

Democratizing the rural development in India: A Case Study of Radio Mewat

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Abstract

With different purposes of its inception around the globe, community radio, with its unique participatory and democratic characteristics, has brought some of the revolutionary changes at ground-level. The present case study from India examines the role of a community radio station in Mewat area of Haryana. Being a small community comprising majorly mohammadans, it forms a critical site for analyzing the potential of community radio in giving a platform to minority communities in rural areas. The study used both primary and secondary sources of data. It was found that the station 'Radio Mewat' is working as a communication link between community members and local authorities along with applying participatory methods in both content production and management of radio station. This paper argues that though the sustainability of this medium in India needs more time, the policies and attitude of the central and state governments as well as that of the bureaucracy towards community radio need a rigorous review and change to utilize its full potential as a medium of developing the masses.

Keywords: Community Radio, Radio Mewat, participatory communication, democracy, case study, minority, rural areas, policy

Introduction

Mass Media has an important role to play in the society by expressing the opinions of the public. Keeping in view the present ownership structure and effect of advertising on mass media in the country, this expression of opinions in its right meaning seems very difficult. Moreover, the mainstream media may not necessarily represent all segments of the society as is evident from the findings of a recent study by Media Studies Group (April -May 2012). In this context, Community Radio becomes all the more important as no national, regional and professional broadcasters can replace it. According to Lui (1995), "Community radio is a type of local radio which is an autonomous unit, which, without any commercial purpose, depends on community for its existence." The concept of Community Radio came with the introduction of Alternative Model of development. It was considered as an alternative to the then existing model which reflected the North American and European trends of development through modernization and held the concept of development communication in India till 1975.

Contrary to the top-down approach of development, this model focuses on the participation of people in the process of framing policies for the development of their respective regions. It talks about development at the level of community and provides a platform to "local people to debate their problems and issues which are relevant to them." (Prasad,2009,pp.169). In this way, communities take their decisions themselves

and contribute in the policy-making process for their welfare. Thus, the content and operation of community radio station reflects the hopes, expectations and problems of those communities that are often marginalized or fail to get place in the mainstream media. Kiran Prasad (2009) in her work 'communication for Development' defines community radio "as having three aspects- a. non-profit making, b. community ownership & control, c. community participation." (pp.169)

So, this medium becomes more democratic, participatory and appropriate to the diverse and plural social, economic, cultural and geographical ground realities and situations of various regions in India. It aims at including the far away rural areas, tribes and people in the mainstream development process, who fail to get the attention of various ministries, corporate houses, law and policy making agencies and planning and implementing authorities involved in the task of allocation and utilization of resources for various development plans. According to Michael Delorme (2012), "Its purpose is to give voice to those without voices, to marginalized groups and to communities far from large urban centres where the population is too small to attract a commercial or large-scale State Radio". (Abiding voices, pp.11)

Community Radio and Rural development

First major experience in the use of radio for rural development was Radio Farm Project launched by AIR Pune on 19th February 1956 with the assistance of UNESCO. "Rural development is defined as the process of sustainable growth of the rural economy and involvement of well-being of rural population." (pp.159, Communication for Development). Prasad further defines the goals of rural development as economic betterment of people and greater social transformation. She

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further comments, *"It later became evident that accelerated development can be achieved only if governmental efforts are adequately supplemented by people's participation at grassroots."* (pp.159, Communication for Development)

The process of rural development includes various formal and informal actors involved in decision-making and implementing the decisions made and the formal and informal structures that have been set in place to arrive at and implement the decision. That is along with the government, other actors may include influential landlords, associations of peasant farmers, cooperatives, NGOs, research institutes, religious leaders, finance institutions, political parties, the military, etc. Co-ordination between various actors becomes very important. Of equal importance is their knowledge and awareness about the needs, priorities and requirements of the areas where the development work is required. And this function is fulfilled by the community radio centres by bringing both the community people and planning and implementing authorities on a common platform through their programs. This participation not only makes the objectives of development reach the needed targets, but also instills a feeling in the people of being a part of the system.

