

COMMUNITY RADIO AS EMPOWERMENT MODEL: ANALYZING CASES OF INDIA, NEPAL AND BANGLADESH

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Abstract

The world today appreciates the need for community broadcasting. It has the potential to ensure freedom of opinion and expression that is upheld by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Community broadcasting came to the neighbouring countries of India, Bangladesh and Nepal much later in comparison to some other parts of the world and even when compared to some countries in the continent of Asia. The development of community broadcasting in these three countries has not followed the same trajectory but these trajectories share a good number of commonalities. The community radio stations in these countries have their stories of success but are facing problems of existence due to lack of funds and difficulty in generating proper content for the community. This paper seeks to analyze the scenario and suggests some measures for a successful and sustainable model for continued existence of community radio stations.

Keyword: Community radio, Broadcasting, Human right, Freedom

Introduction

The history of community radio broadcasting is definitely not as old as that of radio as a mass media. History of community radio is not very old in India. Countries like Kenya and Sri Lanka who have made their presence in the UNESCO list in the establishment of community radio in the 1980s. The Kenyan and Sri Lankan experience inspired citizens in those countries where the wave of democratization and decentralization had noticeable effects in the 1980s and 1990s. UNESCO worked with its mandate to empower marginalized communities to set up their own broadcasting stations in those places. Among those were countries from Asia as well. Several countries in Asia and specifically in the Indian subcontinent, however, lagged in progress in this regard. Even at the end of the nineties the government and civil society in India and Bangladesh were debating the need and the norms of ushering in community radio.

The pioneering experiences from which community radio has started evolving began 50 years ago in Latin America. Poverty and social injustice were the main stimulus of forming community radio stations first in Bolivia in 1947 known as Miner's Radio and in Colombia in the same year known as Radio Sutatenza. Miner's radio in Bolivia worked in the time of ideological clash between capitalism and socialism. Thus their principal focus was to unite miners for better working conditions. Radio Sutatenza also inspired by organising the peasant community of the region by educating them through radio. However even if the pioneering experiences began in Latin America, it was Europe, where community radio was setup as an alternative to mainstream mass media. In Africa, formation of community radio stations was more a social movement after the end of apartheid regime in South Africa. The pressure groups that have instigated community radio in many parts of the world were

less present in Asia. In their place, international organisations like UNESCO or other external donors supported formation of community radio stations.

Nepal is the first country in South Asia to form community radio broadcasting. Its first community radio station Radio Sagarmatha went on air in the year 1997. The very first community radio broadcast was, unfortunately, not free from government control. Radio Sagarmatha has strictly restricted flow of alternative view. It is interesting to note that such a state control was not fabricated under any policy related framework, rather was an ad hoc decision by the licensing authority; in this case, the Nepali Ministry of Information and Communication (MOIC). The dynamics of storytelling as well as context both have changed after several years of the first airing of independent radio in Nepal. But, what remains the same is the temporary nature of regulation for community radio governance in the country. As pointed out in a study that by the end of 2010, the numbers of community radio stations in the country stand at nearly 200 with a total number of 300 radio stations granted license to operate yet, there is no policy addressing large and growing independent radio sector in Nepali media (Dahal, 2011).

The Supreme Court verdict in 1995 was the game changer as far as community radio in India is concerned. The honorable court ruled that airwaves are public property and must be used for public good. Consequent upon this, several conferences were held by civil society groups to take advantage of this ruling. It was only the universities and IITs and IIMs that were empowered to set up Community Radio Stations (CRS). The CRS movement in India has not garnered enough strength in spite of these exercises. As per the Open Government Data Platform India, there are only 149 operational CRS in the country as in June 2013¹.

Bangladesh happened to release its first policy for community broadcasting in 2008 under the Awami League government. It was titled 'Community Radio Installation, Broadcast and Operation Policy'. Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio and Communication (BNNRC) was instrumental in persuading the government in bringing out this policy. However, not many stations in the country could be set up since the release of this policy. The first list of 14 CRS was published in 2013. The process of setting up and running these stations happened with the help of UNESCO.² Remaining true to the common agenda of all CRS, those in Bangladesh help in elevating the socio-economic status of the marginalized population and strive to bring forth their voice to make democracy more participatory. Particular mention may be made of their service in spreading warning about tropical cyclones.

