

Community Communications for Participative Development Experiments and Experiences in South Asia By: Dr. Rajesh Kumar*

Key words: Community communications, Community radio, Participatory development.

Abstract

Millions of people in developing countries, particularly in rural areas are deprived of a wide range of information and knowledge owing to lack of access to information and communication technologies and scanty participation in information generation and dissemination which may have improved their livelihoods and development pattern. In the prevailing socio-cultural and geographical structure of rural and remotely settled people, community communications or community media or its most popular and viable form, community radio have been found more effective and inclusive medium to provide equitable information and knowledge among the masses. It has been empirically established that community communications/media creates grassroots-level participation and horizontal circulation of ideas among the deprived rural communities, which are necessary pre-conditions to democratization of communication and redistribution of power. This paper makes an attempt to analyze the contribution of community movement for 'conscientization' and development of marginalized masses in various parts of South Asia in general and India in particular. It will examine various experiments and experiences in community radio broadcasting in different countries of South Asia/S-E Asia and will draw pragmatic policy suggestions for the sustainability of rural community radio initiatives, particularly in India. A host of literature and empirical studies on the subject will be referred during analysis.

Introduction

Uses of communications media which include two way communication have been called 'community communications' or 'community media'. In the past, similar terms have been used to identify programming especially designed for particular community groups, such as ethnic or minority groups, groups with special needs or interests. But community communications should mean more than programming designed for special or selected groups. They are intended to be based on more than assumed audience needs and interests. Community media are adaptations of media for use by the community, for whatever purposes the community decides. They are media to which members of the community have access for information, education and entertainment, in the form and in the manner they desire (Berrigan FJ, 1979). They are media in which the community participates, as planners, producers, performers. They are the means of expression by the community and also for the community.

The application of access and participation invariably involves communications. It is argued that communications media are the vehicles through which practical participatory democracy might be applied. At the simplest level, before people can consider a question, they need to be fully aware of all the facts: the short-term effects and the long term implications, ways in which decisions taken in one area will affect future planning. Communications media could present this information. At the same time, if people have access to communications media, they can use them to request further information, and convey their views to others. The media, when placed in the hands of the community might become machinery through which participation in the socio-political sphere is achieved.

The Theoretical Underpinning

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator challenged the one-way approach of information-giving, or transfer of content. As an educator, he worked on the basis of interchangeable teacher/learner relationships, i.e., the teacher learned from the student and vice versa. His practice was based on the idea that education was a process of 'conscientization', in which the community was helped to articulate its problems, then to provide the solutions for those problems. Freire believed that the average citizen was not an empty vessel into which facts could be poured, but a knowing being. The task for the educator was to activate the community to express its needs, to formulate solutions and to organize politically to achieve its goals. This approach was considered a radical departure from the traditional approach to rural education, for it did not rely upon transmission of knowledge and skills, but focused on the community as a decision-making unit. Since these ideas were first put forward,

there has been wider acceptance of the process of development as a process of individual and community self determination. An important ingredient in the 'conscientization' approach is the activation of the individual and the group (Quoted from Berrigan FJ, 1979).

Community communications and participative model of development is based on an emergence of "Another Development" perspective (Servaes, 1995) which emphasised alternative communication system and media practices. The stress was on inclusive forms of participation of people in the economy, political system and media within a particular area. 'Another Development' perspective evolved as a critique of, and an alternative to, the modernisation and dependency theories, which influenced development communication paradigms until the late 1970s (Servaes, 1995). Modernisation theorists advocated a universal model of development on the lines of those in Western European countries and North America. Dependency theorists put forward the transitional and structural conditions needed to eliminate under-development. Both modernisation and dependency theorists were on two extremes of a psychological warfare that characterised the cold war period.

