

Waiting To Be Heard

Bringing Marginalised Voices to the Centre

The Indian media experience represents a gallery of stark contradictions. Even as the government is making efforts to bridge the digital divide and take information technology to the masses, the colonial Indian Telegraph Act of 1885 continues to hold sway over the airwaves. While an apex court judgment of 1995 has endorsed that airwaves are public property, in practice, lines between public, private and community remain conveniently blurred. While private radio has made an entry into the Indian broadcast arena, community radio is yet to gain legitimacy from the law of the land.

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First, the good news. The recent decision of the ministry of information and broadcasting (MIB) in India to allow educational institutions like IITs and even residential schools to set up their own FM radio stations would appear to indicate a thaw in New Delhi's approach to community radio. The crucial question, however, is whether this thaw will ultimately result in radio for marginalised communities and the social sector (distinguished by community ownership and management of production and broadcasting processes) becoming a tangible reality in the Indian mediascape. Consequently, the cheer that the government's decision might draw needs to be sharply qualified by raising several questions pertaining to the specifics of the policy:

- (1) Why should the policy not encompass non-residential educational institutions as well? Educational institutions, which work with disadvantaged communities, like people with disabilities, should fall within this ambit as well.
- (2) Why are NGOs and CBOs who have a proven track record in using audio/radio for development not given the opportunity to start their own FM radio stations? Community radio's relevance should be viewed within the gamut of development as a whole and not merely within the confines of education.
- (3) Why is the policy on radio for educational institutions limiting the range of stations only to a radius of 5 km and not a larger space encompassing the span of a village community?

Peripheral Voices and Policy Implications

These questions assume sharper relevance on considering the following voices:

My experience is 'Namma Dhvani' (Our Voices) is huge. Because of this community audio production centre, we can reach 22 villages by narrowcasting programmes on agriculture, education, medicine and other issues (Balu, Boodikote village, Kolar district, Karnataka).

The children come in their free time from nearby villages, they give suggestions and make their own educational programmes. We need these kinds of (community audio production) centres all around the country (Amresh, community worker, Hunkaldurga village, Kolar district, Karnataka).

These are just a few of the many underprivileged voices from rural India where radio has been used for the development of villages. Even after more than 75 years of radio broadcasting

in the country, these voices remain on the periphery. In many ways, this concern begets a larger question, which scrutinises the relationship between media and development, between the right to information and the right to communicate. While there are no easy answers, the implications are evident.

The Indian media experience represents a gallery of stark contradictions. In contrast to the governments' efforts to bridge the digital divide and take information technology to the masses, the colonial Indian Telegraph Act of 1885 continues to hold sway across the air waves over the India subcontinent. On the one hand, the Supreme Court judgment of 1995 has endorsed that 'airwaves are public property'. However, in practice, lines between public, private and community remain conveniently blurred. While private radio has made an entry into the Indian broadcast arena, community radio is yet to gain legitimacy from the law of the land.

Paradoxically, the lessons from current media trends would indicate the need for the following:

(1) A more substantial interplay between media and development. Despite constitutional guarantees, several rights related to basic needs of the Indian citizen have not been realised. The onslaught of globalisation has, in many instances, worsened their plight. The media's coverage of these issues needs to be strengthened. This demands not only an appraisal of existing media practices, but also the widening of the scope of media democratisation in the country.

(2) The two tiers of public (government) and private media are already a part of media structures in the country. However, a third tier – that of community media – needs to be strengthened and enabled through legislation. Community radio assumes additional significance in a country like India given its huge socio-economic and regional disparities. Priority needs to be given in issuing of community broadcasting licences to rural areas and other regions and communities that are least developed in terms of various socio-economic indicators. This is also based on the fact that the least developed regions and communities of the country are also least served by media.

(3) Proponents of community media have for long demanded a legitimate space for community broadcasting as an issue of Rights. In the current socio-economic climate there is a need for such advocacy efforts to also be viewed within a development paradigm. After all, basic rights stem from basic needs. Consequently, recognising that denial of information aggravates the poverty gap would strengthen the demand for community radio.