The present study attempts to understand the role of community radio in a rural area in context of its structure and functioning. The research aims not only at analyzing the existing data about the communication of a radio station in context of a rural Muslim community, but also studies and evaluates the difficulties faced by such stations while working amongst people at the ground level. Also, the study tries to evaluate the current attitude, policy and environment for the working of such medium in the country.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of the medium can be traced by looking at the pattern of origin of various community radio stations around the globe and in India as well. According to Ronkegilyolo (1995), community radio originated in Latin America as an alternative and critique to the mainstream commercial broadcasting media and aimed at helping the marginalized to get basic education. According to Bohafa (1998), it started in South Africa as a revolution to establish democracy, decentralization and harmony among other orders of the continent after the end of racial government.

UN and other international agencies working for development through communication helped Asia in establishing its community Radio Centres.

The community was considered as a social aspect based on participation and two-way communication (J.Surveys, 1995). In Sri Lanka (1980), Mahaveli CR was established for two-way communication between the rehabilitation authorities and the needs of the 60,000 families that got settled near Mahaveli river (MJR David, A Passion for Radio). It was followed by Thambuli CR in Philippines with a motive of making undeveloped communities self-capable of operating their CRs and participate in National Issues. The first independent CR of South Asia was Radio Sagarmatha established in Nepal in May 1997 with the efforts of environment and press organizations. Its commitment and struggle for the freedom of speech and as a defender of democracy was evident by a crackdown of army on its journalists after airing an interview of BBC Nepal service with Prachanda in 2005.

The stepping in of CR in India was a revolution (Banglore Declaration) by academicians and communication experts. The CR 'by the women,for the women' was started in Pastapur Community,100 kms away from Hyderabad by 70 Women organizations. It was followed by 'NammaDhwani' CR of Boddikot community in Karnataka, Palamu CR of Jharkhand and 'KunjlaPachche Kutch Ji' CR in Gujarat for participation of Kutch women in Panchayats. These efforts were made before the declaration of CR Policy by MIB in 2002, amended in 2006. Currently 147 CRs are operating in India and 413 CRs have got Letter of Intent by Ministry of Information & Broadcasting and would start operating once they get resources. Maximum number of stations are in Tamil Nadu and almost no station is there in north-east India (CR Compendium 2012 by Ministry of Information & Broadcasting).

A. Banjade (2006) conducted an audience survey of Community Radio Madanpokharain Nepal . The study revealed that the media use (listening to radio and watching television) was not homogeneous across people living in city and their counterparts in villages as well as among people from different caste/ethnic origins. Listening to the radio was universal in the city whereas almost 15 percent people in villages reported not listening to a radio. Kerrie Foxwell (2001) conducted a National Survey of the Community Radio sector in Australia .The study found out that while community radio contested mainstream and dominant representations of Australian culture, the local roles at the community level could not be ignored. Further it concluded that a more accurate description of the sector would be 'citizens' media' which

acknowledged the pivotal role of citizenship and democracy in the broadcasting process.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To assess the work of community radio in improving the quality of life of Mewat community
- To understand the nature and extent of community participation in the tasks of station
- To analyze the work of community radio with regard to local governance in Mewat community
- To find out the problems faced by the radio station while working for rural development

METHODOLOGY

Keeping in mind the objectives of the present research, there was a need to study in detail a community radio station working in a rural area. Since, the study involves analysis of content, management and role of various organizations in the community, the present study adopted qualitative research methodology. It is the worldview that emerged out of human sciences in 20th century and focused on using qualitative methods like focus groups, case study, discourse analysis, ethnography, semiotics, visual anthropology etc. It forms an inductive method wherein data collection is followed by the stages of meaning generation and theory formation.

Since the present study demands exploratory research design, method of case study was used wherein Radio Mewat 90.4 MHz operating in Mewat district of Haryana was included in the sample. While this community forms a critical site for analyzing the role of community radio in a rural isolated Muslim-dominated area, its winning of awards like 'Most Innovative Program Content' (2013) and 'Most Sustainable Model of Community Radio' (Tehlika, 'FM of the masses', March 24, 2012) makes it a case study for exploring community participation in content management of community radio station. Both primary and secondary sources of data are used. While the primary data was collected through visit, observation and interviews, the sources for the secondary data were the documents of radio station, the reports in media and reports of various seminars, conferences and ministries.

