Review Paper

A critical review on the status of Community Radio in India

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Abstract

Radio has been recognized as one of the most cost-effective means of mass communication man has ever invented. The concept of radio communication run and managed by the community itself has gained serious attention since almost a half a century ago. The government of India in order to target specific communities launches Community Radio (CR) since the early 2000s. Today India has a functioning 200 CR in the country as against the expected 4000 stations. Though the country's communication network is one of the largest in the world, Community Radio is still at infancy. From the trouble in obtaining license to the managing station; from the technical limitations to limitations imposed on content to be broadcasted; from mode of financing to restrictive commercialization, Community Radio need total revamping of its entire regulations to meet the demands of the vast-multi-cultural society.

Keywords: Community Radio, Uneven distribution, Licensing, Content, Poor infrastructure of CR.

Introduction

Community Radio is a type of broadcasting service that caters the interests of a specific community by broadcasting relevant content through the use of local-intelligible medium. It is a product of the idea that people in our changing times seeks information that is convenient, relevant, entertaining, inclusive, and reliable. It is a platform in our day where we can be challenged of our perspectives or think differently, and grow from one another. It gives a space where everyone can speak of issues important to their life or neighborhood that affect us – where we live, work, and play. Thus, the historical philosophy of community radio is to use this medium as the voice of the voiceless, the mouthpiece of oppressed people and generally as a tool for development of the community.

Basic Elements and Concept of Community Radio

World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters, an international umbrella organization of community radio broadcasters founded in 1983, with nearly 3,000 members in 110 countries, identifies three major elements of Community Radio are which is presented below: i. Non-Profit Making, ii. Community Ownership and Control. iii. Community Participation.

According to W. Jayaweera, Director, Communication Development at UNESCO, Community Radio is not just about broadcast content but mostly about the process of community engagement in the participatory development process[1]. It identifies the possibilities that this particular medium can transform the whole society in a desired manner. With the proper use of this media people within the community can realize the potential of the information world. Moreover, it makes oneself aware of the responsibilities that are attached in the community itself. Thus, Community Radio is not about doing something for the community but about the community doing something for itself, i.e. owning and controlling its own means of communication. It is a media which is owned by the community and receives community support through participation.

The three major elements that identify the Community Radio from other commercial or public broadcasting should always be the guiding principles in our community broadcasting setup. Moreover, apart from the major elements mentioned above, elements such as community and localized content, local medium of language for broadcasting and analysis of important issues concerning the community has to be considered as well.

The key concept of Community Radio (CR) is that of giving the 'voiceless a voice'[2]. The idea of having a *Voice* is not just limited to the influential and well-to-do groups, but more to the neglected masses of the society. By 'having a voice' means the recognition of the problems a particular neglected groups faced in their daily life. In this context, community radio is often seen as giving a voice to those who are often voiceless in the social, political, economic and decision-making domain. For its reliability and ownership by the community itself, the medium became so instrumental in highlighting the difficulties so that the issues are addressed accordingly. Finally, the concept of community radio can be summed up in the words of Louie Tabing, a community radio pioneer from the Philippines, who said community radio can give a community member the opportunity to 'Be you, Be New and Be True'.

Community Radio in India: A Critical Review

Introduction: The Community Radio was not legal in India till 2002. Though there had been a campaign by free speech advocates, academics and concerned individuals across the country to get the community radio legalized, it development was far behind expectations. However, the turning point to the establishment of Community Radio Stations (CRS) begins in the 1995 ruling of the Supreme Court which upholds "airwaves are public property and must be used for the public good". The ruling added that though airwaves are limited, they should be used with reasonable restrictions.

The ruling empowers the public of the right to receive and impart information is enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and also in the Indian Constitution which describes the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression. This 1995 ruling was the foundation stone of community radio in India. Immediately after the ruling came out, the civil society groups formulated and adopted a Bangalore Declaration in 1996 which the need for a third tiers of broadcasting, i.e. community radio was articulated. This was followed up by a UNESCO sponsored Pastapur Declaration in 2000 which reiterated the need for community radio and also asserted that it ought to be non-profit making, localized and community owned. These two declaration played important role in the development of Community Radio movement in India[3].

In December 2002, the NDA Government approved a policy for the grant of licenses for setting up of Community Radio Stations to well established educational institutions including IITs/IIMs in the country. Thus, eligibility to own and operate the community radio was restricted to only the educational institutions. On 1 February 2004, Anna FM was launched as India's first campus "community" radio station by the students of the Anna University.

However, by that time, the marginalized and voiceless communities remained outside of the community radios. The civil society kept working towards convincing the government to expand the mandate of the community radio sector to include communities living in rural, remote and hilly areas of the country.