'Community' emerged as a central element in the "Another Development" paradigm which argued that it is at the local community level that the problems of living conditions are discussed, and interactions with other communities and outside groups and institutions are elicited (Melkote, 1991). Therefore, it highlighted the critical role of local participation in development and demanded that participatory decision-making strategies be encouraged in the design and implementation of development programmes. For this purpose, communication systems were seen as a means for those local groups to seriously consider development initiatives and desires, and elicit participations. Therefore, the stress was on inclusive forms of participation in the economy, political system and media within the communities. The nation state in this case is considered to be consisting of any number of individual communities. The mainstream media which are usually associated with the concept of nation state were generally left out in support of small and alternative media. Thus, 'Alternative Development' approach to development communication recognised two key elements, viz., 'two-way process of communication' thereby emphasizing interactive nature of communication in contrast to linear form of communication under the modernization paradigm and 'participation of community'. It was widely believed that participatory approach could help in the "development of a community's cultural identity, act as a vehicle for people's self-expression, or serve as a tool for diagnosis of a community's problems" (Melkote, 1991). While fewer efforts were made to define participation, the exact nature and role of communication in "Another Development" were believed to depend on normative goals and standards set by the host communities to ensure participation. The participation, access and self-management define uses of communication media that include two-way communications as "community communication" or "community media" (Berrigan, 1979).

"Another Development" discourse supported the right to relevant local information, the right to answer back and the right to use the new means of communication for interaction and social action in small-scale settings of community, interest group or sub-culture. In the place of uniform, centralised, high-cost, commercialised, professionalised or state-controlled media it encouraged multiple, small-scale, local, non-institutional, committed media which link senders to receivers and also favour horizontal patterns of interaction (Mc Quail, 1994). Thus, the belief that the community should become the focus of development communication was strengthened.

Experiments and experiences in South Asia

In the prevailing socio-economic scenario and geographical settings in South Asia, the community radio fits into the true role of community communications/media as discussed above in the preceding paragraphs. Some of the experiences and experiments in countries of South Asia/South East Asia such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, Philippines and India could give an insight into the community radio organization, functioning and impact.

In Nepal, there are three types of such radio organizations and operations. One, a co-operative model, i.e., Radio Lumbini, Butwal. About hundred share holders contributed about Rs.20,000 each to set up the radio station in 1998. The station is owned managed and operated by this cooperative. There are also more than six hundred friends of Radio Lumbini each paying Rs.100. Annually, the station receives additional funding from 71 Village Development Committees (VDC) in the area. A combination of paid staff and volunteers make the programme. With infrastructural support from Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) and

UNESCO, they broadcast for about 12 hours a day. The schedule includes four local news bulletins a day and a range of programmes on health, agriculture, gender equality, children's education and good governance. Second, Local Administration model, i.e., Radio Madanpokhara. Initially funded by UNESCO, the station is owned by the village development committee. The station went on air in April, 2000 with the support of a trust fund constituted by sixty five members, each of whom paid Rs. 1000 and some collections from donors to build a radio station, while running costs are met through donations from the VDC and from Tansen-Palpa District development committee, as well as through advertising, sponsorship and entry fees to the station. The station has been playing an active role in development, with programmes to improve forestry and farming and the environment as well as working to eliminate social discrimination, injustice, and superstitions. Third, NGO model, i.e., Radio Sagarmatha, Katmandu valley. Owned and managed by NEFEJ (Nepal Forum of Environment Journalists), this station was started with the support of UNESCO and has been a source of inspiration to the community radio movement in South Asia. Most often termed as an independent public interest radio station, approximately sixty per cent of its funds come from donors, thirty per cent from strategic advertisement and ten per cent of it comes from other sources. It has about thirty paid staff and many volunteers. It started broadcasting in 1997 and provides a forum to discuss local ideas and culture, and is actively involved in social change. It also broadcasts programmes in minority languages and on folk and contemporary music as well as programmes for women, children, and semi-urban listeners (Ghamaraj L, 2010).

