

BY Ashish Sen, Director, VOICES, Bangalore, India,

WHOSE VOICE IS IT ANYWAY ?

*“We can’t use government radio. It is used as a tool for propaganda. They will go to a village and say that they have given so many buffaloes to this village, we have given so much land to this village...that kind of radio will not allow poor women to discuss their own problems and issues....” (Metalukunta Susilamma – from Pastapur village in Andhra Pradesh) **

*“ You people often come to shoot work on the Gene Bank in our village. But there are seasons when it is impossible to shoot and you are not able to come . Maybe we can do our own recording and give it to you .” (Laxamma ,from Pastapur)**

*“ We want people outside to know about issues that concern us .” (Ipappally Malamma from Pastapur)**

*“My experience in Namma Dhwani (Our VOICES) community audio production /radio is huge . Because of this we are reaching 22 villages and thousands of villages. We can narrowcast programmes on agriculture, medicine and educational programmes.....” (Balu , Boodikote village, Karnataka)**

*“ The children come in their free time from nearby villages, they give suggestions and make their own programmes... we need these kind (community audio production centres) of centres all around the country (Amresh , Hunkaldurga village,Karnataka) **

These are just a few of the millions of underprivileged voices from rural India where more than 60 per cent of the country’s population resides . On the eve of the 75th anniversary of media broadcasting in the country (July 23rd will mark the occasion) it is worth reflecting whether their voices remain on the periphery , leave alone the centre of mainstream media . In many ways , this begets a larger scrutiny of the relationship between media and development . While there are no easy answers , the questions are evident .

The Indian media experience , represents a gallery of stark contrasts . Contrasting the governments’ efforts to bridge the digital divide and take information technology to the masses , the colonial and fossilized Indian Telegraph Act of 1885 continues to hold sway over the broadcasting arena . On the one hand , the Supreme Court Judgement of 1995 has endorsed that “airwaves are public property.” However , in the practical realm, lines between public and privately remain conveniently blurred . While Private Radio has made an entry into the Indian broadcast arena , community radio remains to find legitimacy by the law of the land

In many ways , the traditions of the Indian media fall between these two pendulum ends. In his essay on the Great Indian Media Bazaar , noted journalist and editor , Frontline , magazine , N Ram has outlined the role of two media traditions in the country's democratic process : An older tradition of a diverse , pluralistic and relatively independent press which has its roots in the Indian independence movement ; a broadcasting tradition which has been vulnerable to manipulation and which began with the appearance of radio as a prop of the British colonial state , The last two decades of the 20 th century saw the advent of private media flowering – especially in the broadcast and cyber media arena – under the umbrella of globalisation and liberalization .

Underlying these media traditions has been the growth of small autonomous media outfits of subaltern groups and their organizations . – groups and organizations to which the voices of Susilamma, Laxmanna, Ippapally, Balu and Amresh belong . These initiatives , while small in number , demonstrate the transformative power of community and participatory media. Unfortunately , in many cases, they remain isolated initiatives struggling to receive legitimacy and recognition from the State.

There is no doubt that in terms of reach and access , India's print and broadcast media manifests - very substantially - the characteristics of mass media . “ While newspapers elsewhere struggle to hold readers, Indian daily circulation has increased by close to 500 per cent in 20 years. Two -all India - readership surveys conducted in 1999-2000, estimate that the press as a whole reaches between something 200 and 240 million persons . Translated in terms of percentages this means that about 60 per cent of urban Indians and twenty five per cent of rural Indians read print media regularly . Radio's reach is even more comprehensive covering about 90 per cent of the country . The nineties saw a surge in broadcast and cyber media with a mushrooming of satellite television channels and internet channels .

But , notwithstanding this growth in terms of reach and proliferation , media's impact on development and governance remains , at best , tenuous . In fact, there would appear to remain a substantial gap between potential and experience .

