

# Community Radio in Rural Development: Indian Experiences

Communication & Journalism Research  
4 (1&2) p 63- 68  
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masscomhod@uoc.ac.in  
ISSN 2348 – 5663

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## Abstract

Community radio, though relatively new in India, has become an important vehicle to carry development messages to the grass roots of society. It serves different needs, in accordance to the requirements of the community in which it functions. Some of the community radios in India which serves the marginalised sections, and impart knowledge about agriculture, literacy and overall community development are explored here.

## Keywords

Community radio, rural development, third gender, women, agriculture, literacy

## Introduction

Community radio takes different forms in tune with the surroundings where it functions, fulfilling its two main objectives: democratization of communication and community empowerment. Consequently, it provides the peripheral sections of the society with a voice and accomplishes the ideal mainstream media's mission of monitoring the society, particularly the power holders, to ensure a good governance and equitable and balanced development.

The mushrooming of community radios in the developing nations owes to the quest of its people for a system which is neither government controlled nor privately owned. The movement started in the 1900s gained momentum and has witnessed exponential growth in the later years. International agencies and governments understand the potential of this system in empowering people through information and participation and in order to facilitate its expansion, legal as well as policy frameworks are developed (Myers, 2011). In India the broadcasting sector was monopolized by the Government. The Supreme Court's historical ruling in February 1995 on airwaves opened up the sector for private players, but solely for airing entertainment programmes.

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In 2000, the demand for a third tier system took contour when well established educational institutions were allowed to run stations on their campuses. Anna FM, the first licensed community radio station thus became functional on February 1, 2004. Four years later, government issued new guidelines that allowed NGOs and other civil society organisations to own and operate radio stations. Today, the sector has been able to carve out a niche for itself. As in February 2015, there are 179 functional community radio stations in the country.

### **Community radio in rural development**

Development is multi-faceted and collective development denotes not only economic development, but the non-economic aspects as well. The Dag Hammarskjold Project of 1975 laid out the need for development activities to be indigenous and self reliant. It said that development would acquire its full meaning only if it is rooted at local levels (Haque et al., 1975). In India, with a multitude of sub-cultures and regional languages; the capacity of mainstream media to serve individual needs is largely limited. Again, world over, the traditional vertical approach of media has turned out to be futile in enabling grass root level development activities. This stresses the necessity for a people centered medium such as community radio. Also, the majority of Indian population- 68.84% (Census Report, 2011) dwells in rural areas which lack even basic amenities and infrastructure. Coupled with illiteracy, it hinders the effective involvement of print as well as electronic media. Even rural newspapers or community television cannot claim the penetration community radio has attained.

Thus rural development is intricately associated with effective information dissemination fostering the grass root level community involvement. The present study embark on five aspects of rural development namely women empowerment, agriculture, education, third gender issues and community development through case studies of community radio stations pan India.

### **Relevance of the issues**

The Indian constitution guarantees equality of status and opportunity to all its citizens and prohibits any sort of discrimination. Despite the guarantees, women have lagged behind men in almost all sectors (6<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan, n.d.). Gender is a major aspect in community radio projects launched by community based initiatives. Conventional ideology of male superiority coupled with their control over productive resources has limited women's options for a better life (Pavarala & Malik, 2007). So empowerment of this marginalized section is a major aspect of rural development. Women engagement is given priority by almost all community radios. Still, to a large extent, their participation is confined to administrative roles. Empowerment is entwined with power. According to Rowlands (1998), there are various relational powers namely power over (controlling power), power to (generate new possibilities without domination), power with (collective power); and power from within (spiritual strength) (as cited in Melkote & Steeves, 2001). Unless

the inequities in power aren't efficiently addressed, the envisaged empowerment may not be realistic. True human development enables self management and participation in decision making (Haque et al., 1975).

Agriculture has been the backbone of Indian economy. The primary sector's (agriculture, forestry and fishing, and mining and quarrying) contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has come down in the successive years, post independence (Acharya, 2014). In addition to the decline in land availability and other hostilities, the failure of the existing communication systems to provide timely information and updates to the relevant people is a major setback. The indigenous farming methods are getting wiped out. A centralized information system may turn to be futile as it might not serve the local requirements.