Providing for community radio in the country's broadcasting system would provide teeth to the Right to Information movement. Right to Information without the Right to communicate is meaningless. Specifically, communities who produce their own information should be given the right to communicate it.

The need for community radio is underscored by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which upholds the Right to Communicate "without interference, and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media, and regardless of frontiers". However, its relevance, in the Indian context assumes additional significance in the context of the right to information movement in the country. Five states in the country already have the act in place, recognising that access to information is a critical requisite if the gap between

the rich and the poor is to be bridged. Community-owned and managed media could provide the means by which people could become producers of information as well.

Advocacy for CR

Community radio advocacy efforts got a substantial boost with the Bangalore Declaration of 1996. The declaration that was ratified by media experts across the country at a consultation organised by Voices (a development communications NGO based in Bangalore) urged the government to endorse community radio by legislation. Five years later the climate had changed, but unfortunately not for the better. While the road to private radio had begun to be laid, lack of legislative change continued to be

Excerpts from **BANGALORE DECLARATION ON RADIO** September 1996

The legislative imperative: Airwaves are public property and must be used for public good. Public good is not served optimally when there is a monopoly by the government over this public resource or when liberalisation of broadcasting is confined to commercial use of airwaves.

Need for community radio: Centralised one-way broadcasting at various levels of aggregation has limited scope to serve the goals of development, especially in the context of pluralism and diversity which is a singular characteristic of Indian society. Community radio is public service broadcasting in its most decentralised and its most democratic form. A community radio station serves a defined geographical area of a village or groups of villages, and is owned and managed by organisations serving a given community.

A community radio station would, besides educating and entertaining people, connect people with people through participatory or circular communication, connect with organisations and communities, and finally, connect people with government and public service agencies. These needs are not met under the current framework.

Policy formulation: Radio combines the benefits of low cost, and wide reach and access. When used in a community setting with limited area coverage, for example as in FM radio broadcasting, it offers many exciting possibilities for fulfilling the developmental goals and aspirations of the people, and wider choices in accessing information from diverse sources within and outside the community. Its potential for creating social change has been demonstrated in many parts of the world. For these reasons, control of community broadcasting should be vested with the community rather than with the government or private commercial enterprises.

Excerpts from **THE PASTAPUR INITIATIVE ON COMMUNITY RADIO BROADCASTING** July 2000

A group consisting of media practitioners, researchers, educators, non-governmental organisations involved in development activities, journalists, and representatives from All India Radio met at Hyderabad and Pastapur, A P to discuss and evolve a policy for community radio in India. The group strongly urges the Government of India: To take the current government policy of freeing broadcasting from state monopoly to its logical conclusion by expanding the available media space and permitting communities and organisations representing them to run their own radio stations.

For the purpose of community radio as it is proposed here, the group defines:

- Community as a non-sectarian group of individuals who are territorially-bound and share a common socio-economic position/interest; and
- Community radio as having three key aspects: non-profit making, community ownership and management, and community participation.
- Community radio is distinguished by its limited local reach, low-power transmission, and programming content that reflects the educational, developmental and cultural needs of the specific community it serves.

Taking into consideration, the experiences, policy precedents, and judicial interpretations from other democratic countries, the group recommends:

- The creation of a three-tier system of broadcasting in the country: a state-owned public service network (existing framework), commercial private broadcasting, and non-profit, people-owned and managed community radio stations.
- To dedicate frequencies, specifically, for the creation, maintenance and expansion of community broadcasting in the country. Priority should be given in issuing of community broadcasting licences to rural areas and other regions and communities that are least developed in terms of various socio-economic indicators.

To formulate progressive and innovative policy that fosters and encourages community radio so that the developmental objectives set forth in the Constitution could be fully realised.

a significant block for community radio. Against this backdrop, a south Asian consultation on community radio was organised in Hyderabad in 2000 by Voices in partnership with the Sarojini Naidu School of Communication (University of Hyderabad) and the Deccan Development Society, and supported by UNESCO culminated in the Pastapur Initiative. The initiative called for a three-tier system of broadcasting in the country: "a state-owned public service network (existing framework), commercial private broadcasting, and non-profit, people-owned and managed community radio stations" (See box for excerpts of the Bangalore Declaration and the Pastapur Initiative).

