

MAKE A SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY RADIO IN INDIA

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INTRODUCTION:

Information and entertainment are now ingredients of human development along with food, clothing and shelter. However, it is also a fact that the mainstream media is unable to cater to the true information needs of the community, as it is primarily market driven and run with profit maximizing motive. Hence, the question of alternative media comes, which definitely has to have space in terms of localization of content, participation and involvement of the community. Community Radio can play a vital role in this, especially in narrowing down the differences between the broadcaster and the audience. Interestingly, the Govt. of India has also come out with an updated Community Radio Policy and is keen to give license to around 4000 Community Radio Stations by 2008. This is no doubt a new approach towards empowerment at the grassroots level, which, in turn, will definitely strengthen the tenets of democracy.

Radio is the main source of news and entertainment for most of India. All India Radio is in the top tier of radio coverage, as it is the public service broadcaster. Private FM Radio Stations have now become the second tier. Community Radio promises to be the third tier, closest to the people. Just hearing themselves on radio is an empowering experience for people, who realize that this, truly, can be their own voice and help them get a better deal from the government and other agencies or groups. Community Radio focuses on low cost and low return pattern of operation, which is aimed at educating and entertaining the community using their own idioms and language in contrast to the private FM Radio, which is primarily driven by entertainment and business considerations.

Ultimately CRS is going to strengthen democratic institutions and practices giving common people access to information to make them informed citizen and also foster peoples' social rights like Right to Information.

BACKGROUND:

The history of broadcasting in India is very interesting. As per the Govt. of India Act 1935, state governments were allowed to run radio stations. With the constitution coming into force in 1950, broadcasting was put in the central list. In 1942 during the Quit India Movement, Dr. Ram Monohar Lohia ran an underground Radio Station for three months.

The decade of 80's was rather the decade of Television and Radio was neglected, not only in the government policies but in popularity too. All India Radio started opening what they called Local Radio Stations (L.R.S) in small towns primarily with a view to catering to local needs and giving local talents a platform. Though several LRS's were established across the country but how far its basic objective was fulfilled is yet to be ascertained.

The resurgence of Radio actually took place in India in 1995 with the commencement of FM broadcast by AIR, where some slots were given to private producers on sponsorship basis. Privatization in Radio came to India in 2003 with private players being given the licenses to operate FM Radio Stations. This practice continued with more and more FM Stations being given licenses in phases. The entertainment programmes primarily based on music and vociferous Radio Jockeys along with interactive formats made FM very popular, especially among the young people and radio sets got back their positions in the households and found new places in buses and auto rickshaws.

However, in a country like India, which is vast, over populated, developing and with a moderately high incidence of poverty and illiteracy, a media which is the people's own, transmitting in their own language, discussing their own problems and if not giving an appropriate solution, sharing a lot of information, which is relevant and useful for the particular community, can be the answer. When we talk about all inclusive development, we need some instruments, which will act as catalysts for bringing the change, and it has been ascertained that as against broadcasting the fairly new concept of narrowcasting is going to emerge as an effective alternative to mainstream media. Community Radio is envisaged as one such alternative. Now, how effective does it become, is the question. It is good that the government has allowed Community Radio.

DEVELOPMENT:

The modern concept of development gives emphasis to human and social development and does not end with economic development only. It has also been accepted that there cannot be any sustainable development unless people can become the agents of their own development and do not remain just a beneficiary. They are required to participate in every stage of the development process and in its decision-making. Empowering the people at the grassroots and their capacity building are the major concerns for modern development. Community Radio can emerge as a major tool for doing both. Community radio can play a significant and effective role in modern concepts of development like the Human Development Index and Human Security. Community Radio can come forward to give development a human face. It can also be a platform for bringing accountability of the development process, ultimately making the system more transparent and ensuring good governance.

PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION:

One of the basic factors of Community Radio is that it has to be participatory. As said by the UNESCO, A Community Radio Station is one that is operated in the community, for the community, about the community and by the community. It is now recognized that participatory communication approaches are powerful tools to bring in change and empower people at the grassroots to decide their own future.

In the context of the information society and its transformation into a knowledge society, participatory communication plays a vital role as it is the marginalized people whose access to information needs to be increased for transforming the entire society to a knowledge based society and this can effectively be done through a proper and planned participatory communication method.

In fact, efforts should be taken to find out possibilities to make at least some CR programmes interactive and two way. The main advantage of Community Radio is that the selected representatives of the community can easily be called to the studio/ station due to the location advantage to share with and debate their views. In some cases there can also be telephonic participation of the people from and among the community.

