

Radio – By the Community, For the Community

By Dr. I. Arul Aram *

For long, radio has been used for government propaganda and as an entertainment medium in developing countries. It denied the weak a voice. But this is not so with community radio. Community radio stations are on the rise the world over. They operate on a small level and cater intimately to a small number of listeners. They work with the concept of 'by the community and for the community' and so are highly appreciated among target audiences. In developing countries particularly those in South Asia, community radio stations serve mainly the rural agrarian population.

Radio is a blind medium -- we cannot see its messages which consist solely of sound and silence. But it can accompany people to a wide range of places and activities. A farmer can plough the field keeping a radio set on. Radio can instantaneously communicate with multitudes of receivers at the same time and at distances beyond that achievable by face-to-face communication. Community radio is distinguished by its limited local reach, low-power transmission, and programming content that reflects the developmental needs of the specific community it serves. This paper reviews some community radio experiments in South Asia and makes out a case for popularising the community radio concept.

Radio can easily be incorporated in the development process, for it has the advantages of:

- A radio set is affordable even to an ordinary farmer.
- A radio set can be carried anywhere.
- One can also listen to it while involved in other activities.
- Unlike newspapers, film or television, radio does not require the listener to be seated in a place. It gives us flexibility of movement.
- Setting up a radio station is less expensive.
- Sustaining a radio station is feasible as recurring expenses are minimal.
- Radio is a simple medium. It is unlike television with the glamour and mystique associated with it, or the print media catering only to literates, or the Internet which again is biased in favour of literates and the technology savvy.

Frequency modulation (FM) sound quality used for community radio is far superior to what is experienced over medium wave or short wave transmissions. Low-power transmitters are relatively inexpensive to build, and FM allows for hundreds of radio stations with the same frequency to be set up in different parts of the country without the problem of clogging of the airwaves.

Mainstream radio

Radio had been introduced in developing countries by the governments with a view to serving their citizens as a tool of development over a vast geographical

area. Gradually, the broadcasts became commercialised and they went in for more of film-based programmes interspersed with lots of advertisements. This is so even in India where there is a three-tier All India Radio (AIR) broadcast based on the area of coverage – national, regional and local. In a few cases, however, the local broadcasts function like community radio. Nevertheless, the mainstream radio had played a significant role in development. The Green Revolution that led to food self-sufficiency in India in the 1970s was made possible only with the help of radio. The popularity of radio during that period was such that a high-yielding paddy variety gained wide acceptance even in far-flung areas, and its rice came to be known as 'radio rice'. Of course, the radio communication had been effectively followed up by field workers. Later, television eclipsed radio to a great extent. Of late in several countries, radio is being reinvented in the form of community radio to accelerate development.

Bureaucratic control and commercialism have made mainstream radio inaccessible to rural communities. These have led social activists to push the cause of community radio as an alternative radio for development. Community radio promotes horizontal communication by providing the oppressed with an alternative platform to discuss their issues in their own language/dialect with their own people.

Even TV failed to serve as community media because of its high-tech and locals not being producers. The high-tech aspect of television made it impossible to replicate extensively India's successful satellite-linked TV experiment for community participatory development under the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) project started in 1975. The cost of running a radio station is much lower compared to any other mass media, and so a community radio station is a viable proposition even to a group of villages. Also, radio is the most widely-used communication device particularly among the marginalised groups. But in terms of control over programme production, substantial numbers of people do not have access to mainstream radio. More often than not, even the local stations of mainstream radio serve as adjuncts to national broadcasts. So community radio aims at giving locals complete say in programme planning and participation. This is unlike the mainstream radio which is not of much relevance to small rural communities.

Need for community radio

Community radio provides an opportunity for the community to own and control its own means of communication. Community radio caters to a community. A community is a group of persons sharing a geographical area such as a neighbourhood, city or village, which shares common traits and maintains interactions that shape it into a social entity.

Community radio takes the medium to the people and encourages their participation and management. Thus it acts as a catalyst for empowerment. It

allows people to take an active part, to defend their interests and to help solve their problems. People get a chance to express themselves in ways they wish to. It enables empowerment of various sections of society. Women too are main players in communication and not simply pretty voices. Thus community radio is truly democratic and grassroots oriented.