DATA ANALYSIS

About the community

The Mewat district was carved out from erstwhile Gurgaon and Faridabad districts, which came into existence on 4th April 2005. It consists of five blocks namely Nuh, Tauru, Nagina, Firozpur

Jhirka and Punhana. Gurgaon district bounds it on its North, while Rewari district lies to its West and Faridabad district to its East. On South, the district shares its boundary with the State of Rajasthan. The main occupation of the people of Mewat is agriculture and allied and agro-based activities. The Meos (Muslims) are the predominant population group and are completely agriculturists. The literacy rate in Mewat is comparatively low particularly in the case of female literacy. Literacy rate is 56.10 against State average of 76.60, while female literacy rate is 37.60 against State average of 66.80.

Work being done by Radio Mewat

Radio Mewat is an example of NGO operated model of community radio. It is run by SMART (Seeking Modern Applications for Real Transformation) NGO in Mewat District at its headquarter in Nuh area. Started on Sept.1, 2010, it broadcasts 14 hrs.in a day through 50 W low power transmitter from a rented flat of Mewat Development Agency and reaches 25 Km radius of area. Hardly 45 kms away from the steel and glass city Gurgaon, the area seems to be untouched by any of the developments even after being connected to the city by highway. The resistance by the Meo community leaders has prevented many a change from coming to the area. Communication strategy of the station was analyzed by looking at the format and content of its programs, the pattern in which it involves community and its role in improving the life of community members.

Role of station in improving quality of life of the community

Objective of improving the quality of life of community members includes acting as a platform to educate the community members in terms of both formal and informal education and the elements of creating awareness through its programs. On looking at the format and type of its programs, one can track the concept of persuasion through information and participation at the ground level. Keeping in mind the characteristics of being a minority and a backward area, the fundamental areas of awareness such as health, financial inclusion, Panchayati Raj Institutions, agriculture and development of villages have been considered to be made aware about. Through its program '**Swasth Mewat**', it calls various doctors and experts in its studio and the people from the community get their health problems addressed. It includes talking about the locally available nutritious food which a Mewati woman can take and live healthy life. Along with it, the RJ tells the

pregnant women about the helpline number given by government to call ambulance free of cost when needed and also convinces them to go to hospitals for delivery. *"The basic problem is that people don't know about the policies and facilities arranged by the government. They think that tuberculosis is an incurable disease because they don't know the location and mode of reaching DOT centres and experts. This information they get from Radio Mewat"*, says Meenakshi, station manager of Radio Mewat. By mutual co-operation with another NGO Hriday, it also ran an anti-tobacco campaign.

The program '**Urdu Deeniyat**' is hosted by madarsa teacher Shaukat Ali, who comes to the studio from his village thrice a week to record Urdu lessons for children. *"We don't have enough Urdu teachers in government schools. Radio is a good medium to reach out to children who don't go to school,"* says the teacher. Informing the women about sanitation and the ways of earning income through self-help groups is also a feature of the broadcast. The ill-effects of early marriage of girls, dowry, deforestation of Aravalisare sung by their age old folk music form '**Mirasi**' performers, and also played are the stories of Mahabharata and other epics. The proximity of the language is also used when the girls studying in faraway schools up to standard eight and the teachers are asked on the recorder about the education. With just two females among the eleven reporters the station is trying hard to fight male dominating attitude and ego problems of the community leaders while encouraging participation of women.

The radio has a special program for farmers, in which an expert is invited to talk about issues like animal husbandry, issues of crops, fishing etc. and to resolve community queries as well. Further, the station staff tries to get farmers '**Kisan credit cards**' for small loans that can be returned once the crop is cultivated. A project titled '**Galigali sim sim**' focuses on children to inculcate good habits. Along with this, another program '**Meena ki duniya**' also focuses on children to create awareness among them regarding education and equality. The element of educating the community about its cultural heritage has also been included by the station in its programs like '**Bharat kaitihas**' and '**Dastan-e-Mewat**'. While the former is a daily program which focuses on India's history especially for the children of Mewat, the latter broadcasts stories and features regarding Mewat's history, historical places and their contribution in India's freedom. By broadcasting the profiles of each village in the area along with bytes of the people in its

signature programme '**Gaon Gaon Ki Baat**', the community not only gets connected to nearby areas, but is also motivated to follow constructive development.