Paradoxically , in terms of need , the role of media in bridging the development gap is more keenly felt today than ever before . The nineties, especially in the socio –economic context , yields a disquieting picture . Globalization's impact on the poverty map leaves much to be desired . Even the World Bank statistics point to a rise in the number of poor , with “40 million people” in India having joined their ranks during the nineties .

Noted journalist P Sainath ,in his article , the Age of Inequality , punctuates this point : “There was no decline at all in the all India incidence of poverty between 1990 and 1997. The absolute number of poor went up by almost 70 million. Importantly, the incidence of poverty rose in the 1990s in a phase where the GDP growth had picked up . The poor have not gained from the reforms. . .”

Sainath goes on to articulate that , “ India also enters the ‘millenium’ with hundreds of millions of illiterates. Again , spending on education in India is less than 4 per cent of

GDP . Far less than the 6 per cent that the government itself says is the minimum required . ” In terms of quality of life the picture is far from rosy . “New nutritional data at the all India level show that average calorie intake declined steadily in both rural and urban areas between 1973 and 1994. ”

The threat of political conflict, communalism and terrorism has palpably impacted the notion of a democratic nation state . If constitutional goals remain outside the pale of many Indians, what is even more disturbing is that some its tenets seem to be glaringly flouted today.

The media’s response to these trends has been a mixed bag : A study conducted by the Centre for Development and Learning , Bangalore in 2000 focused on media coverage of development issues in newspapers. The data was based on coverage spread over the period of one year . It noted that if “development news can be defined as ‘information that has social consequence ,’” priorities were startling . For instance , in the Times of India (one of the largest dailies in the country), 4 % of a total of 24 pages was devoted to development news . This percentage proved to be more or less representative in terms of coverage in many other dailies .

Media’s relationship with governance is equally tenuous . Media coverage of the recent communal strife in Gujarat has , in the main , been positive . But disparities do exist . As Sharma points out , “ both media and governance in India suffer from serious problems, which at times, even feed into each other. Suspension of civil liberties , excessive miniaturization, communal assertions and homogenizing tendencies have too often spelled doom for Indian democracy . In this context ,it is imperative that media becomes more sensitive on issues of democratic governance , people’s struggle against social injustice, and so on

This, however , is only part of the picture . If the media is to effectively mirror society, then “the role of people’s organizations , social movements, voluntary organizations and other civil society formations in monitoring the functioning of the media and making it more people centered is critical.” It is here, that the rub comes in .

Unlike the government or political parties and sections of the corporate sector who have developed the own press and media channels , voluntary organizations , social groups and activists, have not been able to develop their own press and television channels in a sustained manner . There exceptions that exist are usually journals/newsletters of development organizations which cannot in terms of size or scope make a sustained dent at the macro level . What is required is an active tradition of community/peoples media .

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 an

appraisal not only of processes in the existing media traditions , but also widening the scope and legitimacy of media democratization in the country .

2. The two tiers of public (government) and private media are already a legitimate part of media processes in the country . However , a third tier – that of community media – needs to be legitimized . A community media tradition has, unfortunately, not been firmly rooted in the Indian landscape . This , in turn, has handicapped the growth of a potentially powerful media player in social change . Community media and broadcasting 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 licenses 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 .

While civil society needs to get its act together , the crux of the problem in several instances lies clearly with an intransigent State . In areas like Community Radio, despite support from civil society quarters, the government has refrained from pursuing due legal measures to endorse legitimacy.

3. Proponents of community media have , for long , advocated legitimacy of community broadcasting (i.e. community radio) as a Rights issues . In the current socio-economic climate there is need to revise this approach .Rights need to be viewed within the development paradigm . The justification for this approach should not be viewed in pragmatic terms so much as from the teeth and legitimacy that this would give to any Right . After all, basic rights stem from basic needs . Consequently, the demand for community radio /broadcasting legitimacy would be strengthened by rooting it in the fact that the denial of information aggravates the poverty gap.

