

Breaking Free

Battle over the Airwaves

Radio is an inexpensive medium in terms of production and management. It overcomes the limitations of literacy and is more appropriate for cultures dominated by orality. All over the third world radio has been a catalyst for social change. Although the state-owned public service broadcaster, All India Radio has turned 75, broadcasting in our country continues to be governed by archaic laws and uncompromising bureaucracy. Recent developments however may make for some loosening of the state's hold over radio, making room for alternatives in the form of popular, community-based media. This collection of five articles attempts to raise some critical questions related to broadcasting in India, with specific reference to community radio

VINOD PAVARALA

In February 2003, the small village of Orvakal in Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh off the Hyderabad-Bangalore highway had unwanted visitors from the communications ministry of the government of India. The village that had been the focus of development work by the UNDP for years had recently launched an innovative experiment in community media called 'Mana Radio' (Our Radio). Supported by the state government's World Bank-funded poverty alleviation programme, 'Velugu' (meaning 'light', run under the aegis of the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty), this project used a tiny transmitter that covered a radius of half a kilometre to enable rural women members of self-help groups to communicate with each other and with other residents of the village. About four months after the programme was started amidst much media excitement and participation by politicians, officials from the central government brought police to seize the equipment and declared the broadcast illegal. Under the archaic Indian Telegraph Act of 1885 and the Wireless Act of 1933, they were of course legally right.

Paradoxically, around the same time, the ministry of information and broadcasting (MIB) announced policy guidelines for what it termed 'community radio'. According to the scheme, 'established' educational institutions, such as universities, IITs, IIMs, and residential schools could obtain licences to run their own radio stations. Mistakenly labelled 'community radio', the norms laid down for licences include content regulations that suggest that these campus radio stations air programmes on agriculture, environment, health, and other development-related information.¹ Apart from the fact that university campuses are privileged 'communities' with more than adequate access to media resources, it is unrealistic to expect campus radio stations managed by young students to eschew fun and entertainment. There is no apparent fit between form and content in this new policy, even as marginalised rural communities continue to be denied the right to produce, own and operate real community radio.

Radio is an inexpensive medium – both in terms of production and management as well as for reception; it involves a fairly uncomplicated means of production, making it relatively easy for people to learn the techniques; it overcomes the limitations of literacy; it is more appropriate for cultures dominated by orality

and helps enhance cultural identity and community pride; the widespread ownership of and familiarity with transistor radios make it potentially a people's medium and; all over the third world radio has a proven track record of being a catalyst for social change. It may be possible for communities to use television and the internet as well, but the reasons stated above plus the inherent inequities built into these new communication technologies render them less appropriate as substitutes.

Historically, radio has been used by the state within the context of an older paradigm of community development as early as the 1950s. That whole approach was top-down, elitist, pedagogical and treated people as only passive consumers of information. However, 'community radio', in the sense of a non-state, non-market venture, owned and managed by the community (defined as a territorially bound group with some commonality of interests), is a relatively recent idea in India. This idea is today being articulated against the backdrop of the rise of new social movements and non-governmental organisations. These movements and NGOs appeared on the Indian socio-economic canvas in the post-emergency years, as the state suffered from a severe crisis of legitimacy, giving rise to a civic ferment. These organisations have now, after two decades of grass roots work, reached a level of maturity, redefining politics and development in the country. After years of focusing 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.

Even as the state-owned public service broadcaster, All India Radio, has turned 75 and the Prasar Bharati Corporation has completed five years of its existence, broadcasting in our country continues to be governed by archaic laws and uncompromising bureaucracy. Apart from the inadequacy of the laws governing electronic media in India, the state is also faced with a new set

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of dilemmas and demands. While private broadcasters are seeking a free market for media and consumers are demanding the right to choose, a number of civil society organisations are challenging the positions held and roles played by state-centred or market-run media and are articulating the need for alternatives in the form of popular, community-based media.

Several NGOs in the country have now developed an active interest in community radio and some, in the absence of an independent licence, have been making use of available spaces within the state sector of broadcasting. Others, fearing co-optation and appropriation, have been steadfastly resisting the offer to use state radio; they have, instead, continued to creatively engage in narrowcasting. The government of India stubbornly refuses to yield to the demands for opening up this sector, under misplaced apprehensions that secessionists, militants or subversive elements would misuse the medium. These so-called subversive elements do not need official sanction to communicate with each other. There are all kinds of simple as well as more sophisticated mechanisms by which such groups bypass the official communication routes. This is just a bogey being raised by a government that is uneasy about the consequences of democratisation of the airwaves. The question we should ask is: why does this government find Rupert Murdoch more trustworthy than a poor, unlettered, dalit woman who wants to use a media channel to communicate?

This special collection in the *EPW* attempts to raise this and other critical questions related to broadcasting in India, with specific reference to community radio. Fred Noronha provides an overview of developments in the south Asian region, where many of India's neighbours have taken bigger strides than India towards community radio. Kanchan Kumar offers a comprehensive historical analysis of broadcasting policy in India, highlighting various government actions since independence caught between autonomy and control. The paper by Jo Tacchi examines community radio policies in Australia and South Africa, hailed as one of the oldest and most progressive, respectively, to suggest that state support in terms of legislation and funding are imperative in the Indian context. My paper is based on an evaluation of 'Chala Ho Gaon Mein', the community radio project of Alternative for India Development (AID) in Jharkhand, focusing on the tangible and intangible benefits of the programme for the community. Finally, Ashish Sen makes an argument for carving out a legal space for community radio in India by demonstrating the excitement generated by 'Namma Dhvani' (Our Voices), a collaborative community audio experiment by Voices and Myrada in Karnataka. **EPW**

Note

1 See www.mib.nic.in for detailed guidelines and application for licence.