

ALTERNATIVE MEDIA AND SOCIETY: ROLE OF COMMUNITY RADIO IN EMPOWERMENT AT THE GRASSROOTS LEVEL

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Abstract

Culture, which refers to practices, languages, traditions and values that defines ones identity, has a timeless appeal. On the other hand, post modernity refers to the modern technological based mass media age. India has a pluralistic culture and in this techno based era, it is interesting to note that the diverse indigenous cultures are being expressed through the contemporary mass media specifically television and films. In the age of competitive, profit making, sender dominated media environment, community media, as a platform for 'alternative' voices plays major role. Community media, especially Community radio, stands for the voiceless and powerless by allowing people to share their opinions freely and also acts as a catalyst in creating awareness in specific areas. In the book "Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man" released in 1964 by Marshall McLuhan, it is being stated that it is the characteristics of the medium and not the content that affects the society. So by applying this theory, this paper will try to explore the role of community media, with special reference to community radio of different regions in India, in the growth and development at the grass root level. This paper is based on the analysis of the secondary data and study of available literature.

Introduction

Since the last quarter of the last century, South Asia has become the hub of media activity. In such a diverse region of the globe, comprising of eight different nations including the largest democracy of the world (India), the prime requisite is to build a free and fair media environment which will ensure absolute neutrality in every sense of the term. With the competitive, sender dominated, mainstream media, alternative media, upholding the „voices“ of the mass is also on rise in this varied part of the world.

Alternative media basically means media that are alternative to or in opposition to something else: mass media products that are widely available and widely consumed. (Waltz, 2005). In opposition to existing one way communication, alternative media tries to build scope for more feedback oriented, participatory media setting. The notion of government owned monopolistic mainstream media are repeatedly being challenged over the last few years by the rise of alternative media which seeks to confront existing power, and tries to represent marginalized groups of the society. Community radio is one of the genres of such community oriented alternative media which aims to facilitate more people centred development and work as a means for empowerment at grassroots. It generally defined as having three major aspects: focusing on non-profit making, community ownership and control and community participation.

For over 50 years, radio has been seen as a key tool for participatory communication and development. Radio clearly has its advantages. It is cost-efficient, both for the station and for

listeners. Secondly, it is ideal for a population that includes many illiterates and poor, as in South Asia. Thirdly, it is relevant to local practices, traditions and culture. Fourth, once initial investment is made in equipment, sustainability is feasible. Fifth, in terms of geographical coverage too, radio scores. What strikes everyone, broadcasters and listeners alike, as significant about radio is that it is completely a blind medium. We cannot see its messages, they consist only of noise and silence and it is from the sole fact of its blindness that all radio's other distinctive qualities the nature of its languages, its jokes, and the way in which its audience uses it- ultimately derives (Crisell, 1986). One of the advantageous effects of radio's blindness which can also reinforce its appeal to the imagination is its flexibility. Listener is free to perform other activities while he is listening to radio. The point that radio's enduring power as a mass medium derives from its unique combination of suggestiveness and flexibility together with the fact that it can accompany listener in the range of other activities he may wish to perform.

Need for Community Radio

In a vast region of South Asia, diversity is the prevalent characteristics. The local languages, culture, customs vary from country to country and even from place to place within the country. Herein lays the need for a community radio. Where public broadcast and FM channels fails to reach in remotest corner due to lack of knowledge on local dialect and dearth of proper understanding of the need of the place, community radio penetrates deep in each household, helps localities to articulate and voice their opinions through well designed programmes.

The last two decades have seen rapid expansion of community radio stations worldwide. Amongst the reasons are: democratisation and decentralisation process in many parts of the world, deregulation of the media and relaxing of broadcasting monopolies by state. Furthermore awareness is growing of social and economic benefits that can result when ordinary people have access to proper information. It is also evident that when people can directly participate in the communication process and in consensus building about issues that can affect their lives, it helps them to cast off their traditional apathy and stimulates them to mobilize and organise themselves (Fraser, 2001).

