

The Role of Community Radio in Democratic Participation in India

By

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The paper was published at the 13th International Conference of the International Society for Third-Sector Research (ISTR), in the Paper Session titled 'Initiatives, Influences and Advancement' on Wednesday, July 11, 2018.

Abstract

Though young, the community radio movement in India is emerging as a viable medium for the voiceless to bring their concerns to the state's attention, a tangible change in the participation of small communities in the democratic process. Rural women, fisher folk ("Kadalosai", 2017) and transgender communities (Paul, 2012), just to name a few, have been found to have turned community radio into a democratic medium.

With the premise that community radio is a definite medium for the subaltern communities to be part of the democratic process, this paper presents the findings of an empirical study of five randomly selected community radios from the four South Indian states of Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Grounded in the agenda setting theory, the study explores how community radios set a positive agenda and raise issues that are of concerns to local communities to bring about policy changes, and thus make themselves heard, actually and metaphorically.

Keywords: Community radio, alternative media, agenda setting, democratic participation

Introduction

Community radio as a democratic communication medium has played a significant role in the life of the people across the world since 1940s. The history of community radio goes back to 1947 when two radio stations came into being in Latin America. The first one was the 'Miners' Radios' in Bolivia and the second one was 'Radio Sutatenza' in Columbia. Though not owned by mine workers, the focus of these two pioneering community radios was 'to unite the community of miners for better working conditions' (Fraser & Estrada 2001, p. 6). Since then community radios have served as viable platforms for the common folk to participate in the democratic process by expressing their views and opinions. In that direction, in South Africa community radios are considered to have made a big impact in the lives of women who now feel empowered to play an active role in democratic process (Molefe & Molefe, 2007). Similarly, the Bush Radio started at the peak of the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa in the early 1980s lived up to be a community radio by promoting Kwaito music of the Blacks (Tanja, 2008).

In Indonesia, community radios have been successful in preserving and empowering local cultures (Sujoko, 2011). In Venezuela, community radios played a crucial role by informing people of the attempts to overthrow the democratically elected government in 2002 (Fernandes, 2006). Thailand's vibrant community radios had allowed the migrant population to voice their aspirations fearlessly. However, following the military coup in 2006, many such radio stations in Thailand were silenced (Elliot, 2010).

In India's neighbourhood Nepal, Radio Lumbini has been active in contributing to the democratic process (Noronha, 2003). In Sri Lanka the government had even given license to the erstwhile LTTE to start a radio station called Voice of Tigers. However, the station was shut down during the volatile period in 2009 (Tacchi, 2009).

Community Radio in India

Radio broadcasting was introduced in India by private organisations. The pioneering radio broadcast services launched by the Madras Presidency Club in 1924 ceased to operate in 1927. In that year, a few entrepreneurs launched the Indian Broadcasting Company (IBC) with radio stations at Bombay and Calcutta. When IBC too ceased operations owing to financial problems, India government entered the field by launching Indian Broadcasting Service in 1932. Since then, radio broadcasting was under the control of Indian government until 1995.

What freed radio from government control was the landmark judgement of the Supreme Court of India in 1995 which stated that 'airwaves constitute public property and must be utilised for advancing public good' (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2016). Accordingly, the government started issuing licences to commercial operators from 1999. However, it took another three years for the state to bring out a policy on community radios. The first policy that came in 2002 allowed only the well-established educational institutions to set up community radios which were in fact campus radios. Such a discriminatory policy was opposed by community radio activists who demanded a 'more inclusive and cohesive policy' (Kaushal, 2015, p. 89).

The sustained struggle by the community radio activists made the government bring about another policy in 2006 to allow NGOs, agricultural research centres, and registered societies to seek community radio licenses. As of May 2018, 217 community radios were in operation

(Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2018), though the government in 2007 had promised to start 400 community radios 'in a few years' (Sharma, 2016).

According to government guidelines, a community radio in India shall broadcast on a transmission capacity of 100 watts transmitter with a maximum antenna height of 30 metres (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2006). With such a configuration, the coverage area would be between 15 to 20 kilometres.

World over, the concept of community radio seems to have evolved with licenses being issued to set up stations to target specific communities. However, in India the community radio concept is largely geographical rather than community specific, given the fact that over 60 per cent of community radios are run by educational institutions. However, many of these community radios target community or communities within the permitted geographical reach.

Community Radio as Means of Development and Empowerment

The distinctive feature of community radio is that it is owned by the community. And the community is the producer as well as the audience of this medium. The goal is to serve local community needs, and not profiteering. Thus, community radios serve the community rather than the advertisers (Sharma, 2012). In fact, a Rockefeller Foundation (1999, p. 15) report had stated that community radio is a "process of public and private dialogue through which people define who they are, what they want and how they can get it".

