

The Perspectives, the Problems and the Progress of Rural Community Radio

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1. Evolution of Radio Broadcasting

Heinrich Hertz, a German demonstrates radio waves in 1887. By 1893, the oscillators and resonators required have been demonstrated. Guglielmo Marconi of Italy and Alexander Popov of Russia successfully transmit radio signals in 1895. Reginald Fessenden of USA using AM, transmits voice and music through radio signals in 1906. By 1915, Harold D. Arnold made the first transatlantic transmission, though Marconi transmitted signals in 1901 itself. Conrad used shortwave transmission in 1921. Broadcasts using radio waves started in 1922 in England through BBC and in 1927 in USA through NBA and CBS. Amstrong who is regarded as the father of radio introduces FM in 1931 and USA used FM mode for transmission from 1940. Pocket transistor radios entered USA and Japan around 1955. Stereo radio broadcast was started in USA in 1960 and from 1996 onwards we have web-radio via internet.

Digital radios came into existence from 1995 and received a big boost with the launch of Sirius 1 on July 18, 2000. Radio, right from its advent in the early twentieth century has been a comparatively inexpensive but very effective medium of communication. It provides not only information but also inspiration. It can inculcate

values and virtues. It can create attitudes and interests. Despite its limitations like one way communication, radio has been highly successful in reaching the unreached even in far – flung and sparsely populated areas. It can cut across geographic, cultural and literary barriers.

In India, the first radio station was installed in Bombay in 1927, followed by Calcutta and Delhi in 1936. In 1986 India had 86 radio stations. To-day over 95% of the country's population is covered by All India Radio's broadcast services. The government sponsored All India Radio slowly introduced commercial broadcasts as years passed by. To-day India has quite a large number of commercial channels, mostly influenced by the celluloid world. By the end of 20th century, India had about 400 radio stations catering to one out of every 8 Indians while 800 TV networks covered one out of every 8 Indians. Compared to this the United States had 600 million Americans listening to radio broadcasts for a weekly average of 22 hrs. Radio broadcasts have been used with very good impact in countries like Australia, UK, New Zealand, Algeria, Thailand, Canada, France, Holland, South Africa, Philippines, Sri Lanka and several other countries.

2. Community Radio

For several decades in India, radio has always been having a top – down approach in the sense, the listeners had no choice except to listen to what was broadcast over All India Radio. With the advent of private commercial broadcasts a feeble attempt has been made here and there to have interactive radio, live or recorded

through phone-in programmes. The mainframe radio had a centralized programme production which was unable to cater to the specific requirements of the rural Indian population in terms of language, programme content and concerns of the masses. Generally, no problems were defined and no target audience was identified.

Villages in rural India are not essentially facing the same types of problems or having the same type of expectations, since they are culturally, geographically, educationally and economically vastly divergent. The local language, customs and social practices, vary from place to place and region to region. This is where the need and role of community radio becomes all the more important. The top-down approach has to slowly give way to bottom - up approach where the target audience decides what he wants from the radio broadcasts.

Reaching out to the un-reached, community radio can be thought of as a medium providing voice to the voiceless, power to the powerless, through cleverly designed and elegantly executed programmes. It has to address the real issues of the rural masses, their longings, feelings, expressions, joy and wisdom. It has to address and redress their sorrow, anguish and sufferings. It has to help them establish their rights to information, development, communication, governance, decision making, participation, freedom of expression, employment and entitlement to land, health, education and security.

Steadily, but surely community radio will have its say in empowering the marginalized towards effecting the much needed social change in a country like India

predominantly made up of invisible and inhomogeneous target audience living in villages with distinctly different and widely varied cultures, customs and practices.

Community radio stations have come up in different forms in developed, developing and under developed countries like USA, UK, Australia, Philippines, Nepal, Thailand, Sri Lanka, China, East Timor to mention a few.

3. The Indian Scenario

The Indian version of community radio became a possibility after Government of India's announcement on 18.12.2002. In reality, the take off has been extremely slow partially due to the cautious approach of the government and primarily due to financial constraints, difficulties and challenges involved in installing, running and maintaining radio stations. The goals, missions and ambitions of a true community radio are deeply buried and a concerted effort is needed by all concerned to successfully bring out and accomplish them.

As it stands today, India has just made a beginning and a few community radio stations have come up on their own, subject to the rigorous but probably necessary procedures of the licensing authorities. Only educational institutions have been permitted to launch community radio services in the first phase, probably mainly due to their accountability in one form or other. Many more are likely to come through eligible Non-Government Organisations and other Self Help Groups. They will have to invest resources reasonably for creating the studio and other facilities for producing and airing broadcasts. It may take a very long time in India to have a large number of

community-owned radio services since sole ownership by a group can create some local problems in the context of present commercial political, social and economic divides.

4. The Perspectives

Notwithstanding the above, community radio in India can be a significant and distinct contributor to the welfare of the common man. The predominantly agriculture based village communities and secluded tribes in India will stand to benefit by improving health, nutrition, child care, women development, environment, eco-balance and a host of other socially needed welfare measures. Identification of local problems will be the first step in solving them. Community Radio can expose to the community the hitherto unknown outside world, usher in the changes in the living conditions and provide opportunities for progress, thereby helping the Nation towards becoming a developed country.