Community Radio in South Asia

South Asia, which is almost same size as Europe, is in geopolitically key position because of its land and sea link with other parts of Asia. It is a region where one can see peaceful coexistences of multiple languages, customs, cultures and religions in one hand, and in another it is that part of the globe which is always marked by poverty, illiteracy, political and social turbulence. South Asia has long tradition of using communication to developmental goals. Nepal adopted community radio in 1997 when Radio Sagarmatha (Sagarmatha is the Nepalese name for Mount Everest), broadcasting on 102.4 MHz, became the first independent public-interest broadcaster in South Asia. Bangladesh was the second country in South Asian region which adopted community radio station.

In India, radio still remains the most important means of communication in major parts of the country. Apart from All India Radio, public service broadcaster, there are FM radio stations which impart sheer entertainment to the urban youths. While in Indian radio scenario, there is coexistence of both

public service broadcasting and highly commercialised channels, some part of Indian population repeatedly demand for more democratised, independent community based media where they can be a part of. Broadcasting laws in India did not permit community radio stations as conceptualised by media advocacy group until 2006. Radio broadcasting shifted from government monopoly to highly commercialised broadcasting after Ministry of Information and Broadcasting announced the Phase I of auctioning of licenses to set up 140 private radio stations in 40 cities in November 1999. In February 1995 Supreme Court of India made historic judgement announcing “airwaves are public property” which opens up scope for formation of community based radio.

In 1996, after long years of struggle for independent radio stations, the Bangalore based communication group VOICES convened a gathering of radio broadcasters, media activists to study the relevancy of community radio in India. This is how community radio sets its nail in the land of the country. In 2000, a UNESCO sponsored workshop was organised in Hyderabad to urge the government to take its intention of freeing broadcast from state monopoly and to make media space available not only to private players but also to communities. The spirited campaigning for communities’ right to access airwaves by organisations and individuals resulted in Ministry of Broadcasting to organise a workshop supported by UNDP and UNESCO to design “Enabling Framework for Community Radio in India” in May 2004. In July 2004, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting prepared a draft policy based on framework of May 2004. Subsequently community radio groups had launched online petition urging the inclusion of right of communities within community radio policy.

In October 2005 the draft policy was referred to group to ministers which took about a year to give its nod. In 2006, the policy was finally cleared by Union Cabinet, making a much delayed but well deserved victory to community radio enthusiasts and of course to all the communities of India. On the basis of new policy about 4000 community radio licenses are on offer across India. By 30th November 2008, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting received 297 applications for community radio licenses, including 141 from NGO’s 105, from educational institutes, and 51 from farm radio stations. Community Radio Association was formed after the first Sammelan of CR stations in 2011 in Delhi. 58 stations expressed their interest in April 2011 for the formation of an association, wherein people working on the ground, can represent their communities and bring the voices of the voiceless to the fore.

Under 2006 community radio policy, any not- for-profit ‘legal entity’ can apply for license. Funding from Government of India is not available for such stations, and there are stringent restrictions on fundraising from other sources. License conditions implicitly favour well-funded stations as against inexpensive low power operations. The community radio license entitles a 100 watt (ERP) transmitter, with a coverage area of approximately 12 kilometres radius. A maximum antenna height of 30 meters is allowed. Community radio stations are expected to produce at least 50% of their programmes locally, as far as possible in the local language or dialect. The stress is on developmental programming, though there is no explicit ban on entertainment. News programmes are banned on community radio in India.

Community Radio Stations in India

Zaheerabad

The Zaheerabad area in Medak district of Andhra Pradesh is a semi-arid tract with limited mainstream job. Dalit women are among the poorest in the region, mainly worked as agricultural labourer. The Deccan Development Society works here with 100 Dalit women mainly trained them to operate community audio visual programming.

