Centering Marginalized Voices: The Study of Community Radio in India as an Agent of Social Change

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Community Radio is a medium which brings different social threads together and weaves a vibrant fabric where all the different threads mingle together without compromising their original composition. Freedom of speech and expression is the cornerstone of this medium. In India, Community Radio started its journey in 2004, with the purpose of bringing different sections of the society together so that they can share their experiences, fears, and ambition. Social intervention has been one of the primary agenda Community Radio. Through various awareness-raising programs, it aims to bring positive social change in the lives of people residing around its transmission zone. It also aims to include different sub-sections of its community who are often excluded from the mainstream media.

Keywords: participatory communication, social change, inclusion, media ownership

Background of the Study

People living in the periphery have always been at the crux of development discourse, but as the recipients of development measures rather than as active participants in the process. Sustainable development demands that people actively participate in the debates and decisions that have an effect on their lives. At one hand, they need receive information whereas, on the other hand, they should voice their opinion. People at the grassroots are often excluded from the developmental process because they lack the resources or skills that are necessary to be a part of this process. Also many groups like women are kept silent by cultural traditions. This fact is highlighted in Boserup's book *Women's Role in Economic Development*,¹ where she mentions how the policy makers are negligent of women's contribution in economy. Sustainable development can be achieved when these oppressed people can control and manage their means of communication. Support for communication in the context of development does not just mean providing more information to poor people but it means giving them "voice". It means enabling them to be the producers of information as well as participate actively in decision-making.

Development Communication has been defined as

purposive communication intended to influence the developing areas of a nation or region in such a manner that the people of that area or region are socially, politically and economically transformed-their wellness being enveloped in an atmosphere of freedom where all citizens are free to pursue their noble goals in life without slavish subservience to the centres of authority. The purpose of development communication is to be stated in terms of desirable social change. Desirable social change includes better social relations based on equal or better sharing of the resources available in

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¹ See Ester Boserup (1970), *Woman's Role in Economic Development*.

society in a dignified manner. (Vilanilam, 2009, p. 97)

While technology is blamed for making individuals more self-centred, it also acts as a valuable tool for bringing diverse communities together. The birth of new media has helped people to access information and participate in the process which can bring a change in their life but it also risks expanding the gap between haves and have nots, those who have the access and skills to participate in the development process and those who lack these resources. Thus, instead of bridging the digital-divide, it has the potential of widening the gap. Speaking on the pros and cons of social media and locating community radio in this new media space, Manish Tiwari said that

if you go by the estimates that are available on the public domain, India may be having around 7 crores broadcasters, who are on twitter, who are on facebook, who are on various other media platforms. So, therefore the ability of people to be able to put out their views in the public space has gone up exponentially. and while we have the proliferation of the instruments of information dissemination on one hand, you have a growing intolerance and a growing impatience with the ability to be able to accommodate if not appreciate each other's view point...while we have empowered people, technology has given us the opportunity to become increasingly public with our private views and ability to be able to take in that cross section of opinion, unfortunately, a thin skin syndrome with a lack of a better expression. Therefore, I was always trying to figure as where community radios figure in this paradigm.²

The basic characteristics that sets community radio apart from commercial and public-service radio is its non-profit nature, community participation and community ownership. It is managed by its community and ensures democratic participation in the management and governance of its structure.

Community radio helps in connecting individual's listeners to a broader community by bringing people of diverse socio-economic class together. Madhevan, listener and performer of Puduvai Vaani spoke on how the radio station helped him to have a better understanding of the society he lives in.

Puduvai Vaani helped me and my friends, I know them personally and spoken to them (sic.), to know my society because whenever we discuss about a situation or about like transportation situation or transportation problem, in live programmes I started to get the news and views of people from the all levels of society like from people below poverty line, from various communities like teaching staff, non teaching staff and student community. This helped me to know about my society and improve my decision making qualities. I am really thankful to Puduvai Vaani...it told me that you are not only part of the society, there is much to explore, to learn...consider everyone...consider the impact of the problem on everyone before taking a decision.³

Objective

Community radio became operational in the year 2004 in India. It is committed to air "developmental, agricultural, health, educational, environmental, social welfare, community development and cultural programmes. The programming should reflect the special interests and needs of the local community" (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2002, p. 5)⁴. Through case study of four community radio stations, this paper documents the one decade long journey of the community radio in India and tries to analyze the potential of community radio as an agent for bringing social change.