Stability of Community Radio Stations

Stability of community radio stations mainly depend on regular supply of funds. There is no fixed formula for the supply of funds to CRS in the three countries being discussed here. The funding sources are diverse and could be government, non-government and Non-Government Organization (NGOs). Again, the sources can as well be local, national or international. Research undertaken by

¹ <https://data.gov.in/catalog/operational-community-radio-stations>

² <https://bnnrc.net/seven-community-radio-stations-in-bangladesh-work-to-address-cyclone-komen/>

Ideosync Media Combine with support from CEMCA and UNESCO gives an analysis of funding sources of twelve CRS in the two countries (2015). A good number of these stations were found to be heavily or moderately dependent on their parent organizations for funding. Where CRS have developed under the supervision of universities and educational institutes, the funding sources are much less diverse. This means that such institutions are capable of taking care of the financial needs of the concerned CRS. Such an advantage is not enjoyed by other CRS. Where large NGOs with qualified people are running the CRS, funds could be garnered through attracting project grants from government or non-government sources. However, doubts still prevail over the actual aim of the NGOs in using the CRS platform as has been borne out by published articles penned by experienced personalities in the concerned field. So the NGO model of fund generation cannot always be welcomed without critical examination. In the rest of the cases, diversity of funds meant that there is very little financial stability.

Community radio is placed within the framework of article 19 of the Indian Constitution that ensures freedom of speech and expression. This means that it recognizes the fundamental right of communities to express them, and further recognizes community radio as a genuine tool for expression. In the context of contemporary development communication, Amartya Sen has also expressed that giving a voice to the voiceless is a form of development. In this sense, the Indian policy is an commendable one that has already inspired a similar policy in neighbouring nation Bangladesh. It can be said that although in many cases freedom of speech and expression are challenged, simultaneously global media juggernaut has been facing stiff resistance all over the world from citizen group, media activists and community organisations. Feminist activists have argued that conventional ideology of men superiority and control of productive resources by men has affected women's opportunities for better life. Gender is significant dimension in community radio initiatives that are seeking to deploy communication technologies for social change in general and development of women in particular.

Content generation by the community itself has not been found to be steady and continuous. The Ideosync Media survey found out some genuine trouble (2015). In quoting one specific interview the survey had stated that on one hand the remuneration demanded by skilled manpower is difficult to meet and on the other those who get trained on the institute's investment leave after it is over. It has been identified that language presents a challenge for these two countries in general and specifically for a large country like India. Sometimes it becomes extremely difficult to find trainers for imparting training in the particular language of the community. Developing a manual is similarly difficult. Again, the non-literacy of the community members makes a manual useless even when developed. The unavailability of suitable content in the language of the concerned community leads to filling up of airtime with that in major languages. Campus radios, operating out of educational campuses, and also categorized as CRS do not face this problem as it is a mixed audience they are catering to. This audience, comprising of enrolled students, agrees in principle to listen to presentations in a major language.

Technology Issues and a Successful Model

Technological tools need maintenance and this again calls for trained manpower. There are more issues in this beyond receiving free-of-cost transmitters from benevolent organizations like UNESCO. Installation and maintenance of these equipments can become a big problem in many cases. One will easily come across many a recommendation to use open source software to reduce costs but training the operators to use such software can again be a big challenge. Switching to renewable sources of energy for power supply to CRS has also been suggested. Even development of software at CRS has been suggested. This software can possibly help students and other citizens who are shifting to the digital platform. But such type of steps can hardly be undertaken by those who are already finding it hard to carry on with regular broadcast. These suggestions are next to offering a Hobson's choice.