THE ROLE OF VOICES

As a development communications NGO that is committed to media democratization , the need to bridge the gap between the information rich and the information poor is at the core of our activities . We continue to be guided by our belief that the denial of information aggravates the poverty gap . However , our recent experiences have confirmed that access alone does not warrant participation . Moreover, access and inclusion are not necessarily sides of the same coin . Inclusion that brings with it participation is dependent not only on access, but also on equity .

VOICES has advocated the cause of community radio in particular and community media in general – especially for marginalized and less privileged communities - since 1996 . Over the years we have found that our advocacy initiatives need to be strengthened by forging ground level partnerships . People with disabilities, poor farmer groups , citizens groups , women and children comprise some of our core constituencies . Experiences at the ground level provide the basis for our advocacy work which includes consultations , capacity building initiatives and information dissemination on current issues in communication by the publication of the VOICES for Change Journal triennially . More information about our work is available at our website : www.voicesforall.org .

VOICES AND COMMUNITY RADIO

VOICES interventions in the community radio advocacy began in the mid nineties . However , we soon realized that if advocacy interventions were to be rooted in terra firma , they needed to be linked to ground level initiatives . In 2000 we forged a partnership with the poor farmer community at Boodikote village in the rural areas of Kolar District, Karnataka ,in partnership with a well known grass roots level NGO - MYRADA . The partnership's experience , in many ways underpins and sharpens the focus of our advocacy work . Today , the community at Boodikote have their own audio production centre (NAMMA DHWANI- OUR VOICES) which been operationalised with support from UNESCO . The management and ownership of the centre rests entirely with the community members of the village , with representatives from MYRADA and VOICES playing an advisory role . The NAMMA DHWANI management committee substantially comprises women from Self Help Groups .Their objective is clear : Community Broadcasting which is dedicated to producing and disseminating local information related to education , health and income generation . NAMMA DHWANI applied for a license to broadcast last year .In the absence of any response from the Government , the NAMMA DHWANI audio production centre focuses its energies on narrowcasting .

Complementing its interventions at NAMMA DHWANI , VOICES has also harnessed its energies on advocacy work through consultations , community to community capacity building and action research . These have called for and consequently resulted in several networking efforts that have, in turn warranted communication mechanisms like e-mail groups, a South Asian community media website etc.

In late 2001 , VOICES was commissioned by AMARC to develop the India Country Strategy Paper for Community Radio . The work in many ways, captures the current scenario for community radio legitimacy in the country. A synopsis is described below :

VOICES AND INDIA COMMUNITY RADIO COUNTRY STRATEGY PAPER

The case for Community Radio in India takes place at a time when the poverty scenario in the country has deepened . World Bank figures confirm that there are more than 40 million Indians who live below the poverty line . Literacy figures remain disturbing . According to World Bank figures , "From 1991 to 1997 , the overall literacy rate increased 52 per cent to 64 per cent, rising from 64 per cent to 73 per cent for males , and from 39 per cent to 50 per cent for females."

Many arguments for community radio rest their case on Article 19 of the Indian Constitution . Article 19 upholds the Right to Communicate "without interference and to seek , receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

However , in the current context ,community radio's relevance assumes additional and critical significance in the context of the Right to Information movement in the country . Five states in the country already have the act in place underscoring the recognition that information and its access is a critical requisite if the gap between the rich and the poor

is to be bridged . Community media , especially community radio , could provide a vital bridge in such a development paradigm .

THE LAW AND COMMUNITY RADIO

Despite the Supreme Court judgement , radio broadcasting continues to be governed by the Telegraph Act of 1885 which gives the Government of India exclusive rights for the establishment and working of telegraphy using electro – magnetic waves . Currently , the proposed communication Convergence bill is before the Indian parliament . If passed , it would create a single statutory authority , the Communications Commission of India , “ to facilitate and regulate all matters relating to carriage and content of communications.” However, in terms of specifics there seems very little in it for community radio . However the bill “would be applicable to network infrastructure facilities, network services, application services and content application services . The definition of “application service” includes additional services added at a later date. According to the Union Law Minister, Arun Jaitley, the provision was made to allow the incorporation of new technologies and service; it is possible that community radio (as an application service) could fit into this area.