The importance of radio as an effective medium of communication in areas where other media cannot reach, especially in developing countries, has been well established (Hussain, 1997; Van Crowder, 1998; Nakabugu, 2001; Pavarla, 2003; Chapman et. al., 2003; Tett, 2010; Sharma, 2012; Sanni, 2013; Maina, 2013). A World Development Report states that community media is of utmost importance in rural development (World Bank, 2001). They are particularly effective in giving voices to marginalised sections of society (Banjade, 2007; Singh et. al., 2010; Kaur, 2012).

With the emergence of development communication in mass media studies, community radio was largely seen as a medium for development programmes. Many countries too look at community radios as carriers of development messages. While this viewpoint has not

been negated, the concept of development needs to have a nuanced attribution. In fact, many authors would suggest that today development happens when communities are empowered. And hence, it is important to empower communities first, before trying to bring about development. In a study by Pradhan (2011, p. 7), it was noted that for people just listening to their own voice was an empowering experience, as they 'realise that this, truly, can be their voice and help them get a better deal from government and other castes'.

Another difference with the community radio is that there is a democratisation of communication wherein community participation is of paramount importance (Elliot, 2010). This is the distinguishing feature of community radios in democratic societies where the mainstream media largely focus on what sells rather than on what empowers people. In fact, as has been seen world over, mainstream media has been used by the states to 'manufacture consent' and support uncritically the stance taken by the state (Herman & McChesney, 1997; Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

A study done on community radios in Kenya found that the strategies that community radios used in Kenya helped in educating people on issues that affected them, thus helping in social cohesion and integration (Maina, 2013).

Pavarala and Malik (2007, p. 209) have suggested that community radio initiatives offer opportunities to people 'to debate issues and events of common concern and to set counter-hegemonic agendas.' They further added that, '(S)uch forging of subaltern counter publics through a process of shifting control of media technologies to those excluded and marginalised from the dominant public sphere helps expand the discursive space, which could eventually facilitate collective action and offer a realistic emancipatory potential.'

What the above studies reveal is that community radio as a true participatory medium in true sense of the term would help in giving voice to the voiceless. This process can be highly democratic helping in the larger goal of empowerment. In fact, democracies can be made more vibrant if this medium is promoted extensively.

In this context, the present study was conducted to study the role Indian community radios play in democratic participation.

Theoretical Framework

It was Bernard Cohen who in his important work *The Press and Foreign Policy* (1963, p. 13) said that the press 'may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.' McCombs (2005) who has done extensive research in the field of agenda setting believes that repetition of an idea day after day by the media, will make the idea stand out as very important. In other words, if an idea or an issue is given prominence by the media, it is likely to be considered as important by the public.

The agenda-setting theory developed and tested over the years, holds that mass media have an innate ability to set their own agenda by giving prominence to certain issues, persons or subjects. And, community radio, which is people's medium in its true sense, has the capability to set agenda for a fruitful democratic process. In this article an attempt is being made to find out how community radios, despite their limitations in an Indian context, set positive agenda for people to be actively involved as important stakeholders in democracy.

Objectives and Method

The general objective of this study was to examine if community radios in India set agenda for a democratic participation by their target groups. The specific objectives were:

1. To study the working of community radios in India and how they involve their target community/communities in participatory democratic communication process
2. To find out whether the target groups are able to experience democratic participation in and through community radio.
3. To study if community radio has been able to make a difference in the way people take part in democracy in India

The study was carried out in April-May 2018. The data for the study was collected from listeners of randomly selected community radio stations (CRS) in south India which broadcast programmes for a minimum of five hours a day. Five such community radios were selected randomly from four different states of South India (See Table 1). The flagship programmes of each of these stations were studied to examine whether the

programmes have promoted democratic participation of the local communities that the stations target.