Sri Lanka has the honour of establishing the first Asian community radio at Girandurukotte in 1986 under the Mahaweli Community Radio project. In fact, the project was started in 1980 as a community programme service, serving the Mahaweli settlements under which nearly 60,000 families were resettled downstream the Mahaweli river. The purpose of this community radio project was to cater to the needs of the newly-settled families. It aimed to help them exchange their settlement experiences, learn new skills from each other, give timely information on day-to-day activities and help in catalyzing development in the new communities. It was a new experience where both young and mature members of the settlers' families functioned as volunteer broadcasters. They identified various settlements issues, animated the community through their own programmes, much of which also related to cultural expressions which they brought from their place of origins. Lively interaction between settlers and field officers responsible for various settlement administration matters were broadcast over the community radio. These broadcasts enabled policy makers and senior officials responsible for settlements to learn about problems and prospects of the settlements. It also helped to establish an all inclusive decisions-making process to solve many important issues such as water distribution, marketing avenues, health, education etc. However, around this time there was no possibility of thinking of independent radio stations anywhere in Asia. The radio broadcasting systems were largely government monopolies except in the Philippines where traditionally broadcasting was not a major government function. Thus, The Mahaweli community radio project of Sri Lanka was administratively under the national broadcaster, Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. With the passage of time, it has been found that national broadcasters' obligations towards this project is on the decrease because national broadcasting system is facing financial crunch. Under these circumstances, community radio services are being looked upon as a burden by the national broadcasting systems. Therefore, policy makers are now considering alternate ways of keeping community radio stations outside the authority of the national broadcasting organisation.

The first truly community-owned and operated Asian community radio stations were established in the Philippines with UNESCO-supported Tambuli Community radio project. The "Tambuli Community Radio Project" has set up a management and training team that co-operates with communities to organise independent community radio stations established in different rural communities. In the project, the thrust is on the local communities to build the radio station. Through focus group discussions, they set the guidelines for the broadcasters and organise the radio team from all sectors of the village. All team members volunteer to share work. The project provides equipment & training, facilitates research and helps in identifying community development schemes. These small radio station help strengthen the democratic process by providing access to different viewpoints, build tolerance and help animate the local development efforts without any commercial motives (Tabing Louie N, 2008 & Seneviratne K, 2009).

The Indian experience

"Radio Farm Forum" was one of the earliest efforts in the use of radio for the development of rural peasants in India. The experiment was carried out from February to April 1956 in five districts of Maharashtra state by All India Radio (AIR). Rural listener groups were organized, who would listen to radio broadcasts twice a week at 6.30 p.m. for half an hour. "The group then stayed together for discussion of what they had heard, the discussion lasted usually, about half an hour, seldom less, frequently more" (Neurath et al, 1959). The summative impact evaluation indicated positive outcome of radio rural forum. Impressive knowledge gains as a result of radio listening were reported across illiterates and literates, agriculturalists and non-agriculturalists, village leaders and others. However, over a period of time the project withered away and could not be operationalised for large-scale implementation in one form or the other. Lack of political will and indifference of bureaucracy killed the rural development project even before it could help poor to take advantage of radio broadcast (Agrawal BC, 2006). For more than fifty years hence, there has not been any single experiment carried out in this direction. But since 1996, several non-profit development organizations, academicians and media-activist groups in India campaigned for the right to set up low-cost local radio broadcasting facilities to support their community development work, especially in rural and tribal area. In November 2006, the union cabinet finally cleared the community radio policy marking a much delayed, but well-deserved victory to communities and civil society groups that have been waiting patiently for the right to broadcast to be extended to them (Pavarala V, 2001,2007).