The waste of human learning potential is more serious than wastage of non renewable physical resources. Illiteracy is seen as a symptom and cause of upward spiral of ignorance and poverty (An Indian Personality for Television, 1985). Development without education is out of question. For India this is all the more serious because we constitute 17.5% of world population; that means nearly one out of every six person is from India (Census Report, 2011). Taking into account the complex social structure of the country, community radios can effectively contribute to people's learning process. MacBride Commission noted: "the development of comprehensive national radio network, capable of reaching remote areas, should take priority over the development of TV, which however, should be encouraged where appropriate special attention should be given to areas where illiteracy is prevalent" (MacBride, 1981).

The late 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a change in understanding of homosexuality as a variant of human sexuality; not a sin or crime (Rao & Jacob, 2012). Following the acceptance of American Psychiatric Association and World Health Organisation many countries have accepted them. In India, it has been considered a practice, not an identity. After a landmark ruling by the Supreme Court in April 2014, the transgender people are now recognized as a "third gender". They are entitled to get the same treatment, privileges and rights as others. Despite a few positive instances, they are still being prejudiced in most parts of the country. They aren't given representation in media. Community radios can serve in this regard as to create awareness in the society to end the discrimination, to bring the problems of the third genders to the mainstream and to engage them creatively. This is particularly important as the third genders form a significant portion of many societies and to bring them to the mainstream of society is necessary for development to be real.

Traditionally, villages are the basic units of Indian society. Even though urbanization and industrialization are progressing at great pace, the benefits do not reach all alike. The development messages are unevenly distributed and this creates hindrances in overall development. Community development visualizes an all encompassed upliftment in the general lifestyle of people, and each and every section in particular. The development of infrastructures, improvement in health,

education, income generation and empowerment of weaker sections are given much focus. Community radio is the best possible way to make this practical.

### **Cases under study**

#### **Women empowerment: Rudi no Radio, 90.4 (Ahmedabad, Gujarat)**

Women empowerment achieved a new height when Rudi no Radio started broadcasting on November 26, 2009 as the 49<sup>th</sup> CRS in the country. Community women are in charge of programme production and broadcasting. It broadcasts for a total of eight hours daily and reaches 40 villages. Trainings, workshops etc. are organised and rural women are motivated to participate and contribute their knowledge on indigenous medicines, arts, recipes etc. Listener groups of women and children are created. The radio station received the *Laadli* Media Awards for Gender Sensitivity (Western Region) in the Special Award category 'Efforts to empower women through media' in 2010 and two awards in the first CEMCA Community Radio Awards for Good Practices in 2011.

#### **Agriculture: TNAU CRS 107.4 (Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu)**

There are 62 State Agricultural Universities in India (ICAR, n.d.). Six of these universities own a community radio station each. Established in 2010, TNAU CRS under Tamil Nadu Agricultural University has been working to encourage farmers to adopt latest technologies in the field. Over the years, the university has engaged in farm school broadcasts over AIR. Through discussions, interviews, skits and features, they interact with all sections of the community and envision raising their standard of living.

#### **Education: DU CR 90.4 (University of Delhi, Delhi)**

Being one of the leading educational institutions in the country, community radio of Delhi University serves dual purpose. The students as well as the local communities are provided with opportunities for skill development through internship and training programmes. Innovative programme patterns and technological advancements are made possible.

#### **Third gender issues: Radio Active 90.4 (Bangalore, Karnataka)**

Licensed to Jain Group of Institutions, Radio Active is an urban Community Radio addressing sexual minorities, women, and children - a few among the diverse groups they cater to. Launched in 2007, the station is a platform for different communities including NGOs to share ideas on issues of importance. Radio Active seeks to promote inclusion, good governance, policy advocacy issues and enhance community cohesion by dialogues to support collective problem solving (CR Compendium, 2015).

### **Community development: Jnan Taranga 90.4 (Guwahati, Assam)**

The North- East India comprising of eight states is constantly conflict-ridden. The effort of Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University to launch the area's first community radio is definitely praise- worthy. The station is an open platform for all sections to voice their views and grievances. The station serves rural and urban people alike, through a variety of programmes. There are regular phone-in programmes for listeners to provide their views on various issues.

### **Conclusion**

Community radio is the answer to the quest of public as well as development agencies for enabling dialogue for, by and of the people. The villages in India face divergent issues and hence they require solutions tailored to suit particular demands. A community radio broadcasts programmes which give an ample view of the community life, including the various internal as well as external factors influencing it. It enhances the flow of information, enables technology transfer and encourages the participation of the weaker sections and minorities of the society; thus empowering them. They are given a platform to raise their issues and concerns. The potential of community radio in providing services during times of natural catastrophes and in remote places are proven many a times. This medium fills in the gap created by the main stream media, making people realise their potential and role in bringing changes in the society of which they are a part.

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