Deccan Development Society (DDS) of Hyderabad is a grass root organization working with Sangams (village level groups) of poor women, of which most of them are Dalits. The UNESCO has recognized the services rendered by the DDS in the region with regard to empowerment and education of the poorest of the poor among women and facilitated funding for establishing a radio station in Machnoor village. The DDS aiming to establish a community radio is perfectly in accordance with the global recognition of the need to democratize the communication media. The station is managed by Algotle Narsamma and „General“ Narsamma, two dalit women who are alumni of The Green School of the Deccan Development Society (DDS), of which the Community Media Trust is a part of. DDS has 5,000 women members, mostly dalits, organised into Sanghams or voluntary village-level associations. Ten girls from The Green School have been commissioned to gather information for the radio from member villages in neighbouring mandals (village blocks). All effort of Deccan Development Society (DDS) is focused on ensuring women's say over their own lives and issues. It is a radio that is intended to give a voice to the “excluded” in general and to women in particular. It is a radio that would help marginalized women to articulate their issues and create horizontal communication among themselves as well as take these issues to the outside world, to make every member of the community to participate in the programme at least twice a year. Sangham Radio focuses on issues such as health, and media. It also focuses on culture, language and local traditions in food, farming, health and ecology. (Chandrasekhar, 2010)

Holy Cross Community Radio

Holy Cross Community Radio was launched on 26th December 2006 as a new initiative of Holy Cross College, Trichy. In the initial phases of establishment, Holy Cross Community Radio was available on 90.4 MHz frequency and the channel had eight hours of transmission (including repeat transmission) a day. It reached in and around ten kilometres of Holy Cross College. The target audience of this radio were the women from Dharmanathapuram and Jeevanagar areas, which are the major slum areas in Trichy.

One of Holy Cross's favourite programmes ‘Pudhiya Jananam’ was initiated on 19th June 2007. Pudhiya Jananam, meaning new birth, buttresses community awareness through interactive programmes on health, hygiene and other factors of daily importance. Pudhiya Jananam, also called as 'Science for Women's Health and Nutrition', is supported by the Rashtriya Vigyan Evam Prodyogiki Sanchar Parishad (RVPSP), Department of Science and Technology, Government of India and implemented by Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA).

Radio Namaskar

Radio Namaskar, the only Community Radio of Orissa (India) established at KONARK (Internationally renowned tourist place for Sun Temple) to make the common people informative & active participant of the community development process. It will ensure overcoming social problem through a community owned process through deployment of oriented personnel and sensitizing the beneficiary mass & will enable the general public to have access to each other's views and ideas directly through a network of communication and can be able to have direct and immediate access to ensure redressal of grievance as well as finalization of local based issues of state and national importance. This will be possible in coordination with mass media of the state and even in coordination with the elites of the State that includes people from different streams of society who do have command and interest in different matters of common interest. This will ultimately augment the communication and knowledge transformation process in a well regulated but well related manner.

Radio Namaskar is established by Young India, a civil society organisation formed by some National Youth Awardees, Indira Gandhi NSS Awardees & Ex- NSS volunteers those are committed to the cause of social transformation & development. The most important programmes of this station highlights on the pressing issues of the country. Some of the popular programmes are based on d\local governance, food security and women safety (radionamaskar.org/).

Kumaon Vani

With the aim to bring together the local community across 20 villages close to Supi village in the valley of Kumaon, TERI launched its first Community Radio Station- 'Kumaon Vani' in March 2010. It was established to use radio as a tool to promote sustainable development among the local farming community. Riding the airwaves at 90.4 MHz (FM), the station covers the radius of 20 kms reaching out to almost 2,00,000 people in and around Mukhteshwar. The radio station is attached to TERI's knowledge centre TRISHA (TERI's Research Initiative in Supi for Himalayan Advancement) that works closely with the local farming community with the objective of improving their livelihoods through sustainable agricultural practices. Like all community radio stations, Kumaon Vani is a not-for-profit entity that is operated, owned and driven by the local community in Mukteshwar.

