

**Community Radio for Women Literacy:
Insights and Lessons from an Indian Experiment**

by

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By Binod C. Agrawal

Community Radio for Education¹

In the last half century radio has been tried for education in many parts of the world, especially for adult literacy (Burke, 1976, McBride, 1980, Mehta, 1989, Basu 1992 and Ghosh 2006). The first attempt to use radio in India for education was a pilot project known as 'Rural Radio Forum' initiated after independence (Mathur and Neurath 1959). Rural Radio Forum was modelled around Canadian Rural Radio Forum's first broadcast in 1941. In spite of Rural Radio Forum's success beyond expectation within 15 years, it was closed down and few years later, there were no functional rural radio forums in India (Yadava 1989; 66-67).

In 1984, All India Radio (AIR) established its first local radio station at Nagercoil, Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu (Anjaneyulu 1989). Nagercoil radio station gave a meaningful direction in the use of radio for education and development. Radio for adult literacy was reported in West Bengal by Basu (1992) who found positive gains in adult learning from radio. Recently, Ghosh (2006), reported use of radio for adult literacy. Dighe and Reddi (2007) also indicated liberating power of ICT for women's education. In neighbouring Sri Lanka, local radio was used for adult learning with some degree of success (Foote 1989). Similar efforts have also been made in Asia-Pacific region.

Opinion in the use of radio for education especially of women's education has been recommended though hard research findings are scanty that too limited to small

¹ This paper is exclusively based on author's earlier report entitled "Project in Radio Education for Adult Literacy (PREAL)" by Binod C. Agrawal *et. al* (1993). Ahmedabad: Social Research Group, Development and Educational Communication Unit, ISRO

“experiments” and “projects”. Findings of one such attempt of radio use for women literacy has been discussed.

Project in Radio Education for Adult Literacy (PREAL)

Consistent with the New Education Policy 1986, Government of India initiated National Literacy Mission (NLM) to eradicate illiteracy from the country. One among several methods under consideration was the use of radio to improve the pace and quality of the literacy teaching-learning process. The “Project in Radio Education for Adult Literacy” (PREAL) was carried out to impart literacy through radio and support the awareness and functionality components of PREAL.

The Directorate of Adult Education, Government of India, selected approximately 3,600 Adult Education Centres in the Hindi speaking states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh spread in 10 districts covering eight All India Radio (AIR) stations. On an average, thirty adult learners were selected for each Adult Women Education Centre. In this way, about 108,000 women learners were selected to participate in PREAL.

PREAL used radio to promote literacy skills (reading only) and to facilitate teaching of literacy in Adult Women Education Centres. The underlying premise was that 15-20 minutes of radio broadcast once a week (and its repeat broadcast as well as repetitive use in the non-broadcast mode) would reinforce learning among women and supplement teaching of literacy skills by instructors. Specially designed Radio primer was used as supplementary to the adult literacy primer. Instructors were trained to coordinate lessons from both primers.

The major thrust of radio broadcast was on literacy learning (reading of standard Hindi) and teaching. Specifically, it focused on enabling the adult learners to read with the help of radio primer. The core content of the radio programmes focused on learning and teaching of reading skills. The radio programmes were presented in a graded pattern. At

the end of twenty-six radio lessons, the adult learners were expected to read and recognize all Hindi along with the words from their active vocabulary.

Quite clearly, PREAL being a complex endeavour, several factors like radio, print primers, quality of instructions, motivational levels of the learners, physical, administrative and social environment of learning affected the overall outcome of the project. Radio broadcast in PREAL was only one of the many components, which cumulatively were likely to influence learning.

At the grassroots, women learners participated in PREAL. For each Adult Women Education Centre an instructor (as far as possible a local educated woman) was selected and trained for organizing and running the adult literacy programme and to use radio-cum-tape recorder (two-in-one). In each Adult Women Education Centre, 30 women learners in 3600 villages were selected. In this way, 1,08,000 women learners were the participants of PREAL.

PREAL Assessment

In order to assess the specific contribution of radio in the women's learning the project was evaluated using field experimental design. The design included pre and post measures in experimental (adult women learners having normal teaching and access to radio broadcast) and control (adult women learners having only normal teaching) groups. Two per cent or 72 Adult Women Education Centres equally divided among the eight districts and nine matching control Adult Women Education Centres were selected. All the 30 women learners of each selected centre were interviewed.

Finally, 4320 women learners (2160 experimental and 2160 control) constituted the sample of the survey. All the 144 instructors of selected Adult Women Education Centres were also interviewed in the survey. However, no more than 3326 respondents were interviewed from 181 Adult Women Education Centres (95 experimental and 86 control) in pre survey, From among them only 2367 could be interviewed from 154 Adult Women Education Centres in post survey.

Rural Context

In PREAL villages one or the other dialect of Hindi was spoken. In almost 95 per cent villages, agriculture was major means of livelihood. The other commonly found activity was dairy and/or animal husbandry. The development activity in these villages was somewhat lopsided.