² Manish Tewari, the then Minister of State, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting spoke on the 3rd National Community radio Sammelan, organized by Ministry of Information and Broadcasting on 9-11 February, 2002, Vigyan Bhavan, New Delhi. The video was viewed on the site <http://edaa.in/crsammelan2013/videos> (accessed on 17.7.13 at 1.00 p.m.).

³ Personal interview as part of the case-study of Puduvai Vaani, the community radio station of Pondicherry University, on 4.10.13 at 3.30 pm.

⁴ Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. *Policy Guidelines for setting up Community radio Stations in India*, New Delhi: 2002, 5.

The paper also tries to foreground the issue of media ownership. The advent of commercial radio in the year 2000 resulted in a kind of revival of radio among the people in India. Over the years, there was a gradual decline of public-service radio mostly in urban India. Though community radio came into existence in 2004, but it took some time to make its presence felt. Community radio stands in sharp contrast to the commercial radio and the public-service radio. A community radio mainly relies on government sponsored projects, public interest advertisements, limited advertisement for its sustenance. Since, community radio does not depend on advertisements for its survival; advertisers also have no say in the programming. The management structure is also less complex and hierarchical than either commercial or public-service radio. This helps a community radio to remain true its ideology and help in voicing the concerns of its people without any bias. Community radio operates with very few paid staff. It relies mainly on volunteers. It endorses participatory decision-making practice which is in contrast to the other tiers of broadcasting.

Two characteristics vital to community radio is access and participation. Access can be related at two levels: choice and feedback. At the level of choice, it includes the right of the individual to listen to a particular programme, where and when s/he wants to listen. It also refers to availability of communication tools and resources for members of the community. In practical terms, this means that community members have a platform which will air diverse programmes from entertainment to education. At the level of feedback, access implies the right to comment and criticize and direct participation of audience during the transmission of programmes.

Participation refers to involvement of community at different levels: production processes, decision-making, and planning. At the production level, it implies making available the technical facilities to the community members for recording of the programmes. At the decision-making level, participation implies involvement of its members in the content, management, and sustenance of the station. Whereas, at planning level, participation includes the rights of the citizens to contribute to the formulation of policies, defining objectives and future plans for the station. Participation is closely aligned with the idea of self-management, which is the advanced level of participation. In a nutshell, access refers to using media for the common people where they have the right to choose from varied programmes and also give feedback on the programmes. Participation requires high-level of involvement in production, management, and planning of the station.⁵

Access is not only limited at an individual level. At a collective level, access refers to right to operate a community radio. The Community Radio Movement in India gained momentum after the historical judgment of Supreme Court that declared “Airwaves constitute public property and must be utilized for advancing public good”⁶ (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2002) in 1995. The policy guidelines give access to operate a community radio to educational institutes, non-governmental organizations and *Krishi Vigyan Kendras*. Political organizations and their affiliated wings like trade unions, students unions are not given access to own a community radio (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2002, p. 2).

Methodology

This article is part of the doctoral thesis of the author on the growth and development of community radio

⁵ See Frances J. Berrigan (1979), *Community Communications*.

⁶ See Petitioner: The Secretary, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, versus Respondent: Cricket Association of Bengal and Anr, date of judgment 09/02/1995. Bench: Sawant, P. B, Mohan, S. (j), Jeevan Reddy, B. P. (j). Citation: 1995 AIR 1236 1995 SCC (2) 161, JT 1995 (2) 110 1995 SCALE (1)539. Judgment: 226, I (B) (<http://www.indiankanoon.org/doc/539407/>). Accessed on 11.6.13 at 5.10 pm.

in India. The broad research question of the study is to analyze the impact of community radio on its listeners. To measure the impact, survey of selected community radio stations became mandatory for the study. The radio stations mentioned in the study were selected on the basis of their year of operation, affiliation to the host institute and their geographical location. In accordance with the policy guidelines for the community radio issued by Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, educational institutions, non-government organizations, and agricultural institutions are affiliated to host a community radio station. Two stations from each of the affiliation will be used for the doctoral study. Since India is a heterogeneous country, it is interesting to study the different cultural practices, societal norms of different communities. To remain true to the title, it was mandatory to spread throughout the length and breadth of the country. If looked from closed quarters, it may be noted that representation from urban and rural India is also taken in account while selecting the stations, so as to see whether radio as a medium of dissemination is popular in both the regions. As in urban areas, the options are more in terms of commercial radio; does community radio hold it fort in the region? Also, there are high-rises in urban India which poses problem in transmission. How does community radio overcome these impediments were few questions that were asked to the listeners. In rural area, were the people ready to make the transition from recipient of information to makers of information was one of the key questions.