In 2006, the government released a new community radio policy which allowed the agricultural universities, educational institutions and civil society institutions such as NGOs to apply for a community radio broadcasting license under the FM band 88–108 MHz. By 2008, some 40 Community Radio Stations started in India owned either by the educational institutions or by the NGOs. The first NGO operated community Radio was the Sangham Radio beginning in 1998. It was licensed to Deccan Development Society, in Pastapur village, Medak district, Andhra Pradesh. In the following, Community Radio in India will be critically examined on its reach, distribution, independence, etc.

Community Radio Stations are unevenly distributed

While recognizing the significance of community radio, there are multiple reasons to be doubted on the status of community radio in the country. One of the greatest concerns on community radio in India is the distribution of broadcast stations in the country. According to the data provided by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, there are a total of 200 community radio stations in the country[4]. Letting aside the insignificant number of community radio stations in the country considering its large geographical area, the other character it hunts itself is its unevenly distribution of community radio stations in the country.

According to the Ministry source, Southern India comprising states of Tamil Nadu, Kerela, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Telengana constitute the bulk of the bases of community radio stations in the country. Of the total of 200 Community Radio stations, 33% of the total stations accounting for 67 stations are located in the region. On the other hand, central Indian states comprising of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand accounts for 24% of the total CR stations in the country.

Northern Indian states of Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, Uttrakhand and Chandigarh have a total of 31 CR Stations accounting to 15.5%. Western India owns 16% of the CR. The states include Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra. Whereas Northeast India and the Eastern India are the regions that experience least Community Radio Stations in the country. West Bengal and Orissa has a total of 12 CR constituting 6% of the total CR in the country. Northeast India which comprises of eight states with a total geographical area of 2, 62, 179 sq miles and a population of 45.53 million individuals has just three Community Radio stations, with all of them confined to the state of Assam[5].

The unjust and uneven distribution of CR is the country becomes a baffling question to the policy makers of the country. Northeast region with diversity at its peak will find the medium most suitable considering its inconvenience in accessing mainstream media. However, the dismal lack in the presence of community -run stations should be a reminder to policy makers and the grass-root NGOs to take up the matter in the earnest possible way to unearth the reason behind this uneven distribution of Community Radio Stations in the country.

Uneven distribution of the types of Community Radio

The distribution of the types of community radio station in the country is another subject. Not only is the uneven distribution confined to its location but also on the types of stations operational in the country. Of the total of about 200 CRS, nearly half of the total station is educational based. It has a share of

47.5% of the total stations. The educational based stations are followed by those run by NGOs which constitutes 38% of the total CRS in the country. University base constitute about 6%, Krishi Vigyan Kendra shares 4% whereas the State Agriculture institutes shares the lowest with 3.5% of the total CRS in the country.

The mission of CRS which has been intended to reach the masses which are out of the touch of the mainstream media has significantly lost its intended path. According to the data provided, CRS has been adopted largely by education related organization based in the cities or towns. Over half of the stations are run and managed by well organized and funded institutes of learning, thereby ignoring the intended public. Thus the concept of 'community' becomes vague. By and large, CRS operated in the country remained well confined to urban and well instituted organisations.

Slow growth on the target number of stations

The need and urgency for community based media has been of great demand especially in multi-cultural societies like India. To cater the needs of such diverse culture, community radio remains the sole initiative of the government of India since the last 15 years. According to estimates, India needs about 4000 community radio stations to cover the entire population under its information ambit[6]. However, the growth of the said platform has been dismally insignificant. The first radio station was started in 2002 by the Anna University for educational purposes. However, after 15 years of its initiative India just have 200 community radio stations in the country.

The government of India's effort to expand CR to the fullest promised in 2007 to set up 4000 community radio stations in the country in few years, yet, remains unexecuted. With a target of 4000 CR stations, India today owns a meagre of 5% of the promised stations. With this trend, community access to information through this particular media is unlikely to be fulfilled in the next 50 years.

Redundant and cumbersome process in acquiring license

One main reason for the slow growth of community radio stations in the country is the lengthy and complex process in the granting of licenses. The criteria laid down by the government have added the burden. Permission to set up CRS is to be granted only when mandatory clearances from Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Defence and Wireless Planning and Coordination Wing of Ministry of Communications & Information Technology are obtained. Clearances should also be obtained from Ministry of Human Resource Development in case of Educational Institutions and Ministry of Agriculture in case of State Agriculture Institutions, Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) institutions and Krishi Vigyan Kendras. All these clearances are mandatory[7].

Since January 2012, Government has received 689 applications for setting up of CRS in the country. Of these 41.3% applications were either returned or rejected, 38.17% of the applications were referred back to applicants, 9.4% were referred to the concerned ministries and letter of intent (LOI) was issued for only 11% of those applications. It is therefore not surprising that there are just 200 operational CRS in the country in 2016.