Role of station in local governance

In its programme '**Aapki Police Aapke Saath**', the SSP of the area announces from the studio awards for those getting their FIRs submitted on the station, and tells the action taken on those FIRs in the next episode. In this way, it is acting as a platform for two-way communication between the police and the people. Along with it, the SP of the area uses the studio to make important announcements regarding traffic control, crimes, khaps, etc. Listeners are offered a chance to be proactive with an accident helpline number. *"If you take accident victims to hospital, you will get a reward and a police commendation certificate. You don't need to be scared that you will get yourself involved in a police case,"* announces the SSP on the station. Similarly, its reporters take their recorders to various Panchayat members in the field and ask them about various funds meant for them and the method of accessing them. Through fictional story-telling method, it narrowcasts the program '**Hamaro Raj Panchayati Raj**' in 10 villages. The feedback reports collected from field surveys by the station confirms that people gained knowledge from it. Ajay, a listener, says in a call between the program-*"It was for the first time that the two official Gram Sabha meetings were called in Mewat. And now they have bought radios to get new information."*

"Around 10,000 bank accounts have been opened by the people of Mewat after the station started calling in officers from local banks who tell them the importance and process of opening bank accounts and the method of savings also", says Jafruddin, reporter of Radio Mewat and the one who conduxts the program '**Pate ki Baat**'. The data has been collected by NABARD with whom the station works for its programme '**Aapke Faayde Ki Baat**' (compendium of CR 2012 by Min of I&B).The program informs about the government schemes meant for locals. *"We encourage women for mutual contribution of 100 INR through which their different requirements like constructing toilets, running a beauty parlour and opening bank accounts are fulfilled"*, says Sunita Mishra, another reporter of the station. She further says, *"We try to help economically backward children to get educational loan from banks...after listening to the program, people come to the station to ask about how they can avail the told benefits."*

According to a report in The Hindu (6th August 2012)titled '**Riding the Airwave**', during the visit of

station's radio jockey Shahid to Khedlidosa Village, he was told by a gathering of women about a liquor racket in their village and wanted to raise the issue through the station. After recording their voices in the local Meo-dialect, he played them on the station. Listening to the voices, the SSP raided the racket in the evening.

Community participation in the tasks of radio station

UNESCO Community Radio Handbook writes about the participation of community, *"the unique advantage that community radio has over any other type of broadcasting in winning audience is its ability to be specifically relevant to the particular needs, interests and desires of its relatively small audience.....it can only reach this level of relevance through the constant involvement of that audience the planning, operation, and evaluation of its programming."* (pp.57). If looked at the involvement of community in the decision-making of the station, the records provided by the station manager Meenakshi Kukkreja lists four people in the programming committee- Mr. Saddeq, Mr Salamuddin Advocate (involved in social service), Mr. Wasim Akram Khaika (Professor) and Ms. Meenakshi (Station manager).

Its reporting team contains 8 reporters and 2 volunteers, all of them belonging to the community. Looking at the composition of its managing committee, out of the seven people, only one (Mrs Archana Kapoor) belongs to the NGO running it. The remaining six members include Mr. Bhatnagar from NABARD (posted in Mewat), Molana Sher Mohd Amani (religious guru from Mewat), Mr. Arif Bhadas (involved in social service in Mewat), Ms. Mohamadi, (Zila Paarshad and the first educated women of Mewat), Mr. Fazruddin Baser (Sarpanch of Sakras village and involved in social service), Dr. Pramjeet (Deputy Director, Agriculture Department, posted in Mewat). During the interview, Ms. Archana Kapoor, Founder Head of the station says, *"We engage Meos not just as listeners, but also producers; we have a content committee which includes district officials, sarpanches, and a maulvi,"*.

Apart from this, various formats and themes of the station's programs involve local people as presenters, performers, participants in discussions and interviews. **Gyan ki baat**, a daily live phone-in program takes up a new issue with the students as participants. An interesting program **Buzurg mahilaon ki baat** is meant for senior citizens. They talk about how time has changed and they miss things like letters, marriage ceremony's etc. they also share recipes and songs

and they celebrate the festivals at that time. Thus, the elderly women themselves form the core part of the program and decide its subject.