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Table 1

Description of the Community Radio Stations

Name of the community radio station	Affiliation and location	Launched
Anna CR	Anna University, Chennai (South India, Urban)	2004
Radio Banasthali	Banasthali University, Tonk (West India, Rural)	2005
PuduvaaiVaani	Pondicherry University, Puducherry (South India, Semi-Rural)	2009
Radio Namaskar	Young India NGO, Konark (South-east India, Rural)	2010

The case-studies included interviews with the head of the organization, management staff and listener or performer of the radio stations. These interviews helped to explore the level of involvement, ownership, and relationship of the community with the station and analyze the impact of the station on its community. The researcher conducted focus-group discussions and in-depth interviews. These interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed on a computer.

Community Radio: Definition

As stated above, the focus is on equal access and participation to all the members of the community. As defined by the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters AMARC, community radio has three aspects: non-profit, community ownership, and control and community participation (Pavarala & Kanchan, 2007, p. 16). In its aim and objectives, it is different from other forms of radio. Community radio emphasizes on freedom of speech which is in direct contrast to state-owned or commercial radio which disseminate the view-point of the state or the capitalist society.

India is diverse in terms of culture, language, and socio-economic backgrounds. There are many

communities whose access to information and self-expression are not always guaranteed by the state-owned or commercial radio. The state-owned radio in India is to a large extent irrelevant to the concerns of the common people because it act as a propaganda machine to distribute the view-point of the State whereas the commercial radio is truly “mass” in terms of consumption but it is extremely limited in terms of participation. At the very core, development—if it is to be sustainable—must be a process that allows people to be their own agents of change: to act individually and collectively, using their own ideas, practices and knowledge and own their means of communication and participate in the decision-making. Thus, community radio can play an important part in bringing sustainable development.

Jamaila, a participant of Anna Community radio, believe that community radio not only helps in increasing self-worth but it also helps in making different sections of the society sensitive to each other. She also hints at the level of belongingness of the community to the station.

I was really put back in my family...I was being dumped. Anna CR brought me out...whenever we come to Anna CR we feel we are in our mom's place. When we get married, we go to our husband place...then we come to our mother's place...we feel so comfortable, so secured. Anna CR is like that for us. And when I came to Anna CR, I was a mom for twins...I used to feed here, students used to take care of them and I would produce programmes and that made me very satisfied, secured...Anna CR made our life very comfortable and successful too.⁷

Emergence of Community Radio in India

The seed of community radio was present in the MacBride Report, published by UNESCO in 1980. The Report analyzed the negative aspect of one-way flow of communication and information moving from richer countries to poorer countries and on a national level from those in power to those in periphery (*Many Voices One World*, 1980, p. 28).

The community radio movement in India gained momentum due to the 1995 judgment of Supreme Court. The historical judgment of Supreme Court that declared “Airwaves constitute public property and must be utilized for advancing public good”⁸ was set against a dispute between the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and the Cricket Association of Bengal. The primary holding of the case was that airwaves were public property and hence there could be no monopoly over it by state controlled media, like Doordarshan. While the judgment does not directly speak of community radio, there are important implications that the judgment makes for community radio. The court also reiterated the right of freedom of speech and expression enshrined in Article 19(1).

The Supreme Court judgment led to the Bangalore Declaration of 1996, which formed the basis of advocacy for community radio. Policy planners and media professionals discussed the importance of community radio in India. The Bangalore Declaration on Radio of September, 1996 has emphasized that community radio would: “besides educating and entertaining people, connect people with people through participatory or circular communication, connect with organizations and communities, and finally, connect people with government and public service agencies”.⁹

⁷ Personal interview as part of the case-study of Anna Community radio, Chennai, Tamil Nadu on 26.9.13 at 11.00 am.