With a little training, local producers create programmes with the help of local people. Technology is demystified so that all could share its benefits. The people also take part in the management of the station and have a say in the scheduling and content of the programmes. People's participation would lead to public awareness, which in turn would result in a critical mass of public opinion and action. Having a say in the decisions that affect their lives will improve their living standards. Radio that is relevant, interesting and interactive allows marginalised voices to be heard, and their grievances addressed.

The voice of local people forms the backbone of community radio. Of course, people would come out with their grievances. Whether or not the local officials like it, they try to redress the grievances. Unlike in the normal radio where only a few listeners take part in programmes and a few more join in the phone-in programmes, community radio offers much greater listeners' participation. But a mechanism of fairness and freedom must be built into the programming so that various viewpoints of locals and officials are heard. A monitoring committee comprising locals and administrators should ensure enough freedom to air one's views but at the same time enough checks to avoid unwarranted attacks.

Governments should make available affordable access to frequencies and licences to communities so that they can set up their own development-oriented broadcast services. Knowledge is necessary for development, access is key, and technology gives us an opportunity (Girard and Eashwar 1999). But unfortunately, while the governments allow private broadcasting for commercial purposes, they are sceptical of permitting non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to use radio for the uplift of the communities. Governments put forth the view that monitoring a community radio station in a remote area is not feasible. But the same applies to a small newspaper. So the fears of the governments that community radio working for local development would go against national interests are misplaced.

Of late, the Indian government has been issuing licences for private (commercial) FM stations on the tender basis. But it does not intend to give licences to NGOs under the pretext that activities of NGOs could be subversive! This is despite the fact that the government now depends heavily on NGOs in the implementation of various development programmes. Another question posed is, whether the NGOs involved in development activities and those who might apply for community radio licences would be the same. The government's argument is that the medium would be hijacked by separatists groups in areas such as Kashmir and the Northeast. In fact, in the countries with higher

insurgency rates such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Philippines, community radio stations are operating successfully without interference from insurgents. Militants refrain from using such media which require open licensing to spread disaffection against the state.

Community radio can serve as an effective tool of integration by involving all including minorities and marginalised groups in the process of exchange of information. It promotes a sense of belongingness among community members and strengthens the bond. It could also bring out the local implications of the national news events. The only cases where insurgents have gone after radio stations are those of national broadcasts as the state-owned national broadcasts symbolise the state power. So it is time India too opened up the potential of low-power, local radio for the benefit of national development. Just as in Australia and Canada, India could well benefit from the creation of a three-tier system of broadcasting based on the nature of management: (i) a state-owned public service network (existing framework); (ii) commercial private broadcasting; (iii) and non-profit, people-owned and managed community radio stations.

According to Vinod Pavarala, as early as in 1950s in India, radio has been used by the state within the context of an old paradigm of community development. That whole approach was top-down, elitist, pedagogical, and it treated people as only passive consumers of information. Today 'community radio' means a non-state, non-market venture, owned and managed by a particular community -- that idea could not have emerged until recently. This idea is being articulated against the backdrop of the rise of new social movements and NGOs. After years of focussing on issues of livelihood, capacity-building and mobilisation, some of these organisations have now turned their attention to deploying media technologies for empowerment of marginalised communities (2000).

Narrowcasting

At times, one could go in for narrowcasting with the use of just a tape recorder. This provides an opportunity even to listen to written material that is recorded onto tapes, called 'talking books' for the benefit of illiterates, semi-literates and the visually handicapped. Here, we do not require radio stations. All it needs is a taperecorder, some tapes and the willingness to talk and listen. Groups of people listen to recorded programmes that are played back. People are relieved of maintaining transmitters and other technical equipment. This is cost effective. The facilitator working with the group motivates people to listen to programmes, organise tape seminars, where listening and discussions happen. Discussions lead to a participatory sharing of information, experience and opinions. Also, in countries like India where getting a broadcasting licence for community-owned media is still a dream, this is a viable option.