Soon after the Hyderabad meeting, the Indira Gandhi National Open University mooted the idea of Gyan Vani. Gyan Vani is not community owned or managed, but up to 40 per cent of its programmes are to be sourced from communities. Operational in about five centers since November 2001, Gyan Vani, notwithstanding its education-centric character, represented a small opening in New Delhi's closed doors. While this gave some hope to community radio advocates across the country, their optimism began to wane in the absence of any further visible movement from the government.

An interview with the information and broadcasting minister, Sushma Swaraj early in the year indicated that 'a firm policy' in regard to community radio would soon be announced. Unfortunately, despite occasional murmurs from the I and B ministry since then, the gap between promise and reality remains to be bridged. So, the question that confronts us today is: how long will community voices wait to be heard? The silver lining is that in spite of an unequal playing field, marginalised communities continue to demonstrate simple and powerful ways to ensure that their voices are heard. The question is: Will the government listen?

Radio for 'Our Voices'

Balu and Amresh are two of eight community workers at the Namma Dhwani audio production centre who regularly produce and narrowcast programmes on a range of issues from organic farming, to rain water harvesting, HIV/AIDS, drip irrigation and many other local development issues. The flip side of the coin is: notwithstanding their innovative use of technology to better their lives, they have not, as yet, been given the right to broadcast their own programmes. In the absence of this right, Balu, Amresh and their group are compelled to fall back on 'narrowcasting' – a process where the audio cassettes are played to relevant community groups at various village centres.

The impact of the production centre has been significant. Says Mangala Gowri, a member of the team and one of the managers for the studio, "On seeing some of the school children participate in Namma Dhwani, some parents have begun to send their children to school." Other members of the local self help groups who are a part of Namma Dhwani's management committee and a driving force of community development in the area are justifiably enthusiastic about the centre. "By disseminating these programmes, people have been motivated to join self-help groups." Some members illustrate other examples of how the programmes have improved their lives. "There have been improvements in agriculture in the last two months since people started using organic farming methods."

The *raison d'être* for Namma Dhwani is evident even at face value. A partnership between poor farmer groups in the Boodikote

sector in Kolar, Myrada and Voices, the project is situated in Boodikote village about 80 km from Bangalore. There is no local radio in the area, which is primarily covered by AIR Bangalore and more peripherally by AIR Cuddapah and AIR Chennai situated about 270 km and 300 km from Kolar, respectively. As Boodikote is on the Karnataka-Andhra Pradesh border, the community speaks a mix of Telugu-Kannada, a language, which does not find a place in the programmes of AIR. AIR Bangalore has played a facilitative role in terms of technical support and has even broadcast – from time to time – programmes made by the community. However, not surprisingly, it is unable to regularly service the local information needs of the community. As a community member points out, "their language and ours is different". Moreover, it is unlikely that the local community would open up to mass media groups in the same way as they would to other members of the community.

Underlying all this is the enormous potential that community radio could offer this region in the context of development. A survey carried out by Myrada about two and a half years ago covering about 3,000 families in the Boodikote sector affirmed that about 64.8 per cent of the families are below the poverty line. Most of them are engaged in agriculture and coolie labour. It hardly needs reiteration that radio could be a vital player in addressing the issues of illiteracy and development. In recognition of this and impressed by the community's efforts to use radio as a medium to better their lives, UNESCO supported the construction of a full-fledged professional audio analog studio that was inaugurated in September 2001.

Since then, the Namma Dhwani team has come a long way. On the one hand, the community centre continues its association with AIR Bangalore, with programmes produced by the community broadcast from time to time. On the other hand, the weekly narrowcasting of programmes links the centre to about 34 villages in the Boodikote area.

