COMMUNITY RADIO – A CATALYST IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

*India has flabbergasted the entire world with its successful emulation of the alien concept of democracy which was borrowed from the West by the nation-builders. There were a number of clairvoyance pertaining to the short-life of the Indian democracy. Some thinkers had in fact predicted that the Indian nation would subsequently break down under the mounting pressure of democracy but kudos to our leaders; we managed to pull through quite decently, if not more. Democracy entails necessary participation which in turn demands politically active people aware of what is happening around them. As says Aristotle, "*A citizen is the one who plays the dual role of the ruler as well as the subject" *i.e. a responsible citizen is the one who necessarily participates in the process of governance. Herein lies the importance of the role the media i.e. the fourth estate needs to play in a parliamentary democracy such as ours.*

Key Words: channels, community, communication, democracy, masses, media, people, role

Introduction

Ashish Sen (Media Development, Bangalore) underlines the pertinent and the pro-active role played by the media in India. He says, *"In terms of reach and access, India's print and broadcast media is strong:Â Approximately 60% of urban Indians and 25% of rural Indians read print media on a regular basis, and 96% of the country is reached by radio"*. The increasing popularity and legitimacy enjoyed by the various new channels, journals, online forums with great participation coming from the masses in the form of *'letters to the editor'*, or *'online comments on a news item'* is indicative of the fact that the Indian population, hitherto ensconced in its cocoon is becoming increasingly active.

This is immensely good for the health of the Indian democracy. However, there are various lacunas inherent in this seemingly benefiting media. The high degree of commercialization of news channels and a detrimentally increasing influence of a select few on the kind and the nature of issues highlighted, the never-ending obsession with the casual effect of policies on the privileged class delivers a partial and to an extent, deceptive information to the people. The issue of paid news misleading the electorates, and of the media being used as a tool for propaganda and other such impediments calls for a different manifestation of the media in which it should play a very neutral, growth-centric role as in the case of community media. In this era of growing inclination towards market-driven consumerist and commercial ideals, the role of community media at large becomes significantly pertinent and sacrosanct. An essential component of community media is community radio.

In order to delve into the various functions community radio performs, it is imperative to fairly understand what would be referred to as community media. Sociology defines community as a space where a group of interacting people live. Community radio, thus is a type of radio service, that serves a particular community either geographical or communes and are also run by that community. An essential feature of community media is that since it is completely free from the clutches of the market, profit motive in its functioning does not hold water.

Community radio derives its genesis from the fundamental principles of democracy necessarily entailing equal and active participation in civic affairs and freedom of speech and expression. The role of any form of mass media, as is self-explanatory by its very name is to reach out to people but in its actual realization; generally the lower echelons of human civilization are always left out. One may argue that the media is vigilant enough to report a number of issues pertaining to the deprived or the socially marginalized of for that matter the tribal groups but a juxtaposition of their demographic occurrence with the quantum of space they demand in our daily news shows the grave discrepancy involved.

Community radio therefore caters to the interest of such groups. It is thus obvious to the point of banality that the low level of literacy rates and even lower awareness towards the society is definitely a handicap for them. It is therefore, quite difficult for these people to connect to the larger framework of national and international issues of importance shown in the news channels. What concern would a person have with Indo- US Nuclear deal who can merely manage to keep his body and soul together? But, what is happening around him, in his own community will definitely be intelligible to them. Community radio then emerges out as the most viable option considering the fact that most of them would not be in a position to use the print form of community media.

It would definitely be feasible for them to connect viably with issues pertaining to their own neighbourhood broadcasted in their own native language. It provides a platform for the local people or groups to tell their own stories, share their experiences and thus become active contributors and participants of the media. In this way, people become creators of their own community specific media. In a way it also broadens their horizons of thinking and over time may even lead to a scenario where they will be increasingly aware of the national issues of importance. In many parts of the world, community radio acts as a vehicle for the community and voluntary sector, civil society, agencies, NGOs & citizens to work in partnership to further community development as well as broadcasting aims.

Social awareness programmes and health care measures can also be articulated to the people by means of community media. The first community-based radio station, licensed to an NGO was launched on 15 October 2008, when 'Sangham Radio' in Pastapur village, Medak district, Andhra Pradesh state, was switched on. Sangham Radio, which broadcasts on 90.4 MHz, is licensed to Deccan Development Society (DDS), an NGO that works with women's groups in about 75 villages of Andhra Pradesh. Thus, community radio acts a source of effective communication vis-Ã -vis various developmental works that are on and their implications for the local residents. It also comes out as an effective forum for airing of any

grievances with the policies and also a place to articulate their suggestions for further improvement.

Information on traffic and weather conditions, information on academic events, public announcements pertaining to utilities like electricity and water supply, disaster warnings and health alerts are also made available by means of community radio. Also the coverage of various cultural events and regional festivals propagates the indigenous culture and tradition of the community and substantiates the enchanting individuality any community upholds. Ideologically, looking through the perspective of the marginalized, this kind of active inclusion instills in them a sense of belonging to the larger community, empowers them and also imbues them with a feeling of self-confidence ushering in hope in their hitherto directionless lives.