Table 1: Profile of Community Radio Stations Studied

No	Station Frequency (Launch year)	Region, State	Run by	Target group(s)	Broadcast languages	Hours of Broadcast per day	Issues of focus in broadcasts
1	Jana Dhvani 90.8 FM (2012)	Mysore, Karnataka	Edu. Inst .	Local people and Tribals	Kannada and tribal languages	13.5 hours	Health, education, women's empowerment, youth, civic issues
2	Radio Mattoli 90.4 FM (2009)	Waynad, Kerala	NGO	Tribals	Malayalam and tribal languages	20 hours	Health, education, tribal welfare, civic issues, local administration
3	Radio Kotagiri 90.4 FM (2013)	Kotagiri, Tamil Nadu	NGO	Tribals and local people	Tamil and tribal languages	12 hours	Education, agriculture, health, environment, women's empowerment
4	Radio Charminar 107.8 FM (2015)	Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh	Edu. Inst.	Local people (Muslims and others)	Urdu and Hindi	15 hours	Health, education, social issues, culture
5	Radio Sarang 107.8 FM (2009)	Mangalore, Karnataka	Edu. Inst.	Language communi- ties	Kannada, Konkani, Tulu, and Beary	16 hours	Health, education, culture, civic and current social issues, women empowerment

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with 35 listeners selected from the five community radios to elicit how effective the radio has been in their areas and in what way it has helped in the democratic process. The FGDs were held separately with each of the five CRSs in April-May 2018.

Further, interviews were held with the important stakeholders of these community radios, such as station directors, programme co-ordinators, programme producers, RJs, among others, to elicit information about the content and the effectiveness of the medium and community participation. A detailed analysis and discussion are presented in the following section.

Analysis and Discussion

CRS and Participatory Democratic Communication

As detailed in Table 1, three CRSs (Jana Dhvani, Radio Charminar and Radio Sarang) are run by educational institutions and the remaining two (Radio Kotagiri and Radio Mattoli) are run by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). As per the records, out of the 217 operational CRSs in India, only 87 are run by NGOs and the others are by educational institutions and agricultural and scientific institutions (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2018).

While the city-based CRSs such as Radio Sarang and Radio Charminar have a wider reach due to the population density in the cities, the rural based CRSs have greater participation as will be discussed later. In fact, the rural based CRSs use local tribal dialects in their broadcasts as per the directive of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting outlined in its guidelines for setting up community radios (Policy Guidelines, n.d.).

The types of programmes broadcast are mostly related to the concerns of the target groups. For example, the two CRSs (Radio Mattoli and Radio Kotagiri) that have tribals as their target groups have programmes related to tribal issues. At the same time, programmes relating to health, education, and women's issues and empowerment are common in all the five CRSs. Of course, they also broadcast entertainment programmes of music and songs, many of which are locally produced through community participation.

A brief profile of those who were part of FGDs is due here. Among the 35 persons who participated in the FGDs, 16 were male and 19 were females. The age of the group ranged from 33 to 44. Most were semi-literate. Just 5 studied Class 12 and above while 6 studied upto Class 10. Most of the others had not completed Class 10. Two of them were illiterate. It is common knowledge that most community radios in India reach semi-literate or illiterate

people. In fact, the main objective of CRSs is to reach such people. The less-educated are also part of the voiceless mass, as they have less confidence or bargaining power.

The FGDs held with listeners of the five CRSs revealed that the audience of four CRSs reported listening to CRS broadcasts for about three hours per day. A few from Radio Mattoli, Jana Dhwani, Radio Sarang and Radio Charminar reported that they listened to the CRS for over seven hours a day.

The listeners of Radio Kotagiri, however, tuned in for an average of just 48 minutes. This was because, most of them worked far away from their homes and it was not possible for them to listen to radio at their work places. They generally listened to radio either in the morning or evening.

CRS and Participatory Democratic Communication

The first two objectives of the study were to study the working of community radios in India and how they involve their target community/communities in participatory democratic communication process; and also to find out whether the target groups are able to experience democratic participation in and through community radio.

Through the study of these five CRSs, it can be construed that CRSs in India thrive in and through community participation only and the by and large the listeners have been able to take part more constructively in the democratic process. Most of the listeners said that they listened to the CRS broadcasts because the focus of the CRS was local issues. As a listener in an FGD put it succinctly: "There is a difference between this radio and other radios: programmes on this radio are related to community. These programmes are helpful to local people. Also, there is an opportunity for us to speak directly to government officials on this radio" (Rajanayaka, personal communication, April 20, 2018).

In fact, the five radios, (and this may be true with most other CRSs in India) brought government officials to discuss local issues and problems of the local community. For instance, government officials take part in Jana Dhwani CRS' flagship weekly phone-in programme called *Sethuve* (bridge). Such programmes make government officials to be more responsible and treat local issues seriously. Outlining this point, a Jana Dhwani listener while taking part in an FGD said: "Police used to be irresponsible and careless about

complainants whenever people went to the police station. Now, they don't as people question police officials when they come to the radio station" (Ravi Gowda, personal communication, April 21, 2018). Many of them said that they were now not scared to speak to the officials. In fact, a few of them even said that after listening to the views of others on radio they were inspired to make their point. They were more confident now to "speak boldly with anybody and at any forum" (Purushottam Salian, personal communication, May 25, 2018).