5. The Problems and Suggestions

The biggest challenge today for community radio in India is mobilization of material and human resources for effectively installing, running and maintaining the studio and station and for delivering valuable, useful and necessary programmes. The Government has come forward to allow limited commercial advertisements which probably may help to some extent. This facility is still to come into force and when in place may help in establishing more and more Community Radio Services. A vast

country like India deserves several thousands of community radio stations, each station catering to the needs of listeners in the small coverage area restricted by the height of the transmitting tower, the power output and the obstructions to the FM waves. The annual licence fee may be cut down for community radios to ease the financial strain. The frequencies allotted to low – power community radios should not be allotted to high power commercial transmitters even if they are more than a hundred kilometers away. Proper utilization of revenue earned through commercial advertisements if allowed, should be ensured. They should be allowed and encouraged to participate and broadcast in State activities like rural development, women empowerment and other welfare measures. The status of press media should be accorded to community radios for effective participation in welfare activities. Information from government agencies and departments regarding local welfare programmes may be furnished to community radios for creating awareness among the listeners.

6. The Possibilities

On their part, community radio can be better utilized by providing information about loans, funding agencies, facilities, education and training facilities provided by different agencies. Factual information about agricultural and other rural industries, market trends, health camps in the area, weather conditions like temperature, humidity, rainfall in the coverage area, train and bus timings from neighboring towns, instant traffic diversion, booking facilities and availability of train tickets, information

about employment, entrepreneurship etc., will help the listeners to a great extent and thereby serve to increase listenership. No doubt, community radio, more than anything else needs to script a proper POEM: Planning, Organisation, Execution and Monitoring.

7. Kongu FM – Experience

Kongu FM Community Radio has been on air for the past 2 ½ years in a real rural set up. Starting with 3 hours of broadcast daily, the duration has been increased to 6 hours a day now and further increase is contemplated in the near future. The broadcasts cover different areas like agriculture, health, animal husbandry, creativity, fine arts, nutrition, entrepreneurship, safety, security and similar welfare programmes. In addition to the regular employees provided by the management, the staff and students of Kongu Engineering College have been contributing to enrich the broadcasts by organizing programmes in the form of skit, drama, story, interviews with experts etc.. A separate vehicle and recording instruments are made available to the producers and programmers who go out to nearby villages and record programmes and activities. The Women Development Cell, the Industry Institute Partnership Cell, Humour Club, Creativity and Fine Arts Club and other associations and self help groups in nearby villages are contributing programmes for Kongu FM on a regular basis. Whenever necessary, people from the villages are brought to the studio for not only recording programmes, but also to make them aware of the facilities available. It has been successful in providing a much needed platform for the local community

focussing on the needs, aspirations, ambition and abilities of the local people. Opportunities for freedom of expression, for voicing for problems of the marginalized and disadvantaged communities are amply provided. A good number of radio reporters, team managers and eager participants are emerging from the listeners. It has provided ample chance for poor and even illiterate to voice their grievances and expectations. Taken to the logical end, this may pave the way for solving many local problems. Quite a good number of feedback letters and phone calls are being received encouraging the work undertaken by the community radio.

Kongu FM had the distinction of organizing a seven – day workshop from 22 to 28 January 2007, on “Emerging issues in HIV testing and counselling” organized by Local Voices of the Internews Network, Chennai in collaboration with USAID. Ms.Mia Malan from Internews Network, Washington DC. Dr.Jaya Shreedhar and Dr.R.Sreedher conducted the workshop for Radio professionals in Tamilnadu.

Mr.Manivannan of BBC and a delegation from Radio China’s Tamil Service led by Mr.Tsung Ziang Hi, Vice President and Mrs. Kalaiarasi (alias) Tsu Zudu Gua, Head of Tamil Division along with Ms.Psung Yu, Head of Napalese division and Ms.Tseng Li, Head of Sinhalese division of Radio China visited Kongu FM studios and lauded the efforts of the Community Radio.

Students of Kongu performed skit and drama and participated in “Awareness against Tobacco and Cancer” programme organized by Indian Medical Association at Erode.

8. Science for Women

A “Science for Women” project named “Kongamma! Kelamma!!”, catalyzed and supported by RVPSP division of DST, has been successfully launched and Kongu FM is broadcasting programmes on Science for Women, for the past 2 months. The focus is mainly on health and nutrition and other related issues.

CEMCA arranged for a training programme and exploratory workshop on content development for Science for Women project during 6 -10 April 2007. Ms.Jai Chandiran and Dr.R.Sreedher conducted the workshop.

9. Conclusion

The target audience may be of general category, special category or specific category. What is important is people are talking to people. Listeners can listen at any time they like and at anyplace they like, irrespective of whether you have electricity supply or not, whether you are at home, on travel or at work and this perhaps is one major advantage of radio communication. The message is that if you carry a radio, you can listen even while you work or travel.

Finally in the words of the Prime Minister “Today globalization is changing many familiar things; the way we think, act and perform”. This applies to India’s venture into community radio services also.