⁸ See Petitioner: The Secretary, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Versus Respondent: Cricket Association of Bengal and Anr, date of judgment 09/02/1995. Bench: Sawant, P. B, Mohan, S. (j), Jeevan Reddy, B. P. (j). Citation: 1995 AIR 1236 1995 SCC (2) 161, JT 1995 (2) 110 1995 SCALE (1)539. Judgment: 226, I (B) (<http://www.indiankanoon.org/doc/539407/>). Accessed on 11.6.13 at 5.10 pm.

⁹ See from <http://www.ddsindia.com/www/radiostn.htm> (accessed on 12.7.11 at 1.30 pm).

The Supreme Court judgment paved the way for Broadcasting Bill in 1997. The Bill seeks to set up an “autonomous” Broadcasting Authority of India (BAI). It was decided some of the major functions of the authority would be:

- (1) To ensure that a wide range of broadcasting services are available throughout India;
- (2) To ensure services of high quality and offer a wide range of programmes to appeal to a variety of tastes and interests;
- (3) To determine the programme code and standard;
- (4) To take necessary action for violation of code, violation of condition of license.

After the drafting of Broadcasting Bill, UNESCO sponsored workshop in Hyderabad and Pastapur (Andhra Pradesh) which published the *Pastapur Initiative on Community Radio* in 2000, urging the government to create a three-tier structure of broadcasting in India—state-owned public radio, private commercial radio, and a non-profit community radio.

In December 2002, the Government of India approved a policy for the grant of licenses for setting up of community radio Stations to well established educational institutions. In 2004, Anna FM, the first community radio in India saw the light of the day. Only educational institutes of high repute were permitted to operate and own a community radio. In 2006, NGOs and Agricultural institutes were permitted to operate community radio stations. “Sangham Radio”, the first community-based radio station that was completely different from campus-based radio was launched on 2008 in Pastapur village, Andhra Pradesh and was set up by Deccan Development Society (DDS).

AMARC defines community radio as “a station that responds to the needs of the community which it serves and that contributes to its development in a progressive manner promoting social change”¹⁰. In this regard, Manish Tiwari said that

Community radio movement has a hugely important role to play...those concerns are neither discussed, nor debated nor deliberated with the vigor which they deserve. Unfortunately, because some of those issues are extremely dry, they are extremely localized and obviously would not generate the kind of excitement which advertisers are looking for which essentially are the revenue model on which the broadcasting industry thrives. Therefore, they do not find that kind of visibility or that kind of display on what we call the colloquially national discourse. Those are the real issues...issues of water, issues with regard to how the rural communities or farming community need to innovate and improve the techniques.¹¹

One of the usefulness of community radio is that it also acts as a connecting link between different communities across the country. At a local level, it provides a platform to the marginalized communities to voice their concerns whereas at a national level it brings different marginalized communities across the country together. The individual communities thus realize that they are not alone and there are other groups like them who share their concerns. It is at this stage that a sense of solidarity develops between them. This kind of solidarity may give birth to a movement which will help them to improve their position within the current system or it may give birth to a new system which will be based on “equality and freedom to all citizens” (Partho, n.d.).

Media ownership was further concentrated in the year 2000 when Government of India (GoI) decided to auction the FM frequency to the private players. In the same year, GoI approved a policy for the grant of

¹⁰ See <http://www2.amarc.org/?q=node/47> (accessed on 17.5.11 at 2.00 pm).

¹¹ See <http://edaa.in/crsammelan2013/video> (accessed on 17.7.13 at 1.10 pm).

licenses for setting up of Community radio stations to well established educational institutions. In contrast to the vertical communication of Sender-Message-Channel-Receiver (Berlo, 1960) model of commercial radio, community radio encouraged horizontal communication where the boundary between the sender and receiver is blurred and this helped in reinforcing the status of media as the “fourth estate”. Though community radio co-exists with public service and commercial broadcasters, it adds to the diversity of programming and plurality of voices. Community radio is useful in the following ways:

- (1) It generates a sense of engagement within the community;
- (2) It creates a sense of community within different community radio stations;
- (3) It provides training for volunteers in radio production which help to transform themselves into confident and articulate individuals;
- (4) It also generates employment.