Shivappa, a regular listener of Jana Dhwani CRS said, "I hear the voice of familiar people in Jana Dhwani. This is not possible in other stations. I feel Jana Dhwani is our own radio and I too can speak freely" (Personal communication, May 20, 2018). Giving voice to the voiceless is an important dimension of a CRS (AMARC, n.d.). This has been pointed out in several studies (Banjade, 2007; Singh et. al., 2010; Kaur, 2012). And the listeners rightly feel that their voice is counted in this medium. For many, hearing their voice on radio is itself empowering. Also, several listeners who took part in FGDs in the present study believed that the views they express, or the questions they raise with officials would be beneficial to others as well.

What Difference CRS Makes

The third objective of this paper was to study if community radio has been able to make a difference in the way people take part in democracy in India. The semi-literate people of the hinterlands, no doubt, are the biggest beneficiaries of CRSs. More than feeling happy of being heard, the participants in the CRS programmes feel empowered as their opinions are considered important. For example, at Jana Dhwani CRS, the official who takes part in phone-in programme is obligated to act on the civic issues that the listeners raise during the programme. The official concerned is bound to act as the CRS periodically enquires with the official about the action taken on the issue(s) raised by the listener(s). Thus, the listeners also feel that their voice is not lost. A listener of Radio Kotagiri (RK) felt happy that when she spoke on RK, as her voice had an impact:

I had spoken on RK about the problems we faced, especially about water supply. The Panchayat (local democratic body) president heard my problems on radio and made sure that our area got water supply. Also, I feel that we are all united after listening to

RK, and we are able to support each other. This is because, when we voice our concerns on radio, they are the concerns of all of us (Kamala, personal communication, May 20, 2018).

Another dimension of the aspect of listening to others on CRS is that listeners could empathise with the voices they hear on radio. For women, especially, this is important as they can relate to the issues/problems faced by other women. At times, when some are not able to voice their opinion, listening to a similar opinion expressed by others can be heartening. A listener from Radio Charminar said: “They spoke about water problem on radio. There is no tube well here. It is a big problem here. I felt happy when they discussed this issue” (Vathi, personal communication, May 31, 2018).

Unlike other conventional media, including state owned All India Radio, community radio thrives on community participation. Browne (2012, p. 155) in his study presents three categories of community: ‘Community as participant; community as audience; and staff and volunteers as community.’ Indeed this seems to be an apt explanation of the word ‘community’ in a community radio, at a time when there is still ambiguity about the concept of community. The Information and Broadcasting Ministry guidelines specifically state that a CRS must have locally produced content with active participation of volunteers from the community (Policy Guidelines, n.d.). This in fact is the strength of most community radios in India.

Radio Mattoli, for example, has an active group of volunteers from among its tribal audience who are trained to produce programmes that appeal to their community. Over 60 per cent of the programmes at Radio Mattoli are produced by the volunteers (Justin, personal communication, April 25, 2018). This is the case even with other CRSs. More importantly, many of the listeners in the FGDs across CRSs that the researcher spoke to referred to the CRS as ‘our radio’. In other words, they felt that the radio belonged to them and them to the radio. Speaking about Jana Dhvani CRS, a listener said: “The name Jana Dhvani (people’s voice) really suits as it is a people’s radio. It is a platform to recognise local talent” (Shivappa, personal communication, April 21, 2018). Several others from the same FGD said that this radio was an “additional member of their family” (Ravi, personal communication,

April 21, 2018) and that this radio was a “blessing to us” (Venkatesh, personal communication, April 21, 2018).

Such expressions confirm that CRSs in the Indian context have been quite successful in not only making the target groups actively involved in programme development, but also make them own up the CRS. A listener from Jana Dhwani also said that “all of us can sing on this radio” (Shivappa, personal communication, April 21, 2018). What this suggests is that all are allowed to take part responsibly in the functioning of the CRS. While talent is appreciated, talent alone need not be the criterion for taking part in a CRS programme. Anyone from the community who would like to take part in a CRS programme is generally given space. “While celebrities don commercial FMs, community radio accommodates even the least in society” (Jayaprakash Ekkur, personal communication, May 25, 2018). This has truly enabled a CRS to be a highly democratic medium.

Agenda Setting by CRS

The CRSs that are evaluated in this study definitely set agenda for people to consider and talk about. However, the difference is that the agenda is not so much set by the station as by the community itself. The steady set of volunteers and stakeholders of the CRS discuss and debate as to what issues they must focus and how they must present them on radio.