Interestingly , the Cable Television Networks Regulation Act of 1995 poses no obstacles for cable operators to make FM audio programmes available as part of their regular transmissions. Advocacy groups have, to some extent , moved towards this direction.

ADVOCACY EFFORTS

The case for Community Radio legitimacy in the country saw a substantial advocacy effort with the Bangalore Declaration of 1996. The declaration which was ratified by media experts across the country at a consultation organized by VOICES (a development communications NGO based in Bangalore) urged the government to endorse community radio by legislation . It justified its concern by reiterating the Supreme Court Judgement of 1995 which declared that “Airwaves are public property.”

Five years later the climate had changed , but unfortunately not for the better . While the road to private radio had begun to take shape , there was no policy change as far as community radio was concerned .

Against this backdrop , a South Asian consultation on community radio in Hyderabad organized by VOICES in partnership with the Sarojini Naidu school of Culture and Communications 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.”

GYAN VANI – EDUCATIONAL RADIO

Shortly afterwards, the Indira Gandhi National Open University, based in New Delhi, 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. VOICES is a part of Gyan Vani's steering committee.

Operational in about five centers since November 2001, Gyan Vani, notwithstanding its education-centric character, represented a small opening in New Delhi's door. While this brought some cheer 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 be announced very soon. Unfortunately, "mums" been the word ever since. The Convergence bill which was scheduled to be ratified during the Budget session proposes various mechanisms to bridge digital divides but unfortunately does not discuss Community Radio. Applications for licenses to broadcast from communities have been, in the main, forced to gather dust on the shelves.

So, the question that confronts us today is: how long will community voices wait to be heard?

GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY RADIO

Until 2001, All India Radio was the only radio operator in the country. Its coverage is massive: 89.51 per cent of India's geographic area and 98.82 per cent of the population. AIR operates at the national, regional, and local levels. Its vast apparatus has often been trotted out to project the official view that there are existing spaces which need to be adequately exploited. However, this view would not only appear to have run out of steam, but also not taken cognizance of ground level realities.

All India Radio and Gyan Vani networks may be impressive but do not provide active community access across the country. While the local radio stations (LRS) were set up to serve the needs of the local community there would appear to have been a marked divide between precept and practice. The first Director of the AIR local radio station in Nagercoil, Mr K Anjaneyulu pointed out that "A local station serves a small area. Its aim should be to reach into the heart of the community it is expected to serve. In short, local radio should identify itself so completely with the interest of its local population that the heart of the people beats in every pulse of the programme it broadcasts." If this was an unrealistic promise, the expectation which it generated was also belied. Locally originating programmes have, very often, not *led* the stations' broadcast services. In fact the reverse has often been true with surveys indicating an increase in relayed programmes from regional/national services.

Moreover, the LRS network, impressive as it may be in terms of size, does not cover substantial parts of the country. Two examples of Community Radio/Audio initiatives in the country are situated in areas which are outside the pale of the LRS network.

Boodikote village in Kolar district, where the Namma Dhwani (Our VOICES) community audio initiative is based, is situated on the Karnataka –Andhra Pradesh border. Not surprisingly, the community speak a mix of Telegu – Kannada. However, the nearest AIR station is Bangalore some 95 kms away. It hardly needs stressing that AIR Bangalore broadcasts cannot serve the needs of the Boodikote community or even speak the same language.

Despite this, strategic interventions between AIR and the Boodikote community have resulted in community specific programmes being produced and broadcast from time to time. These, however, cannot provide the requisite light at the end of the tunnel. A half an hour community based programme once a week on AM reception may provide incentives, but is a far cry from community broadcasting.