Let us say, you are working with rural women, your project areas cover health and literacy. You could interview some articulate women on the problems they face in these aspects. You could use this to promote their cause with the officials. You could interview the officials as well, and play it back to the women and record their feedback. Points covered could be what all went into the success of the programme, what were the problems faced, how they were solved, and what direction the project would take. Playing this tape back to your field workers would be informative and educative. The programmes may use low-end formats to reduce costs. Interviews offer much scope for sharing new ideas. It would be interesting to hear the beneficiary's viewpoint along with the format itself. An interview with the beneficiary would be preferred to paraphrasing his/her views. It is much cheaper than video recording but more effective than writing down problems and responses. Such recordings could also be played before other groups faced with similar problems. This could form the starting point for interactions among groups, and networking. It is much cheaper than video recording but more effective than writing down problems and responses.

The Deccan Development Society (DDS), an NGO working in the Andhra Pradesh province of India, has set up a community radio for 100 Dalit (most backward in the caste hierarchy) women's groups (sangams) consisting of nearly 4,000 members in 75 villages of Medak district. Under the UNESCO's 'Learning without Frontiers' programme, DDS has set up the women-managed community radio station at Pashtapur, 100 km south of the provincial capital Hyderabad. The community radio uses the simple cassette technology. The volunteers record programmes on portable cassette recorders and edit them on cassette machines. DDS 'narrowcasts' (plays back the programmes on a portable cassette player) and thus creates an atmosphere for discussion in the villages. Thus it helps empower women and acts as a strong pressure group. DDS has involved around 70 women organisations, most of which are organised by low caste women, in management and production of programmes. DDS encompasses a range of activities starting with balwadies for providing a creative learning environment for young children to Pachasaale, a unique school for working children that combines formal learning with life skills. The actual radio broadcasting at the station, in spite of its long time readiness to go on air, is awaiting licence from the government. The studio facilities now are being used to produce audiocassettes on issues related to women empowerment.

A review of radio projects

Radio Sagarmatha (the Nepali name for Mount Everest) began broadcasting in 1995, but the station's licence to broadcast was approved only in 1999. Radio Sagarmatha is the first community-owned FM radio in the entire South Asia. In Nepal, access to newspapers, radio, television as well as education is limited due to widespread poverty. The Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists, an NGO, helped set up the radio station with the support of UNESCO and

DANIDA. Now four of the 22 radio independent stations in Nepal are of community radio -- one is in Kathmandu and the other three are in western Nepal. The programming has given thousands the opportunity to have their voices and opinions heard in a public forum. On a daily basis, Radio Sagarmatha takes listeners to locations of everyday life. Interviewees and people profiled in the station come from diverse backgrounds and occupations. In the daily feature 'It's My Turn Now', individuals from the community-at-large voice their opinion. Sagarmatha started 'Safa Radio' (Clean Air Campaign) in 1999 to check air pollution in the Kathmandu Valley. Control of vehicle emission was totally lacking. A van-sized three-wheeled electric vehicle that carries half a dozen or more people measured the level of air pollutants from different locations in the city. The results were discussed the same day during the evening community bulletin. The cumulative results of a month were presented at a press conference. Radio Sagarmatha broadcast is about the capital Kathmandu's growing air pollution problem, urbanisation and its impact on heritage sites, tourism, threat of AIDS or garbage disposal. Radio Sagarmatha mainly celebrates the ethnic, religious and linguistic variety of Kathmandu. Although new bulletins are not permitted, the radio station circumvents this by reading out news reports from newspapers. The government has offered a mobile licence that will allow Sagarmatha to go anywhere in Nepal and broadcast from a mobile studio, with the frequency FM 102.4 MHz reserved for it throughout the country.