The main objectives of the station are to spread awareness among the farming community on sustainable agricultural practices. In addition, the radio spreads awareness on issues like health and sanitation, education, water resource management and livelihood generating opportunities. The radio aims to promote indigenous art and culture of Kumaon and deliver timely information about emergency services, weather predictions, government schemes, transportation and rates of local produce.

Radio Benziger

Community Radio Benziger started working from Kollam, Kerala on 7th November, 2010. The main aim is to socialise the community and to bring about greater interaction amongst them. Kollam lying on shore of Arabian Sea is a residence of large number of fisherman who stays within filth and

wastage. A study conducted on the place reveals that diseases like diarrhoea, typhoid, and dysentery are rampant in the region. Poor housing, lack of protected water supply, inadequate toilet facilities are very common in this area. One of the major activities of this community radio Benziger is to fight against this menace.

In West Bengal, Community Radio Jadavpur and SRFTI are the two important community radio stations. Radio JU, the community radio station of Jadavpur University, started its journey as a part of its Technical Education Quality Improvement Program on 14th April, 2008. It collaborates with the School of Media, Communication and Culture of Jadavpur University. It is a pioneering project of its kind in eastern India. Radio JU can be heard on 90.8MHz within the radius of 10km from the main campus of JU. Its aim is to promote community interaction and dissemination of all kinds of knowledge. It also provides a unique platform for students, teachers and the local people to present their talents, as well as their views on different issues before the community. The programmes are planned not only keeping in mind the priorities of campus life but also of the greater community beyond the campus. The principal objective of Radio JU is the empowerment of the less privileged section of the community by informing and entertaining them.

Policy Guidelines and Community Radio in India

Policy guidelines in India regarding community radio are recommended by Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. It has strictly mentioned that community radio should be non-profit in nature and has a proven record of at least three years of service to the local community. Even the ownership and management structure should be reflective of the community needs.

Freedom of expression and equitable access of communication media are seriously threatened in 21st century not only by excessive usage of state power but also by unhindered growth of media organisations into large conglomerates. In India, 90s were marked by gradual easing of state monopoly over electronic media. The consequence of media globalisation is immense upon market, state and civil society. Media globalisation, in India, although creates suitable democratic environment, it diminishes freedom of speech and expression and discourages diversity of opinion. The pertinent question which arises here is whether community radio which is neither completely state-owned nor fully dependent on autonomous processes manages to revive this basic fundamental right enshrined in Indian Constitution.

Various success stories in India regarding the role of community radio testify the fact that the process for the betterment of the community in specific areas has just began. Despite all the success stories, by and large, the obstacles to expand access to communication technologies for marginalised groups lay in a lack of political will in policy that fails to recognise the importance of communication in political, economic and social development which is considered as the most important factors for slow growth of the community radio. It also needs to be recognised that community radio by itself is neither an end nor an independent means to reach the marginalised audience for achieving social development. It has to be coordinated with ground level initiatives and has to be perceived as an additional arm for social communication and capacity building programmes (VOICES-UNDP 2004). Financial considerations may be one major reason why the growth of this sector has been slow.

Concluding Notes

Although community radio broadcasters are very enthusiast about role it plays on social network, the different survey results, sometimes, show completely pole apart result. It is also revealed that many people are still unaware of the term ‘community radio’. Community radio is a process and cannot exit on social isolation. It is not simply about producing programmes to put on air but it requires preparing and creating awareness and information of a community radio from the very beginning. It is about developing a community by using radio. It is important to clearly identify goals in any community radio from the very beginning. (Bandhopadhyay, 2004). Despite the huge gap that exists between policy and ground level realities with respect to community radio in India, it can be predicted that it will grow in the future. It appears to be a question of time, but no fear in waiting to see those golden days.

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