'Self expression must pass into communication for its fulfillment' goes a saying but I would like to add on another perspective to it saying that, *'Effective communication is the apt articulation of any kind of information'*. It goes beyond saying that community radio thus has the potential to mobilize the people and effectively impart information thus making media more people-centric.

Apart from all this, it also spreads awareness among the college students regarding the living conditions of slum dwellers thriving around the campus. The students may broadcast different community based programmes with the help of community based members residing in adopted slum areas and community residing grounds. Students are therefore important stakeholders in carrying out the process of spreading awareness which is an important function of any community radio. Like Anna FM caters to programs on how to improve agriculture. These programs inform and educate farmers about the latest fertilizers, seeds and so on. The Anna FM 90.4 also airs programs on environment, health and rural development. There should be a nationwide campaign to show the importance of community media in general and community radio in particular and the support the cause actively especially in the most under-developed and neglected areas.

While Indian radio is shifting from a government monopoly to a highly-commercialized broadcasting network, citizens' groups are also demanding that the media be democratized. Imagine a country which has 18 officially-recognized languages and a total of 1652 mother tongues in a country nearly a billion strong and spread over an area of 3.2 million square kilometers -- that's India.

Given its diversity and expanse, one could well understand the problems that tribal, under-privileged, or minority cultures face in getting their voices heard.

As far as the radio is concerned, long years of official domination by the government, outdated, but existing British regulations, and the rampant commercialization of the airwaves have complicated the problem. Citizens groups and non-profit organizations in India are pushing for a wider representation on the centralized and hierarchical Indian radio network -- with some success. Court rulings have recently favored the establishment of new, local stations and campaigners from across India are underlining the importance of radio in

shaping the destiny of Indian society For decades, India's radio stations have been centralized, unable to cater to the regional diversity of India, and lacking editorial independence. Now, citizens' groups are pressuring the government for a community radio model.

Call it by any name -- community radio, rural radio, cooperative radio, or development radio -- its proponents feel that radio holds the key that will unite India's linguistic and ethnic diversity and improve the economic disparity and the huge rural-urban divide. "Imagine having your own radio station where you can walk in any time to ask for your favorite music, share some important local event or chat with your neighbor who's now become a celebrity," says media advocacy campaigner Ms. Sucharita S. Eashwar from Bangalore, the capital of the Indian federal state.

Decentralizing Indian Radio
Ms. Eashwar leads a non-profit development communication group called VOICES that has lobbied to start community radio in India. Based on the current debate in the national media, interested parties feel India has only developed its urban commercial broadcast facilities while ignoring its public service, community, educational, and developmental broadcast networks. Indian non-profit groups are looking to the more vibrant community radio models like those in nearby Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and other African or Latin American countries.

Media advocacy groups have been pressing policy and decision makers in New Dehli to give broadcasting licenses to universities (particularly agricultural universities, medical institutions, adult and legal literacy organizations), registered cooperatives, women's cooperatives, and suitable public bodies. "Our problem has been a `Delhi-centric' approach to broadcasting that we, in this country, have taken. One fear is that [community broadcasting and grassroots radio] could become inconvenient for the existing power-structure," says prominent media critic Professor K.E. Eapen of Bangalore.

In India, radio is shifting from being a government monopoly to a highly-commercialized broadcasting service. Media advocacy groups say the media needs to be "democratized" simultaneously as it moves away from official control. Privatization and total deregulation is not enough if the media becomes irrelevant to the vast majority of Indians. Now, while the policies are being developed, is the time for non-profit groups, educational and research institutions, cooperatives, women's groups, and development organizations to seize the available opportunities created by liberalizing the electronic media.

In September, 1996, in Banglore, VOICES brought together a group of radio broadcasters, policy planners, media professionals, and non-profit groups to study how community radio could be relevant to India and what policies were needed. Initially, one suggestion was that the approximately 76 local radio stations that make up the staterun monopoly, All India Radio, could allocate an hour of air time each day to community broadcasting. The Banglore Declaration for a Media Policy on Community Radio was released at the end of the meeting and aimed to shape media policies in India.

Meanwhile, several non-profit organizations have written to the Information and Broadcasting Ministry showing an interest in establishing low-cost local radio broadcasting facilities to support their community development work. Problems remain since cheap FM receiver sets are not easily available, especially in rural areas.

An official of the state-run Bharat Electronics Limited, Mr. Rajamani, points out that low-cost radio stations are becoming affordable in India too. One low-cost station with a transmitting power of up to 50W that reaches a target audience of 5-10 square kilometers would cost between Rs 1 to 1.2 million (almost US$ .5 million). Basic equipment for recording, mixing, editing, and a 20-feet high antenna would cost a little more.