Since the reach of a CRS is limited to 15-20 kilometres, issues that affect the community within the reach are taken up and given focus by most CRSs. For example, at Radio Mattoli, the community (tribals) faces conflict with wild animals. Many lives have been lost in this conflict. Hence, Radio Mattoli has made this as an agenda for people to think and debate so that the community takes precautions not to come in conflict with the wild life and this has had a significant effect. Similarly, another flagship programme at Radio Mattoli called *Grama Mattoli* (focusing on village issues) which broadcasts discussions between village heads and government officials has done a lot of good to the people in nearby villages. The station has covered over 25 villages and helped people to better their lives (Sebastian Puthen Varghese, personal communication, April 22, 2018).

It is also important to note that certain CRSs focus on sensitive issues to make people to rise above narrow domestic walls. For example, Radio Sarang (RS) is situated in Mangalore, a

highly communally sensitive city in Karnataka. This sensitive issue has been taken seriously at the station as it broadcasts programmes that cater to all religious communities. As a listener of RS said, “RS is an answer to the communal problem that this city is facing. Every religion is given its due space here” (Jayaprakash Ekkur, personal communication, May 25, 2018). Other listeners too felt that listeners of various religious communities bond well by listening to RS.

The weekly phone-in programme of Jana Dhvani CRS called *Setuve* (Bridge) sets the agenda for officials to act. The listeners raise important issues that concern them and make the officials who participate in the programme to act. At Radio Sarang CRS, an important daily live phone-in programme called *Jana Dhvani* (people’s voice) takes up an issue for the day for discussion and debate. Listeners are invited to speak and take part. The issues are generally local and those which affect the life of local communities. Listeners take active part in carrying this agenda forward.

Interestingly, it is a fact that listeners who actively take part in CRS programmes, those voicing their opinion and even those who just speak on radio, set an agenda for themselves without their knowledge. A listener from community Radio Sarang explained this quite forthrightly:

Since I voice my opinion and am a regular participant in various programmes of Radio Sarang, I need to watch out how I behave in public. I cannot set a high moral ground on radio and act contradictorily. There is an increased responsibility on me to become a responsible citizen (Sreepathi Kalambady, personal communication, May 25, 2018).

This is an important insight from an active listener of a CRS, a fact that has been emphasised by several others. It can be said quite affirmatively that those who spend relatively longer duration listening to a CRS not only become informed citizens but responsible human beings.

Conclusion

The concept of public sphere as given by Habermas has been critiqued as a space dominated by the powerful and the dominant (Hohendahl, 1989, 1995; Stevenson, 1993-94). This trend continues even in conventional media where the voice of ordinary masses is seldom heard.

It is here that CRSs have the potential to create 'community based public spheres' (Gaynor & O'Brien, 2011 p. 438).

This study confirms that community radios do create and provide space for those who otherwise are not able to find space to express themselves. The focus group discussions that were held for the purpose of this study have highlighted three major potentials of CRSs: i. a CRS is able to gather diverse voices of the ordinary masses, giving them a 'voice'. ii. The focus of a CRS is major local issues. Hence, it is able to make a considerable difference as regards local civic issues. iii. It is perhaps the only medium which is truly democratic in its approach, in that, local community assumes unofficial ownership and thus is able to set local-based agenda for discussion and debate and influence officials to act.

In fact CRSs are able to create a community based public sphere for people to discuss and debate issues important and relevant for them. While the state-owned radio in India, in most parts, is a one-way communication medium, CRSs stand out as two-way communication channels wherein people can participate and express themselves on community issues and concerns. Further, CRSs have built a space for themselves in the contemporary chaotic cluttered world of mass media channels.

What this study has also revealed is that CRSs are bringing in a silent revolution in their jurisdictional areas by enabling people to take part in the democratic process by expressing their views on matters that concern their communities. Strengthening the voice of those in the periphery is a functional responsibility of any true democracy. And this responsibility is being fulfilled by CRSs. All five CRSs in this study are setting a positive agenda for people to be active participants in tackling local issues. It has been rightly pointed out that a community radio is more about community and less about radio (Gaynor & O'Brien, 2011). When a CRS awakens and strengthens its community, it fulfils its existential potential.

Despite several limitations, CRSs are playing a positive role for democracy in India. At a time when some sections of Indian media are accused of being partisan and ready to compromise on core values for money ("Media on sale", 2018), the rise of alternate media like community radio definitely augurs well for Indian democracy.

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