Some significant initiatives in community radio broadcasting are Sangam Community Radio, Andhrapradesh, Radio Bundelkhand, Madyapradesh, Mandeshi FM Tarang-Community Radio, Maharashtra etc which are operating after seeking formal licenses from authorities. Sangam Radio is India's first community radio, entirely owned and run by members of women's groups or Sangams as they are known, started on the occasion of World Rural Women Day, i.e., October 15, 2008. These Sangams are supported by the Deccan Development Society(DDS) that has been working for the poor and landless. It also received UNESCO's support. After receiving formal license from MIB it has created lot of changes in a traditional rural society. Another such initiative is Radio Bundelkhand launched by the Society for Development Alternatives, on October 23, 2008, at Taragram, Orchha, in Bundelkhand region of Madhya Pradesh. The Society is a Delhi based NGO and is the first to establish, maintain and operate a Community Radio under the new policy. The purpose of setting up Radio Bundelkhand, as identified with the help of communities in the radius of the radio station, is to work along with them to use this communication medium to create awareness, give information, participate in local self governance and provide entertainment – all based on requests and feedback from the community. The audience includes the communities in the radius of the broadcast range – with special attention to women, youth and the marginalised groups. Mandeshi Tarang in Maharashtra, a community radio running at 90.4 MHz was started in 16th December, 2008 under the aegis of Mann Vikas Samajik Sanstha, an NGO working for the empowerment of rural and marginalized women in Satara District of Mhaswad and Hubli & Dharwad in Karnataka. Main aim of the Radio Station is to become an effective medium for the rural remote people to share views, showcase talent, gain knowledge and increase awareness and also to ensure overall social, economic and cultural growth of the area(Ray, Anuradha, 2009).

However, without waiting for the formal license from MIB there are some individual groups, civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations involved in running community radio institutions within the prescribed legal framework. The instances of 'Namma Dhwani', 'SEWA Radio', 'Henwal Vani', 'Mandakini Ki Awaz' and many others reveal an inherent trend of the community to come together and make their voices heard. 'Henwal Vani' and 'Mandakini Ki Awaz', in the hilly reaches of the Garhwal and Kumaon Himalayas of Uttarakhand present local issues and promote local culture. They are run by youth volunteers and use WorldSpace for broadcasting. The Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan is an initiative in Bhuj, Gujarat that uses the medium-wave broadcast channel of All India Radio (AIR). Alternative for India Development (AID) has a radio initiative in Daltonganj, in the Palamau District of Jharkhand which uses purchased air time from a local All India Radio station. Namma Dhwani, the VOICES initiatives in Budikote, Karnataka, cablecasts programmes, made by the rural community members themselves, right into their homes. Some of the most recent community radio initiatives include, Charkha's Pechuwali Man Ker Swar in Ranchi, Self Employed Women's Association's (SEWA) 'Rudi no Radio' in Gujarat etc. Institutions like One world South Asia, the Population

Foundation of India are also involved in establishing several community radio networks in India, especially in underdeveloped rural regions and the states like Orissa, Bihar and Rajasthan.

As per the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting recently updated official data available on its website accessed in June 2012, there are 132 operational community radio stations (CRS) all over the country. However, not many experts are impressed with these figures. "This is a drop in the ocean. We have the potential to accommodate around 4,000-5,000 CRS in the country.

Also, this upsurge is benefitting whom? Most of them are from the educational sectors and not from the civil society. We needed the NGOs and voluntary organisations to flourish, who really work for the community but unfortunately, this has not happened," says Vinod Pavarala, UNESCO Chair on Community Media, University of Hyderabad. In fact, going by the official ministry data, out of 132 operational radio stations, eighty one belong to the educational sector, six to state agricultural universities, four to Krishi Vigyan Kendras and forty one to the NGOs. It may be noted that only these four sectors are allowed to set up community radio stations in India. Amidst this increasing numbers, a new challenge has dampened the spirit of community radio enthusiasts. The ministry has decided to hike the annual license fee for these CRS from Rs 19,700 to Rs 91,000. "This retrograde step by the ministry has hit the very spirit of the CRS. It will discourage the small and marginalised communities running the low power radio stations and can lead to their shut down and will favour only the rich NGOs and private educational institutions. This is against the very concept of developing community radio which was supposed to be of, for and by the people," says Pavarala. Another problem is the involvement of multiple ministries when it comes to granting licences to CRS in India. Till now, the government has shown reluctance to open these CRS in 'conflict zones' like Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh which are 'Naxal prone areas'. "By barring the people of these areas of information, they are actually helping the extremists. When people lack access to information, chances are more that they will get inclined to the extremists' views. In fact, we need more CRS in these areas," says Pavarala who is spearheading the struggle for freedom of CRS in the country (Retrieved on 1/7/2012 from <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/259324/community-radio-takes-tentative-steps.html>).