The audio production centre has also enabled the team to touch the lives of the local community in various innovative ways. Every Tuesday, the village *santhe/mandi* (market) takes place just outside the production centre. Spices, vegetables, clothes take centre stage – transforming the area into a colorful, bustling arena. It is also a time when people outside Boodikote, from nearby villages, visit the market. For the better part of a year (2002) the Namma Dhwani team used the market place as a platform to demonstrate its work. For an hour in the evening when the market is particularly populated, the team narrowcast relevant social and economic messages and announcements, using loudspeakers. Information about goods being sold and crop prices jostled for time between social messages and even birthday greetings. The experiment elicited the participation of everyone, including the local vendors, the consumers and even the occasional tourist.

The narrowcast, in many ways, brought Namma Dhwani in touch with the larger community. Says Usha Rani, a student at the nearby school, "I know Namma Dhwani from the announcements about vegetable prices during the Tuesday market". Several children participate in making audio programmes on a number of local issues. These are subsequently narrowcast through audio cassettes at educational and community centers. This mix of knowledge and fun has reaped positive dividends. Prema, who is in Class 6, says, "I have made many programmes in this place about cruelty towards animals and protests against animal sacrifice." Her ambition is: "I want my story to be played on air". Munichandra studies in Class 8. After his induction into the audio

production centre, he is determined to make radio programmes. He says, "I have come to the Namma Dhwani centre many times. I have seen all my friends come here and make the programmes. This gives me a lot of pleasure."

Sharada, another student from Class 8, wishes that Namma Dhwani programmes would include, "computer education and the news". Sridhar, from Class 7 says, "I know the Namma Dhwani centre very well. I have heard plays and music programmes that have been made in the studio. I have joined many of my school friends and given programmes related to education." Sundar Reddy, a year senior, agrees with him, but would like to hear programmes on general knowledge. "We want to know about the news here, in the country and the world."

The enthusiasm of these children was so palpable that in June 2002, the local school authorities collaborated with the Namma Dhwani team to operationalise School Audio through cable. This initiative was the result of meetings with the teachers, parents and children themselves who recognised the need for extra-curricular training. The programming content consists of current affairs from local newspapers, local news, songs and drama made by the students themselves, a short lesson (science, history) and a longer programme on issues like dowry, environment and water resources. At the end of every hour, a quiz is broadcast for which the right entries get mention or prizes in the next broadcast. The studio managers collect feedback about the programmes on a regular basis.

Cabling of the village of Boodikote has now been completed and on March 28, 2003 Namma Dhwani cablecast its first programme. Taken up in collaboration with the local cable operator, this has enabled 200 households in the village to listen to the programme on their TV sets. By May, the entire village is expected to have access to cable audio. In the first two weeks of the programme, the number of volunteers at Namma Dhwani grew visibly and there has been a rush of phone calls, visits and

letters from the community. Programming covers duration of two hours daily and includes not only bus timings, market prices, local news and discussions on a range of subjects from health to income generation, but also devotional songs and cinema music.

Demonstrable Potential

If Namma Dhwani's successful demonstration of the potential of community managed and owned radio for development sharpens the case for legalising community radio. The view that the medium could be misused does not hold much water. Any medium is vulnerable to misuse. Providing a legal space, in many ways, reduces this possibility. This is amply demonstrated by the community radio experiences of our neighbours, Sri Lanka and Nepal. Kothmale Community Radio continued to function at the height of Tamil insurgency. Nepal's experience goes, arguably, a step further. Kothmale Radio is supported by the government and the Sri Lankan Broadcasting Corporation, while Nepal boasts of a number of independent community radio stations. Notwithstanding an ongoing Maoist uprising, these radio stations act as critical hubs of community information.

Neither does an oft-repeated argument questioning the number of existing demonstrable models in India seem relevant in the current context. Like 'Namma Dhwani', other poor and less privileged communities – in Pastapur, Andhra Pradesh, in Kutch district, Gujarat, Lesligunj and Panki in Jharkhand and the Orvakal initiative in Andhra Pradesh – provide tangible evidence of community participation in radio. How long must they be compelled to remain marginalised voices waiting in the wings? Will any clear-cut answers be forthcoming from the government? [4]

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