Through its live programs like **Mera gaon kaisa ho** that talks about the village issues, **Aaj ka mehmaan** that facilitates meeting local people and talking about their journey and struggle, **Mahilaon ki baat** that talks about women issues in Mewat, their rights, cases and take advice from women protection officer and SP of Mahila thana, **Yuvaon ki baat** that focuses on youth and their issues, the community radio station seems to be cultivate a structure that represents the community members belonging to all age groups along with their direct involvement in the programs. *"Sometimes we have experts or villagers as a guest of the day. We also approach departments through this program to be a part and connect them with the villagers"*, says Mr. Samar Khan.

Upon asking about the feedback mechanism regarding the content and quality of programs, Meenakshi tells, *"people from the community call us during programs and give their feedback about the things they liked or the benefits that they got from the content and announcements."* Narrating an incidence, Mr. Ahmed, a farmer from FerozpurNamak village, tells, *"Initially I was used to using cow dung as it is in the field for acting as fertilizer, but after the expert in the program told about converting it into fertilizer first and then using it for field, it benefitted in the form of good harvest."*

While taking interviews and analyzing the communication strategy of the station, the staff expressed the difficulties they face during their work. Reporter Samar Khan comments, *"People have trust on the station now.....but there is a huge problem of funds. I think the administration should give 100 percent support to the community radio centers, like the funding that the Collector or District Commissioner received for giving advertisements to the newspapers, they should think about giving local advertisements to medium like ours as well."*

Following difficulties were found during the data analysis-

Difficulties faced by the radio station

- Though CRS receives co-operation by central government but the attitude of state governments is poor as far as funds, visibility and other factors are concerned. Also, the state-level bureaucracy does not allow the efforts of the station to reach its destination. For example, after getting informed about various helpline numbers, if the authorities do not pick up calls, the effort goes waste.

- Since many of the community people are unemployed, it is very difficult to get volunteers and that too for a long term.
 - As is evident from the Case Study, the station got applied for spectrum license in 2007 but got it in 2009. The procedure of getting spectrum license is time-taking and complex and this affects the relevance and timeliness of the ideas thereby discouraging and demotivating the volunteers.
 - Male-dominating attitude at various levels makes it difficult to convince opinion leaders about the empowerment of women in the area whether it is about education or employment or participation in the Radio.
 - CR Policy of the Ministry of I&B puts limits to funds which creates problem in the efforts of the station. As a result of complex foreign funding policy and limited government sponsorships, manpower becomes less and the organization personnel has to invest personal money to sustain it. This is evident when Ms. Archana Kapoor says, "Since the time I had started this radio, I had to tell my daughter to wait for her marriage till the next policy of Government of India is here."
 - There is no existence of any kind of mainstream media to work in co-ordination with or to get visibility for the station.
 - Since there are no local markets, no local advertisements are available which further worsens the conditions of local funds.
 - Though the station is trying to revive the dying age old culture of the area through 'Meerasi' performance in the programs, shortage of funds also creates problems here, like the TA of artists from Rajasthan, any remuneration for performances etc.
 - The casual attitude of the people of community does not allow it to become self-sustainable.
 - The shortage of funds to buy many loud speakers, play back recorders, etc. stops the station from repeating the broadcasts on various spots of community gathering in the field, like Tuesday market, or some fair /festival, etc.
- maulvi*, teachers to influence the community members in groups regarding the change it wants to bring for their development.
- The format of programs reflects a well-researched strategy with a clear focus on habits, preferences and needs of the community.
 - Use of local dialect by the station in its programs has the potential to create a close connection with the members of rural community. This also acts as a factor of motivation for the community members to participate more and more in its programs either by displaying their talent and performance or by expressing their views in the discussions taking place at the station. The importance of this strategy has been highlighted by Kiran Prasad when she writes, "The use of informal local dialect adds to the comfort and confidence of listeners, as well as their comprehension of the information imparted." (pp.169, Communication for Development)
 - Participation of community members in the managing committee and programing committee of the station, as per the records received, suggests a democratic structure which can be called 'owned and controlled by the people', though the participation seems not to be there in context of funds or other economic resources.
 - The program content reflects a complete communication package containing source of awareness, education and entertainment being given by the station to its listeners in the community, thereby justifying the ideal objectives of operation of a community radio as highlighted by UNESCO Community Radio Handbook 2001- "in addition to pleasing, entertaining and perhaps providing some general enlightenment for its audience, they also seek to facilitate change, social progress and better living conditions in the community that the radio serves." (pp.57)
 - Use of folk culture and music by the station conveys a positive step on the part of its communication strategy of communicating messages of change like family planning, girl child education etc. by appealing to the heart and soul of the community through theatre performance, singing and plays etc. Moreover, the way programs involving different people from community regarding their age old traditions, marriage ceremonies, recipes, songs and festivals is a good effort on the part of the station to promote the art and cultural heritage of the community.