Radio has already proven its relevance to Indians. Recent government studies suggest that radio in India could potentially reach up to 98.5% of the population. There are approximately 104 million homes that have radio-nearly double the number of homes that have TV. "Over the last decade, All India Radio has focused more on the rural population and the urban lower middle classes, unlike [TV'S] preoccupation with the urban upper middle classes," Ms. Eashwar says. India's population is overwhelmingly poor and over one-third of the population lives below the official poverty line, the equivalent of US$300 a year!

India's Broadcasting Policies
In a recent ruling, India's Supreme Court declared the airwaves public property to be used for promoting public good and ventilating plurality of views, opinions, and ideas. In the context of delivering its crucial 1995 judgment, the Supreme Court of India looked closely at the evolution of the broadcast laws in Europe and the U.S. and stated "Use of the airwaves, which is public property, must be regulated for its optimum use for public good for the greatest number. The rights of the listeners and viewers, and not of the broadcaster, is paramount." The court felt that monopolies in broadcasting -- either by the government, an individual, or organization -- was unacceptable.

Oddly, there were no special laws to govern broadcasting in India except the Indian Telegraph Act, a British colonial legislation that dated back to 1885. This law scarcely fit the purpose, since it was developed before the radio was even invented. "Centralized, one-way broadcasting...has a limited scope to serve the goals of development, especially in the context of pluralism and diversity which is a singular characteristic of Indian society," read the Bangalore Declaration on Radio.

India has been poised on the brink of broadcasting autonomy for at least three decades. Yet, media policy and implementation continue to remain in the hands of the government. Because of this, Indian radio has grown impressively, but has remained inaccessible to large groups of nonaffluent segments of the population, despite sporadic efforts at innovation. India has been unable to chart out a well-formulated communication strategy to support broadcasting development and there have been lopsided priorities while defining the state's role in the media. Recent economic policy changes in India introduced foreign technology, capital, and the advent of satellite television. This has reoriented broadcasting towards

commercialization and the formerly powerful All India Radio has been relegated to a distant second place.

Recently, India has been making efforts to revamp its age-old broadcasting laws. But shaping a new broadcasting policy is turning into a tough job. For the last five years, there has been a hotly argued debate over the social, political, and cultural impact of the electronic media in India. "We have an impressive [radio] infrastructure -- one of the best in the world -- with broadcasting content that is of limited interest for its listeners," commented journalist Kalpana Sharma in national newspaper The Hindu. She blamed government's domination of radio for this.

Examples Across the Border
Meanwhile, broadcasting lessons are being learned from some of India's neighbors. Tiny landlocked Nepal, the Himalayan country that is home to some of the world's highest peaks, is showing the way to south Asia by setting up its first community radio station. Official restrictions have not hindered the arrival of Radio Sagarmatha, the first non-governmental FM station in Nepal. It broadcasts from a transmitter set up by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with support from the United Nations.

Over the past few months, this station has been filling the airwaves of capital Kathmandu with the sound of long forgotten Nepali folk music mixed with `development messages.' Sagarmatha, literally meaning the `forehead of the ocean' is the Nepali name for Mount Everest. The Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists (NEFEJ), headed this project and is planning to develop Radio Sagarmatha as a prototype station and training and resource center that will expand radio into the rural areas of Nepal. "Our long term objective is to encourage dozens or more of small stations throughout the Himalayan country," said NEFEJ executive director Om Khadka.

Radio Sagarmatha launched its own test transmissions in early June after getting a license from the Nepali government-a herculean effort. Over a dozen other applications are believed to be pending with the Ministry of Communication and Information in this Himalayan kingdom, but analysts in Kathmandu feel it is unlikely that there will be more private radio stations because of the enormous bureaucratic obstacles one must overcome.

Presently, Nepal only has two FM stations both operating from Kathmandu. Radio Sagarmatha's 500 watt transmitter has just joined the government-run FM station in Kathmandu. Both stations cover the Kathmandu Valley, an area of around 400 square kilometers.

Radio Sagarmatha is an unusual experiment in other ways. Some of the country's best known media organizations, the Nepal Forum for Environmental Journalists (NEFEJ), the Nepal Press Institute, publishers of Himal magazine, and Worldview Nepal (a media related organization), have taken a lead in establishing Radio Sagarmatha.

UN development statistics say 75% of Nepalis live below the poverty line. Average life expectancy is 55 years. One in every 10 infants dies before the age of five, and 40% of Nepali children are undernourished. Environmental problems have been a concern in Nepal for quite some time. Some two-thirds of the country's rural population live in mountains and plateaus with only 30% of Nepal's arable land. Population pressures on the land in these rural areas have caused erosion and deforestation to reach alarming proportions. Low productivity, unemployment, and poverty are some of the concerns staring in the face of the country. Its backers hope that the Radio Sagarmatha experiment will boost pluralism in the broadcast media in the South Asian region, where the scene has largely been dominated by large, sometimes-monolith official organizations. India hopes to follow this example to improve the economic and social well-being of the country's rural inhabitants, as well as to improve the communication between these communities.

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