The Mahaweli Community Radio Project in Sri Lanka -- a branch of the state-owned Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) -- started in 1981 to support farmers settling in new lands by motivating them towards agricultural productivity. The project got assistance from UNESCO and DANIDA. It involved the development of a community radio service suited to the conditions existing in rural Sri Lanka. It was based on the belief that radio is a powerful instrument to motivate the settler villagers in their development efforts. It motivated the villagers to try out innovative practices in agriculture, animal husbandry and health, in tandem with development workers. The project is designed to encourage villagers to take an active part in the development process and, particularly to take their own initiative to improve their living conditions. The people were helped to understand that they could do something to help themselves, instead of just waiting for others to do. This realisation was considered a must for a community to get over backwardness. The project has achieved its aim of inspiring the people to take to innovative development practices. The project found that without the help of local officials, media initiative for development at grassroots would be futile. Community radio can serve as a link between officials/politicians and people. So the Resident Project Managers were actively involved in answering select questions posed by the listeners.

The Kothmale Community Radio, one among four community radio stations set up under the Mahaweli Community Radio project, was chosen as the site for a

pilot project to experiment accessing of the Internet content through radio in 1998. The convergence of community radio and informatics helps to serve rural information needs and to determine its possible impact on development efforts in rural communities. The UNESCO project is meant to study the prospects of converging community radio and informatics to serve rural information needs and to determine its possible impact on rural development. The University of Colombo supports a community database of the Kothmale Community Radio. The database is developed through a daily interactive radio programme broadcast over the Kothmale community radio station to ensure that relevant community information needs are addressed. Three community access points are located within the community. They provide the users with free access to the local and national databases, use-net service, e-mail facilities and other relevant information available on the Internet. Listeners phone in, send postcards or call at the radio station to request the information they need. The usual way to link radio with the Internet is to get an audio stream onto the Internet but here things have happened the other way -- the Internet has been put into community radio. But for this, the Internet remains a marvelous but least useful tool of communication for villagers. The Internet as such was developed in the West in an individualistic approach, but this project turns it around and makes information seeking a collective action. Now the community itself runs the radio station -- staff and volunteers are educated sons and daughters of plantation workers and farmers from the surrounding areas. Government officials and local political leadership in the Kothmale valley became more aware of the potential use of ICT for development, and in turn local government bodies started contributing valuable information to the community database. The community radio has helped open the doors of knowledge, understanding and entertainment. In fact, Kothmale is not a community radio in the strict sense since it is owned by the state-owned SLBC. This experiment has shown that although community ownership of the radio station is an important aspect of community radio, it is not a must to serve a community. Anyway, to replicate this experiment as a radio owned by a community, it has to be made a lot more affordable. According to W. Jayaweera, UNESCO Communication Adviser for Asia, ICTs combined with community radio support poverty-alleviation programmes particularly by facilitating the information needs of rural households, and by opening new windows of opportunities for rural youth in their efforts to be innovative and to become active partners of programme implementation (2001).

Indian scenario

The government-owned All India Radio gave up its monopoly in 2001, with a decision to issue licences to private parties to start radio stations. This follows the Indian Supreme Court's ruling of 1995 declaring the airwaves as public property, to be used for promoting public good and ventilating plurality of views, opinions and ideas. It noted that Indian broadcasting was being governed by archaic laws. The Indian Telegraph Act of 1885 was meant for a different

purpose altogether. When it was enacted, there was neither radio nor television, but both these concepts were later sought to be fitted into the definition of 'telegraph'. [AIR 1995 Supreme Court 1236].

Indian radio broadcasting is now shifting from being a government monopoly to highly-commercialised broadcasting. In July 2001, India's first privately-owned broadcasting station went on air in Bangalore. In fact, it is owned by Rupert Murdoch's Star. The government is also considering leasing out some of its existing radio transmitters to private parties.

Besides private licensing for commercial broadcasts, the Government has also set up radio stations in select educational institutions -- Gyan Vani is a network of 40 FM community radio stations set up for extension and training. The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) was chosen as the nodal agency because of its wide network of 46 regional centres and 650 study centres (located in various regular colleges) across the country. Each station covers a 75 km radius. Each such digital radio station has been set up by the government for Rs. 1.5 crore. Unlike full-fledged stations, these stations require only three full-time staff to operate. They work as decentralised cooperatives, with programmes contributed by local educational institutions, NGOs and national-level institutions such as the University Grants Commission. They also cater to IGNOU's distance education as part of the multi-media package. The topics include adult education, agriculture, health and sanitation, career counselling, music appreciation (classical and folk), tourism, environment, human rights, and teaching for higher education courses. A special feature is interactive radio counselling with toll-free phone-in service. Gyan Vani is expected to carve an identity from the other radio channels through its distinct educational/awareness outreach programmes. But being controlled by educational institutions, these initiatives can usher in community participation only to a limited extent. These stations are mainly of educational radio, though they also cater to community needs. According to Sivanti Ninan, with the programming break-up of a 60 per cent education component and a 40 percent community component, Gyan Vani has marked a guarded attempt by the government to allow a semblance of community radio (2001).