The national and regional political parties were active in these villages having 77.3 per cent functioning village council (panchayat). Almost half of the villages were physically segregated on caste lines. More than 88 per cent villages had schools for primary education and above. Rajasthan had distinction of having a school for every village.

It is in this rural backdrop that the Adult Women Education Centres were organized. They were mostly located in the central part of the village or in the instructors' home. These centres were organized in convenient *pucca* large or small rooms.

Instructors

Over 90 per cent were women instructors as per the design of the project. More than half of the instructors (50.3 per cent) had education between class nine and 12. This level of education was thought sufficient to teach adult women learners as decided by the project planners. As much as 54.5 per cent instructors owned radio and frequently listened to entertainment programmes. Similarly, 44.7 per cent instructors watched some television and 77.3 per cent had some exposure to cinema. But only 18.9 per cent read newspapers more than once or twice a week. On the whole, media exposure except radio was low. Instructors were especially trained for PREAL by State and District level trainers in the operation and maintenance of radio and teaching methodology. In addition, every instructor was trained for Improved Pace and Content of Learning (IPCL) though 52.3 per cent instructors had not participated in IPCL training.

Radio for PREAL

In the experimental Adult Women Education Centres, the instructors were given a 12 volt radio-cum-cassette recorder or two-in-one and three audio cassettes and batteries for recording and replaying the radio lessons. Radio Reader or Akashvani Pathmala was given to supplement the efforts of women learners. IPCL primers were given to all learners.

Radio sets were available for use to 70.6 per cent instructors before the start of PREAL, whereas 29.4 per cent received it after the programme had started. The sad part was that not more 47.1 per cent radio sets were in working condition, though there were inter-state variations, highest being Bihar (63.2 per cent) and lowest in Madhya Pradesh (27.3 per cent). Observations indicated that the instructors were not clear about the use and purpose of the blank cassettes provided to them (32.2 per cent instructors did not record any programme, 27.9 per cent instructors recorded between one and nine programmes and remaining recorded from 10-26 programmes).

Radio lessons were useful for 78.2 per cent instructors. After the completion of the PREAL more instructors had favourable opinion about the adult education (from 75.0 per cent to 83.8 per cent). Opinion about the usefulness of PREAL was positive in all states. Comprehension of radio programmes by adult women learners according to the instructors became difficult with increasing complexity of lessons.

Women of Learners

In line with the objectives of PREAL more than 90 per cent adult learners were females. Most of the adult learners belonged to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes for whom National Literacy Mission was aimed. Among women learners there were 16.7 per cent literate women. In this respect, PREAL managed to cater to the targeted adult women learners to a very large extent.

Tests of functional numeric and reading ability before the start of PREAL indicated one out of 12 or about 8 per cent women learners were literate. This finding was not surprising as 16.7 per cent women learners reported having formal education. Most adult learners joined the adult literacy programme on their own choice referred to as “self desired” learners. The externally persuaded adult learners were over 40 per cent who joined the programme because they were enrolled by the instructor (Prerak).

The distribution of Radio Reader was disappointing among the adult learners. Radio Reader was not received even by one fourth of the adult learners by the end of PREAL (availability improved from 14.5 per cent to 24.4 per cent by the time the PREAL was over). The Adult Women Education Centres did not function regularly. Inter-state analysis indicated that in Madhya Pradesh, it was most irregular whereas, in Rajasthan it was most regular having difference of almost 1:7. It seems there were inherent structural difficulties in running the adult women education centres on a regular basis.

Literacy Gains from Radio Lessons

Women learners, in spite of several difficulties, lack of supply of books and educational material, low attendance, expressed advantages of being literate having ability to read and write. It is this reason why a large majority of the women learners had favourable responses towards adult women literacy programme.

Overall very little difference was found between the experimental and control groups as far as ability of reading of sentences and words was concerned. Further, no appreciable differences in gain were found between women learners of experimental and control groups thereby reflecting little or no contribution of radio lessons in accelerating the teaching learning process during PREAL.

Given all the problems associated in the implementation of PREAL and attrition of the women learners at every stage, it is difficult to isolate any contribution of radio especially when only 61.5 per cent or 796 out of the total 1295 women learners in the experimental

group claimed to have attended PREAL literacy classes, and only 42.5 per cent or 551 had heard the radio lessons at varying frequencies in which only 4.9 per cent could listen to 22 to 26 radio programmes.

Conclusion

In conclusion it would be difficult to say that radio intervention in the women literacy programme, in any way, positively contributed in improving the attendance, due to low use of radio. On the other hand, it was encouraging to observe that radio broadcast acted as facilitator in improving the teaching and learning situation and also help increase interaction between learners and the instructors.

Women learners, though small in number, who attended the classes gained from the adult literacy programme and became literate. Hence, more than pedagogy, the techniques of appropriate management, operation and implementation need to be worked out for the success of the programme.

In PREAL while usefulness of radio was indicated, the contributions of radio in accelerating the learning process could not be fully realize as radio broadcast remained marginal due to several factors. This needs to be further explored to define the role of radio in the adult literacy programme.

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