With this backdrop a success model, alternately called a sustainable model, is sought to be proposed that will enable CRS to move ahead without compromising their stated goals. Central to this model is a consortium consisting mainly of universities. This paper holds that a strong parental organization holds the key to a successful model. Experimentations with various sources of funding have not been able to throw up a model with financial viability. Now, consortiums are not unheard of in the operational space of CRS. Several have been constituted to support particular causes and the vehicle of community radio has been tagged to the same. To cite an example, a consortium called Community Radio Consortium for Environment Protection (CRCEP) helped CRS in Uttarakhand to propel ahead with their disaster awareness programmes.³

This paper after analyzing the present situation proposes the establishment of Community Radio Stations with the participation of at least five universities and institutions of the respective countries having government approval and belonging to nearby areas of the CRS. Funds in several accounts of such universities that either remain unspent or are reported to be spent through unnecessary expenditures can be identified for the purpose. Such a plan can possibly demand appropriate changes in certain policies related to the flourishing of community radio. For instance, the participating universities are to have equal financial responsibility and no university or institute can appeal for a pull out before a period of three years have lapsed. Further, even after keeping in mind that CRS have to be non-profit, it cannot be ignored that a minimal source of steady income or profit has to be ensured so that they do not have to go through sudden patches of financial stringency or insolvency. Modules in language translation have to be integrated into the courses so that the trainees can suitably translate the text of the content and make the programmes available in other languages. This will promote exchanges between CRS and at the same time raise the pitch of appeal for donation from possible sources (Sreedhar, 2016).

It can be summed up that while retaining the dominant role of the consortium, the CRS will have to look for funds and technical resources from elsewhere. There are certain areas that have not been tapped. For instance, adopting of a community radio by any university can be an extremely appealing theme. It could be taken to potential individuals and social service organizations around the country. If the price tag could be cleverly decided, split intelligently and kept low then it could be paid even by

³ <http://www.bgverghese.com/PrasarBharatiReform.htm>

people in middle income groups. License conditions also implicitly favour well-funded stations as against inexpensive low power operations, many of which ran well on shoe string budgets before the imposition of any community radio policy. Although five minutes of advertising per hour is allowed, these revenues appear to be inadequate. Considering that most of such community radios are expected to cater to the poorer rural populations, paying a subscription for earning revenue is still farfetched. For community radio to become the third tier of radio broadcasting, growth needs to be speeded up. This can be done through a more active process of dialogue between the government and the potential community radio users. Aspects such as operational hassles, technical expertise and sustainability issues can be discussed in an open forum that helps both sides understand the other's requirements. Since the sustainability issue is one of the main aspects where many potential community radio users may face a problem, they have to explore other means of sustenance as well. Regional workshops to spread awareness of community radio need to be encouraged and measures to be taken for setting up of community radio stations. These steps were further encouraged by the Government's proposal to follow up with at "touring technical exhibit" of technology options for this purpose.

Conclusion

The usefulness of having community radios is acknowledged by one and all. Though a late entrant in this field, the two countries have been able to appreciate the benefits of having CRS. Some of the crucial factors that unite these two countries are dominance of agriculture in the economic scenario, uneven development and concerns over environmental conservation. CRS can play a very important role in correcting imbalances in these cases. But CRS in these countries have to evolve out of the poor condition they are in. The numbers of CRS in India and Bangladesh are yet to come up to an appreciable level. Several researches and surveys have suggested measures for improvement of CRS scenario from time to time. Governments have also issued policy guidelines and welfare measures. In spite of all this, community radios in these countries suffer from existential problem. The measures to help CRS come in bits and pieces and the sword of financial insolvency always hang on the head of the management of CRS. Many CRS, who have managed to exist, are not able to broadcast for more than a few hours.

This paper analyzed the basic existential requirements and leaves out issues like political intrusion etc. A consortium can never be without problems but holds enormous possibilities for this field. Stress has been put on utilizing the money that is unspent and often not properly spent in the universities and institutions. However, the paper does not move away from subscribing to the collective clamour for more financial allotment to higher education in government budget so that the CRS movement also receives a boost through the consortium approach.

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