The Indian Government is till-date resisting the demand of issuing licences for community radio. Meanwhile, a few stations of the government-owned AIR function like community radio, with an active involvement of NGOs. Although 'community radio' can really be worth that name only when the communities start, operate and own their radio, these programmes moderately serve the purpose. When such an opportunity comes the way, local problems and initiatives get reflected in AIR programmes.

'Voices', a Bangalore-based NGO, has played a leading role in advocating legislation for independent community broadcasting. Besides providing community radio programmes through the local AIR and Gyan Vani stations, it

studied the feasibility of setting up a community radio station. A survey on radio ownership covering 954 families in six villages was completed for Voices by Myrada, another NGO, in 1999, in Kolar district of the Karnataka province. The maximum concentration of radios is in Boodikote where 536 families or 56.18% own a radio set. So Voices chose Boodikote as the proposed location for a community radio project, which will cover 35 villages out of 45 in the Boodikote sector. In the Boodikote sector, 1930 families (64.85%) are below the poverty line and literacy levels are very low. There is no local radio station in the area that is primarily covered by AIR Bangalore, located 120 km from Kolar. The area also receives peripheral transmission from AIR Cuddapah and AIR Chennai. Transmissions are in three different languages. Awareness as well as capacity building for making radio programmes was the first stage of the project. Voices conducted a series of workshops for creating awareness among the villagers on the utility of community radio and training selected members from the community for radio programme planning and production. This also helped finding ways to sustain community interest on community radio. Twenty community representatives were trained in scriptwriting and production. Initially, they thought that they would all have to individually take time-off to make radio programmes, but later they understood that it was an easy group effort where all members of the community shared responsibility. The community radio station formed thus is now into narrowcasting. Voices has also been involved in the community-based rehabilitation project which used radio (AIR) innovatively for empowering the disabled such as providing 'talking books' for the visually impaired.

In Kutch of the Gujarat province, AIR has leased weekly airtime to an NGO working with rural women in 2001. The NGO produces a 30-minute serial every Thursday at 8 p.m. It began with 20 minutes but was increased to 30 minutes after the first three months after AIR lowered its royalty rates. The Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan found that the right dialect (in this case, the Kutchi dialect that has no written form), a partnership between rural and urban & neo-literate and professional writer, along with a proper feedback studies, can make a difference in the lives of the rural people. The Centre for Alternatives in Education, which is a part of the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad, is conducting feedback studies on the impact of the programmes. The Sarus crane is the narrator, keeping a beady eye on a mythical village called Ujjas. The focus of the serial is the participation of women in political processes, specifically village panchayats, which is explored through the woman sarpanch of Ujjas. (In fact, women in India are gaining foothold in local bodies such as panchayats with the introduction of one-third reservation for women in local body elections in 1994.) The issues raised include women's leadership and governance, a girl's right to education, female foeticide, harassment of brides for dowry, unnatural deaths and suicides of women at their in-laws, and maternal mortality and disregard of mother's health. Within the serial, there is a 6 to 7 minute documentary module featuring interviews with a wide range of people in Kutch. For instance, an interview with local police authorities was taken to

bring to their notice the problems faced by women. The United Nations Development Programme provided funding to this project for two years. One episode on an average costs Rs. 25,000, and to be a replicable community radio model it has to be much more cheap.