DECENTRALIZATION:

There has been very strong centralization that existed in the field of media till the other day making the entire communication system an imposed one from the top. There had been clear instances of homogenisation of culture and ignorance of local tradition and heritage. That is one of the major shortcomings of broadcasting and big print media as against their many plus points. The inception of digital technology and other technological advances in telecommunications have made the media geographically and financially accessible to the small and far-flung places. Cable TV operators disseminating news for the community is one such example. However, in the field of radio broadcasting the possibilities are much more and Community Radio is one such example.

'*Glocal*' is the mantra in this case. While the mainstream media will be more prolific day by day and will bring global culture and trends trying to attract more and more people at the grassroots considering the huge potential market, the space still left untouched by it needs to be captured through the local and alternative media such as Community Radio, which will try to cater to their personal and useful needs of information. Since, it is participatory and community based, there should be a feeling of considering it to be one's own.

In a pluralistic society, there are public, private, commercial, mainstream, alternative, national, regional and community media with varied and diverse content and a modern society has space for different kind of media. The job is to find out the true space of the community media and construct it and make it useful. CRS could be useful in case of disaster management including disaster broadcasting.

BASIC ELEMENTS OF COMMUNITY RADIO:

According to the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters, the three major elements of Community Radio should be:

1. Non Profit Making,
2. Community Ownership and Control
3. Community Participation

According to Mr. W. Jayaweera, Director, Communication development, UNESCO: Community Radio is not just about broadcast content; it is mostly about the process of community engagement. Community radio is about social skills, business skills, creativity, IT skills, local democracy, hard to reach groups, involvement of women and young people and involvement of hundreds of volunteers. Community Radio is about harnessing the tremendous potentials media can offer to engage people and change their lives. It is about ordinary people having a stake in the vast broadcasting landscape and becoming responsible and accountable citizens. Community radio is also about media literacy. A media literate society can demand accountability from the media, and what better way to become media literate than by making media yourself?

Community Ownership and equitable access to community members in all spheres are the two basic elements a Community Radio should have, otherwise it should not be considered as Community Radio.

The poor countries do not only use the concept and practice of Community Radio but it is a global phenomenon. All over the world people can decide to become active in producing radio programmes according to their individual needs.

AWARENESS:

It is true that the need for establishing a Community Radio Station should come from and among the community, but how will it come unless and until they are made known of this potential media outlet of their own. It is very significant that the government of India has come out with the New Community Radio Policy in December 2006. The basic difference between the new policy and the old one of December 2002 is that in the earlier policy only the recognized educational institutions of high repute such as universities, the IITs, the IIMs, were allowed to operate Community Radios, whereas in the new policy the voluntary, Non govt. organizations (NGO) and civil society organizations (CSO) with good track records have been made eligible to set up Community Radio Station (CRS), which is a very significant development. This has made the true concept of Community Radio become a reality in India. What was done earlier was mere campus radio.

But, it is definitely the responsibility of the practitioners and experts of communication to create awareness especially among the rural community, NGOs and CSOs, so that they can come forward to avail of the opportunity. The need of the hour is to popularize the concept by highlighting its potential and effectiveness, facilitate setting up CRSs and impart training to the community broadcasters. The best practice methods and cases in respect of CRS need to be highlighted as examples so that various communities come forward for it.

Although some communities have come forward but the number is very insignificant. Though there are good many numbers of NGOs and CSOs are actively working on various issues in different areas, the eagerness for CRS is still not there. Advocacy Workshops need to be organized so that more and more communities come forward. This is one of the major works at this moment, which will give birth to a number of able CRSs in the country. Ultimately, if this experiment succeeds, the community will be able to meet the demand of information from its own CRS to a great extent.

FACILITATION & NETWORKING:

The principle being followed in terms of CRS all over the world says that for a successful CRS, the community has to take all the initiatives and external assistance should be restricted to guidance only. There must be a strong national level association of CRSs. Fortunately, the Community Radio Forum has already emerged in India and CRF is utilizing Information Technology as a very effective means of networking and information dissemination. It is going to take a more concrete shape. But, CRF should open centres or it should tie up with regional Media-NGOs at the regions at least to extend facilitation to the intending CRSs outside Delhi.