In community radio, the distinction between the performer and the listener is not distinct. The listener is a performer provided that s/he wants to do programmes in the radio. Attachment with the Radio station is not only limited to doing and listening programs. The members of the community radio station have to multi-task. They are involved in various work like answering the phone call, updating the website (incase of Radio Namaskar),¹² programme production, anchoring and administrative work of the station. Different radio stations use different innovative techniques to increase their human resource base. With little support and encouragement from the organization who is running the station, local people can very well manage the station. To cite the example of Radio Namaskar, Sri N. A Ansari shared

100 persons of the staff are from the community. We have groomed them so that they manage the community radio. We do not have any professional staff. It is that the community people think that they are listening to the voice of their community. We want to promote their involvement in the management of the radio.¹³

The attachment with the radio station enables them to gain knowledge and confidence and address social evils and superstitions collectively. According to Lokesh Sharma, station manager, Banasthali Radio,

change in mindset is the greatest impact. We had a woman, Maya Sharma, who was a simple woma...when she came, she was fearing [sic.] of the microphone she does not have any confidence. After few programme she became so confident, there was no fear. Gradually she started doing programmes on social evils, social problems. Gradually she realized that these kinds of issues can be eradicated if people are educated...Social evils like when a children is born people give a spoon of tea called *ghutti*. This is dangerous for new-born children. It is recommended that new-born children should be given mother's milk and these kind of *ghutti* is not suitable for children. When our health expert talk to them, then they realize that we should not practice this kind of rituals.¹⁴

Here lies the difference between public-service and community radio. Like public-service radio, community radio also broadcasts health-related programmes. In addition to that, community radio also brings the health expert to the doorstep of the community, where the people can also get examined by the health expert, if necessary. Outreach and activism are the backbone of community radio. It is not only concern with generating and transmitting information. The main ideology behind community radio is to involve people in raising awareness against any malpractices that is prevalent in their society and making them conscious of the rights that are entitled to them.

¹² See <http://radionamaskar.org>.

¹³ Personal interview as part of the case-study of Radio Namaskar, Konark, Odisha on 9.1.13 at 4.00 pm.

¹⁴ Personal interview as part of the case-study of Banasthali Radio, Tonk, Rajasthan on 25.8.13 at 6.00 pm.

Community radio also defines “quality” in a new way. Due to lack of technical expertise, the programs produced by the stations may not be of technical brilliance. But because it is rooted in a specific locality, people will tune in as it broadcasts their voice apart from the valuable information.

Conclusion

It emphasize on extending communications rights to all members of the community while focusing on the importance of equality of access and participation.

Supriya Sahu, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, commented that

Success of this movement will be when we will have community radio stations in every nook and corner of the country bringing the diverse culture, various languages of India together and when community radios are actually truly representing the community voices. The community actually participates in the entire management and governance of the community radio station. And raises issues and voices which are relevant, which are important and ultimately they lead our country to true development. That will be the day when we can call that this movement has been successful in India.¹⁵

Community radio is not a matter of giving a platform to non-professionals to voice their concerns. Rather, it endorses two-way communication. The line that divides the listener and the performer is blurred and effortlessly, both can switch their positions as and when desired. Thus, community radio enables the individual to enter into public discourse and participate in the decision-making processes thus directing to community in the path of growth and development.

It endorses bottom-up approach as opposed to top-down approach of commercial and public-service radio. This also leads to decentralized approach that supports dialogues and exchanges.

Through its programming, community radio constructs a collective sense of identity. What distinguishes community radio is the way in which the technical arrangements are rearranged and reconstructed to suit the particular and distinctive needs of local communities. It highlights people’s ability to alter and rearrange existing media structures to better suit their needs. In doing so, community radio demonstrates the possibility for alternative broadcasting structures, forms and practices. As we have seen, the motive behind each of the community radio initiative described above is rather similar but the strategies used to realize the objectives are unique to each particular community.

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¹⁵ Supriya Sahu, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting spoke on the 3rd National Community radio Sammelan, organized by Ministry of Information and Broadcasting on 9-11 February, 2002, Vigyan Bhavan, New Delhi. The video was viewed on the site <http://edaa.in/crsammelan2013/videos> (accessed on 17.7.13 at 1.30 pm).