enlarged participatory approach all over India. However, the Government of India decided to start local radio stations during the sixth five-year plan only. Therefore, in some places, local stations were started on an experimental basis.

Community Radio is a new concept in broadcasting in India. Each of the stations serves a small area, providing utility services reaching right into the heart of the community which uses the microphone to reflect and enrich its life and artistic expression.

The first experiment in local/community radio was conducted in Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu. The experiment was launched on October 30, 1984. The main objective of this station is to support the development of socio-economic and cultural objectives of the local people. Besides providing information, education and entertainment this local radio station disseminates information relating to government policies and programmes extensively and motivates the people to participate in the national endeavor for integrated development of the country. Other experiments have been carried out in rural areas of Bangalore, Karnataka and Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh.

Several NGOs use local radio to further their development activities. *Chetana*(Kolkata) and *Ravi Bharati*(Patna), for instance records their programmes on adult education, in the field and using local talents.

In 2006, the Government of India notified new community radio guidelines, which permitted NGOs and other civil society organizations to own and operate community radio stations. By 2008, the ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Government of India, had received 297 applications for community radio licenses, including 141 from NGOs and other civil society organizations, 105 from educational institutions and 51 for ‘farm radio’ stations to be run by agricultural universities and agricultural extension centers. Of these, 107 community radio stations were cleared for licensing through the issue of *Letters of Intent*. Thirteen *Grant of Permission Agreements* (GOPA) were signed with license applicants under the new scheme. Soon after, there were 38 operational community radio stations in the country. Of these, two are run by NGOs and the rest by educational institutions.

The first community-based radio station, licensed to an NGO was launched on 15th October 2008-‘*Sangham Radio*’ in Pastapur village, Medak district, Andhra Pradesh. *Sangham Radio*, which broadcasts on 90.4 MHz, is licensed to Deccan Development Society (DDS), an NGO that works with women’s group in about 75 villages of Andhra Pradesh. The second NGO-led community radio station in India was launched on 23rd October 2008 in Madhya Pradesh. Named ‘Radio Bundelkhand’ after the Bundelkhand region of central India where it is located, the radio station is licensed to the Society for Development Alternatives (DA), a Delhi-based NGO.

According to the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, 47 community radio stations were operational in India by 1st November 2009, including 45 campus- based stations and two community radio stations run by NGOs. By December 2009, the number of community radio stations run by civil society groups had shot up, including Sangham Radio, Radio Bundelkhand, Mann Deshi Tarang(Satara, Maharashtra), Namma Dhwani(Budikote, Karnataka), Radio Mattioli

(Wayland, Kerala), Kalanjiam Samuga Vanoli (Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu). Today more than 160 community radio stations are functioning in various states of India. By 4th December 2009, the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting had issued GOPA for 62 community radio stations. Most of the GOPAs were issued to educational institutions. For instance, among the campus-based community radio stations started in 2009, SARANG 107.8 is one in Karnataka, when few others have received SACFA (Standing Committee Clearance for Frequency Allocation). SARANG 107.8 is run by St Aloysius College, Mangalore. Symbolically, the name implies 'all colours' of Mangalore signifying the union of various social, religious, linguistic communities and their harmonious existence.

Community radio in India has many advantages over All India Radio and Private FM. Programmes nearly always in the local languages deal with local issues involving ordinary people so that villagers and town folk understand what they are about. Just hearing themselves on radio is an empowering experience for many of the marginalized sections in society. In India farmers, tribals and women identify strongly with community radio. The local communities of farmers, fisher folk, medical/legal experts, students, workers contribute regularly to this radio. As such health and hygiene, feedback pertaining to agriculture and fisher folk issues, road safety, water conservation, rain water harvesting, folk culture and life, as well as entertainment by local residents and students are the hallmark of this radio.

The need of the hour is to educate the masses, create awareness and cater to the needs of the people at the grass-roots level. Community radio stations are expected to produce at least 50% of their programmes locally, as far as possible in local languages or dialect. Setting up of successful community radios can help to empower and give a voice to the people of India, and in turn strengthen the tenets of democracy. Though there is a long way to go, the realization itself is a step towards a brighter future.

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