Summary and suggestions

From the above discussion, it is clear that promoting awareness of issues, protecting cultural diversity of communities and people and motivating them to participate in the planned development programmes can be enhanced effectively on a mass level through the community radio. Greater decentralisation and power-sharing plans have been recognised as essential reforms to support development efforts. But, decentralised administration alone would not bring the desired results unless there are possibilities for each and every community to influence and to take part in the decentralised decision-making process. This is where community radio has a great potential, particularly because it helps bottom-up decision-making from each and every community in the decentralised administration. Therefore, community radio facilitates the process of true and democratic nation-building. Development based upon participation demands that the people affected by development are involved in the selection of development priorities, and the design of development plans. It is an approach which attempts to build upon a consensus. Participation calls for a horizontal governance process, in which community groups consider and decide priorities for development, and suggest the ways in which this can be achieved. It is in the operation of this procedure that community communications can play a part.

The availability of appropriate communication systems with public access facilitating free and fair participation in the decision-making process is increasingly becoming vital. It is also important that such systems are community specific, because community is the basic unit of decentralised development. Also, they should have the capacity and the necessary credibility to mobilise both mental and physical resources of communities at grassroots levels. Availability of permanent and affordable communication channels that are within the competence of people at grassroots levels is a must to usher in bottom-up reforms and more relevant development initiatives. Experiences have proved that effective participatory communication tools, in some particular community-operated small radio stations, have tremendous potential to catalyse development efforts in the immediate communities. Radio is the medium which can penetrate the most. A low-cost community radio is less expensive to operate and well within the resource capacity of any community. Further, community radio

is a valuable tool to maintain a high level of transparency and accountability in decentralised administrations. More recently, community radio has attracted attention for its potential to function as an interface to bring the benefits of new communication technologies to the communities, demonstrating that there are ways and means to include the excluded in the knowledge society, even if there is no individual access to computers.

In terms of policy formulation, the community radio should be based on the concepts of access, diversity, equality, inclusion and independence. The central public interest principle in broadcasting is that of universal access. This refers to the availability of broadcasting services to all citizens. The democratic basis for this claim is the right of citizens to reliable, accurate and timely information and to allow them to participate meaningfully in society and respective communities. It is also desirable to broaden the concept of access from the right to receive information to include greater access to the means of production in broadcasting. Genuine access to channels and messages depends then not only on the existence of channels, but on their effective distribution, availability and affordability enabling all segments of the society to participate in broadcasting rather than limiting themselves to being passive recipients.

While such an alternative to traditional development planning is suggested, some hindering blocks have to be taken into reckoning. First, for development to take place smoothly, there does have to be some central co-ordination, and there has to be some arrangements for central funding. Local development affairs, or even of the national situation, and do not have sufficient background knowledge or experience to make their judgments viable. There may be complex and involved circumstances which have to be weighed and it could be felt that inexperienced and uneducated people would contribute little that is useful to discussions. Therefore, these concerns must be addressed while devising bottom-up development plans.

But the bottlenecks to community decision-making as enumerated above can be overcome effectively if there is determination to find ways to extend participation. Communications media can give people access to the national and international situation, can overcome some of the problems of choosing priorities, can be the vehicle through which people explore alternatives with central planning units, and with communities in other regions. They can also become the backbone of the horizontal decision-making machinery thereby speeding up the process of discussion, suggestion and decision.

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