Palamau district is in the Jharkhand province which is newly carved out of the south Bihar province. Most people here are poor, more than 70% of women illiterate and a sizable number of men depend on migratory labour. Poverty has not hampered their natural aptitude for song-writing, musical compositions, folk theatre and information dissemination in non-formal styles. The district headquarter at Daltongunj has an FM station that can broadcast up to a radius of 50 km. The Alternative for India Development (AID) has been working here for a decade now on education, micro-credit for women and health issues. In 2001 when the National Foundation for India (NFI) and AID took up a community radio project, they allowed the community to decide on the issues to be highlighted in the programmes. AID gathered community representatives from villages to get local response to the initiative. From these representatives, 18 community volunteers were selected to form the core project team. The norms evolved through a workshop include: (i) develop indigenous ideas about integrated development through participatory decision-making, (ii) programmes will be in the local Maghi-Nagpuri dialect, and (iii) define and voice the felt needs of the people. NFI presented four sets of portable cassette recording units to the four groups and provided the initial operational training for field recording. Each group was given two C-90 cassettes to complete its recordings. The field recordings of the four groups and studio exercises conducted at the workshop formed the basic raw material for the first set of four 30-minute programmes. AID took the programmes to selected villages to assess their acceptability, test the impact on local communities and give advance publicity for the community radio initiative. This phase, termed as 'narrowcasting', gave a boost to the project. The villagers themselves came up with the time slot for the broadcast: 8 p.m. on Sundays. They also came forward to help in programme production (Internet Conference on Community Radio 2002).

Boodikote, Kutch and Daltongunj are recent efforts of the community in pressuring the government to yield to community broadcasts (at least by providing airtime in AIR). But then, the government should be continuously pressured till licences are made available for setting up community radio stations; otherwise, the government may give some leverage by offering some time for community broadcasts and preclude the need for a fully-independent community space for broadcasting.

Appeal of radio

Radio has an advantage over television and film with its appeal to imagination. Audio programmes, including those on radio, aim at creating sound pictures.

Radio deals with audio programmes -- songs, radio plays, interviews, talks, discussions and the like. Although audio programmes are not limited to radio, they find powerful expression on radio. They invoke the magical world of sound to create pictures in your mind. We would have to imagine the meaning of the scene just as we would do while reading a short story or a novel.

Children and adult neo-literates of today lack the ability to concentrate. The wide availability of audio-visual material, mainly on television, has made reading habit extinct. Audio-visual media allows little scope for imagination and requires little effort on the part of the viewer. Radio kindles imagination and paints more beautiful pictures than those found on films and television. Radio can be used effortlessly to improve the power of concentration. Listening to radio, in turn, can help enhance reading habit.

Community radio should perceive listeners not only as receivers and consumers, but also as active citizens and creative producers of media content. It should have (i) non-profit making, (ii) community ownership & management and (iii) community participation (Noronha 2001). Programme officers even in government-owned radio stations are beginning to come out of the air-conditioned studios to meet people and produce more relevant programmes than before. But, of course, this shift in broadcasting style in India cannot be considered as an alternative to community radio (Jayprakash 2002). Community radio needs to be free from government-control and must be owned and managed by the people for whom it is intended, so that the community agenda is always kept paramount. Academic institutions' help in conducting media research and providing training on the skills of radio broadcasting has helped promote community radio to a great extent.

In fact, community radio has a great potential for reaching out to marginalised communities and developing social consciousness. Particularly in far-flung areas, community radio can also help in disaster management as the information got by the local official can be immediately put on air. It can effectively communicate cyclone warning to fishermen and people of coastal regions. Information on the sudden release of floodwaters from dams can be passed on instantaneously to the people living in villages likely to be inundated, and temporary resettlement plans for any such area can also be elaborately discussed. No doubt, community radio serves as a powerful tool for development at the grassroots. For instance, sowing and harvesting period vary from one place to another, and community radio is capable of communicating information at the exact time to the right farmers in the form they easily understand. It could also deal with a new crop variety, fertilizer, hygiene, health, literacy, biodiversity, folk songs, indigenous knowledge systems and the like. Because of its localness and people's participation, community radio serves as a credible vehicle of development. The communities involved have a deep sense of pride of being the masters of their own communication facility that allows them to correlate their activities with the progress of the nation.

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