The community should arrange for space and build up the required infrastructure for setting up the CRS by its own means and by taking active part in creating the same. For the choice of technology that means studio and transmitter options may be provided by the CRF or such other facilitation agency. Recruitment and training of community broadcasters will have to be facilitated by the facilitator. However, CRS is based on voluntary participation to a great extent and experts think that it should be such rather than depending much on the paid staff, a regular flow of recruitment and training will

have to be done continuously as one is not supposed to remain volunteer permanently. Training on content development based on the local need should also be imparted. Skill development maintenance of the studio and transmitter equipment is also very vital in case of CRS; otherwise there can be break and/or degradation of technical quality of the programme. This facilitation is very important for the success of CRS in India and some organizations have already come up for this in various parts of the country. The CRS functionaries should also be provided with training on conflict resolution, as lot of conflicts are going to come up in the community in terms of prioritizing the content of the CRS.

Definitely in a democratic country like ours, govt., be it central or state, should come forward at this stage in supporting the facilitation services, as it requires a funding and it is necessary for smooth installation and functioning of CRSs. State Govts. Like Karnataka, Haryana and Punjab have come forward to extend financial support to the successful licensees to run the CRSs. Fortunately, international organizations like UNESCO and others have already pledged some help in this regard. But, whatever assistance come from outside the community, it should be restricted either to procuring the hardware or meeting the training needs and should not be used for any recurring expenditures like honorarium, etc. The proposed Broadcast Regulatory Authority to be set up after the proposed Broadcast Bill becomes law may also be entrusted to similar activities.

Networking among neighbouring CRSs will be very useful in sharing content if the needs are similar in nature, like forest management in two neighbouring districts catered by two different CRSs.

NGO, GOVT. OR A TRUE CRS:

A debate has started recently on keeping the true spirit of the CRS. This has come after Bihar Govt. has expressed its willingness to set up CRS in Patna and Nalanda districts. The experts have started saying that in this process state govt. can capture a CR network though broadcasting as such is in the central list of our constitution. The other point raised is whether CR will remain as NGO Radio, which means it should come up from and among the community itself. However, the initiative of NGOs working in rural

area cannot be ignored also. The point raised here is NGO run CRS will speak of the particular NGO since it has the fund and manpower to run CRS and obtained the license for the area. These are the question to be deliberated and debated with much caution.

ALLOWING NEWS IN CR:

In the new CR Policy, the CRSs are not allowed to broadcast news. The question has come that if Cable TV operators of even small towns can telecast news in their Cable TV, why CR would be debarred for that. In this context an example from our neighbour Nepal may be appropriate. In spite of all kinds of turmoil, CR has become very effective and also grown in numbers. When they were debarred from broadcasting news, all of them decided together to broadcast the news in musical or ballads form. Actually, in folk and traditional media information used to be passed on in the form of ballads and songs.

In this connection the recent conflict between Gujjars and Meenas in Rajasthan can be cited and had there been CRSs belonging to both the communities, these CRSs might have been used to conspire against these two communities. But, it needs to be seen in a greater aspect and some sort of events, happening, achievements, soft stories should be allowed to be broadcast and in case of major newsbreaks they should be allowed to be noticed. However, who is going to draw the laxmanrekha to decide all these.

In this connection, setting up of a monitoring mechanism for CRSs will have to be specified. Though as per the provision of the license all programmes are required to be preserved for six months after broadcast for scrutiny at a later stage. Since, CRSs are localized, all of them cannot be monitored from a particular place. However, there is provision for penalty for violation of code.

However, the right to broadcast news and current affairs is a part and parcel of freedom of expression. Article 19 of the Constitution reiterates Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which says: everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinion without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers. On this ground the community broadcasters are supposed to enjoy the right to

disseminate news. But, it is also a fact of the matter that in India private FM channels are also not allowed to broadcast news and current affairs, whereas private TV channels are authorized to do so.

TECHNOLOGY:

Community Radio is based on inexpensive technology. Considering the CR Policy the standard small size FM transmitters for the purpose are made available and UNESCO has already facilitated showcasing of such equipment. Transmitter having Effective radiated Power (ERP) 100 watts to cover a radial distance of 5 to 10 km are available and to cover greater distance transmitters with ERP 250 watts can also be used case by case with permission. The equipment is moderately small. Integrated equipment for production as well as transmission known as box radio costs less than Rs. 3 lakhs. There is even a smaller version known as suitcase radio.

In the technological side propositions have also come to integrate CRS with Community media Centre (CMC), which combines traditional local media, like radio, TV, newspaper with new technologies such as computers, internet and other digital devices. CMC is a unique way for poor communities, often in remote rural areas to overcome common obstacles to their full and profitable use of ICT. The possibility of connecting CRSs through cable is also a concept, which can be thought of.

CONCLUSION:

The need of the hour is to create awareness, motivate communities and facilitate CRSs to begin. The time has come to launch a movement to make a successful Community Radio in India.

References

Appendix-I

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