OUTCOME OF DATA ANALYSIS

- Mewat community radio station has adopted a two-step flow model of communication that is considered suitable for interpersonal communication. It involved the opinion leaders of the community like *panchayat*,

- By helping the community members in terms of getting their bank accounts opened, broadcasting academic Urdu lessons, providing them response on their FIRs and acting as a platform of important announcements like ambulance helpline no., police helpline no., government policies etc., the station has established itself as centre point in the community, thereby acting as a catalyst for solving their problems and thus, helping in their development. This aspect has also been highlighted by UNESCO in this way- *"Every effort should also be made to have the radio station seen as a focal point in the community where people are free to come and talk to the staff and discuss ideas for programs in which they could be involved."* (pp.58, UNESCO Community Radio Handbook 2001)
- The content seems to be democratic in terms of representing issues and concerns of different sections of the community like youth, women, children, elders etc.
- The station seems to have not applied techniques for evaluation and monitoring except the calls received from community members as feedback. Thus, the station needs to start a process of periodical monitoring of programs; maintenance of records related to choices and interests of the people and should evaluate the language and sound quality related aspects of the programs as well.
- A single window process for granting license to the organizations and agencies except the government ones is the need of the hour. Instead of getting the application passed through 8 ministries in 10 stages, one person each from some other ministry can be collaborated with Ministry of I&B for the verification and other processes. This would help in making the license procedure efficient, effective and simple.
- Sensitization of state governments is a must through workshops and seminar sessions, and it can be started at the district level first.
- A strategic membership drive can be undertaken by giving badges to the community people. It will foster a sense of identity, participation and dignity.
- CRS should also follow the process after people contact the relevant authorities as it can hold them accountable and make them answerable to the complaints not acted upon.
- Many common Internet forums like 'Ek Duniya Anek Aawaaz' need to be established to facilitate the exchange and sharing of ideas, concepts, skills and many other resources among various centres.
- More and more qualitative research needs to be focused upon for trapping and adopting the changing needs and interests of diverse groups.

SUGGESTIONS

In context of the current policy of government regarding community radio and the kind of work stations like these are doing, the following recommendations can be helpful in utilizing the potential of community radio as a medium in true sense-

- The centers of All India Radio in various regions can also be used for training of station management, program production and other skills.
- GOI can go for partnership with the NGOs for the capital expenditure of the station, or it can allocate separate funds to Panchayati Raj Institutions for establishing and maintaining a community radio, as the estimated cost of establishing a CRS can go upto 15 lakhs. Even though the new policy of government of India provides grant up to 50%, but that too can be received only after operating it for three months after approval of grant and this seems very difficult for a station which is already facing the lack of funds.

CONCLUSION

The concept and process of development has shifted from top-down approach to participatory one in the past five decades. The process of taking development to the grass root level involves many actors including local administrative agencies, non-governmental organizations and voluntary groups who can act as a mediator by involving people in various policies and decisions at the community level. Community media is more democratic in its structure and functioning than the mainstream one. But it needs technical, financial and skill-base support from the policy makers in order to involve more and more people in the process of development and governance at the grass root level. Radio Mewat seems to be acting at its best in bringing social change and betterment in the lives of community members, though the risks of this medium getting completely into the hands of an NGO cannot be ignored. Therefore, the government needs to revamp its policy and attitude towards community media keeping in mind the diverse needs, interests, cultures and aspirations of

different rural and isolated communities in the country.

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