Technical limitations of the strength of signals

After getting the permit to operate community radio stations, another important factor to be considered is the several technical limitations the government imposed on the stations. As per the guidelines mentioned in the 2006 modification, signals for broadcasting shall be limited to 12 kilometers. However, in reality the transmission equipment provided by the agencies sometimes reach only 7 kilometers radius.

The technical and equipment inefficiency has left many radio stations limited to a small locality. Local towns and villages with greater than 7 kilometers radius of its settlement find it inconvenient. The reach and coverage of a particular signal can hence be enhanced by providing better equipments and more importantly revamping the guidelines laid down by the ministry. This will ensure that a particular station serves more people and also act as a strategy to minimize the insignificant presence community radio stations in the country.

Limitations imposed on content

The concept of community radio varies from countries to countries. Countries in Europe and the Americas largely let stations function independently on the selection of content and programme, thus granting more autonomy to the community. However, community radio stations in India functions with 'reasonable restrictions' on the content selection to be aired too. In India, CRS are largely use to communicate development policies. It encourages broadcasters on the educational, developmental, social and cultural needs of the community. It however restricts the airing of news, views and opinions of the people; with exception to the translated version of news broadcasted in the All India Radio without any distortion.

The restrictions imposed on the contents of the media in turn lowers the attractiveness of the audience towards the media. In the fast changing virtual world where media acts as a sharing platform, the absence of news and information content in community radio stations makes itself redundant and dull. The slow growth of community radio stations could also be attributed to the several guidelines and content restriction imposed by the government to the community broadcasters. CRS policy of India is largely a one-way communication process considering the development centric content. Community Radio stations will bear desire results only when the voices of the people are taken into account through the

adoption of two-way or multidimensional communication principles.

Organisational and managerial challenges

One of the challenges CRS faced in its functioning is the organizational modalities of the stations. As stations are owned and managed by societies, the well functioning requires time, human resources and financing. For a struggling society, the maintenance of CRS is a cumbersome. As it does not permit any commercial interest, the society has to get financial assistance from any individuals and societies, which is unlikely to be responded positively to the project. As such, the longevity and survival of stations depends largely on the sacrifice the society made over.

In the light of such difficulties, it can be assumed that lack of support, inefficient organizational structure and regulations imposed upon have made CRS difficult to be started by NGOs. According to the data provided, 38% of the stations are run by NGOs. However, it is rather surprising to the fact that several of CRS run and managed by NGOs has footprints of the politicians, corporate leader, etc. According to the report of Anushi Agarwal and Devi Leena Bose, CRS in the country is largely financed and funded by politicians, corporate houses or institutes to gain mileage indirectly or indirectly[8].

Conclusion

Community Radio Stations are considered as one of the most vibrant and dynamic means of participatory communication among the Indian communities. These radio stations have a critical role in strengthening the democratic fabric of a country by ensuring community engagement at all levels of governance. It is simple to set up and at the same time requires little expense to get oneself informed through the medium. For the community radio is broadcasted in local-intelligible language, it requires no formal education on the part of the audience thereby minimizing the gap between the educated and the illiterate masses.

However, the Indian community radio stations rather make the medium complex to its extreme. From its reluctance in giving airwaves free to public, it added tiers and levels of regulation and restrictions for any group of individuals to use the service. The process in acquiring the right to set up airing stations become so complex that it has buried its intended concept, goal and mission of the project itself. Compared to other countries of the west or its neighbours like Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh or Philippine, CRS structure in India is still exhibit colonial censorship. The restriction it imposed on the content itself has negative implications to the idea of free speech and expression in the largest democratic country.

Thus the restrictions imposed on the content of CRS lacks reasoning. In a country where all forms of media thrive with editorial independence, the special restriction it imposed on the

Community Radio Stations is perplexing and discriminatory. When all forms of media thrive together and acted as a sharing platform besides news and information, limiting the editorial autonomy and independence of CRS lacks logical argument.

In the era where media are either owned and managed with huge commercial interests, the denial of right to broadcast content of its own by CRS with the fear of being misused for political of economic purpose shows the colonial system of grating the license to publication house which have favour one group of media over the other. The denial of platform for majority of Indians will create deep imbalance in the planning process and its implementation of development policies. Media available to the rural masses has to be taken care of. This will ensure better participation of the community in the decision making process of the country. Subscribing solely to the agenda of corporate-centric media and their corporate interest will further aggravate the country's uneven distribution of wealth, power and influence.

The bottom-up approach to development programmes which every government profess to promote will continue to remain unattended or least benefit the public until and unless the voice of the community is taken into consideration. The total disregard to CRS, however, is a reminder of the neglected masses in the decision making process of the country. All development initiatives should be preceded by a careful and balanced planning involving the mass at the grass root level. Community radio and its allied media should be a game changer in the process.

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