Like AIR, Gyan Vani/educational radio has limitations related to scope and size. Even when its 70 proposed centers are operational, broadcasting will be restricted to selected urban parts of the country

PRIVATE BROADCASTERS

Currently, 5 private FM stations are on air – the result of a process unleashed as early as 1994 when the government of India decided to lease time to private companies on AIR FM frequencies. The path towards private radio articulated itself more clearly in 1999 when the government of India announced a framework under which licenses to operate fully independent FM radio stations in selected urban areas would be granted to private radio stations. “With licenses going to the highest bidders there has been a predictable ownership concentration of new radio operations within established print and TV commercial media houses.

By agreement private broadcasters are allowed programming related to ‘social development, but restricted from broadcasting news or current affairs.

So where do we go from here ?

VOICES FROM THE COMMUNITY FIELD/GROUND LEVEL INITIATIVES

INNER VOICES

“We talk about Samma and Sajja . (some minor grains) . We always talk about marginalized food grains, marginalized people, marginalized language, Marginalized issues . This does not interest the mainstream radio. ” (Pushpalata from Pastapur)

“ We can’t accept government radio. ...that kind of radio will not allow poor women to discuss their own problems and issues . Our radio will help in our analysis of our experiences and our problems.” (Metlakunta Susilamma)

“We want people outside to know about issues that concern us.” (Ippally Mallamma)

“ A village girl says – Sir , I have given programmes in this centre. Now I am writing a story on child marriage-.here we can see the social responsibility of the child who wants to share her feeling on this platform .” (Amresh)

Despite seeming government intransigence ground level initiatives by a few communities make a strong case for community radio . While their approaches may be different , there are underlying similarities which reiterate the primacy of community voices . These are briefly discussed below :

1. CHALO HO GAON MEIN

(a Partnership between the National Foundation of India, Alternative for India Development and Manthan Media Collective, Ranchi .)

Target Group: 45 villages from Lesliemunj and Panki divisions

Partners: National Foundation for India (NFI), New Delhi; Alternative for India Development (Lesliemunj Section); and Manthan Media Collective, Ranchi

Focus: Empowerment of communities with special emphasis on women

Media: Local AIR FM station at Daltongunj (the district headquarters)

- AID selected one project co-ordinator and each community volunteer was asked to identify 3 villages they could **Place:** Palamau District of Jharkhand represent keeping in mind geographic proximity to their native villages.

- At the workshops, the volunteers were acquainted with the techniques of audio presentation and production

- NFI requested for a 30 minutes slot on sundays at 7.20pm on AIR Daltongunj to be allotted to AID on commercial terms for the community participatory programme ‘Chala Ho Gaon Mein’ from August 2001, and the first community radio programme of Daltongunj went on air on August 9th.

2. NAMMA DHWANI (OUR VOICES)

(Namma Dhvani is a partnership between the Boodikote community in Kolar district , MYRADA (an NGO committed to Integrated development) and VOICES (a development communications NGO) .

NAMMA DHWANI has been operational for two years and has a community audio production centre which started in September 2001 . Computers were introduced into Namma Dhvani in April 2002 with a view to develop the project into a community information centre with web broadcasting playing a critical role .

Place: Kolar District of Karnataka

Target Group: Communities living in and around Boodikote sector in Kolar . In the Boodikote Sector, 1930 families live below the poverty line. Literacy levels are abysmally low, particularly among women

Partners: MYRADA, Kamasamudra and VOICES, Bangalore with technical support from AIR, Bangalore

Objective : Develop community audio production and broadcasting skills using audio and net with a view to ultimately develop NAMMA DHWANI into a full fledged community media information and broadcasting centre .

Focus: Generate awareness about the concept of audio as means of communication and empowerment.

Media: AIR MW station at Bangalore. Narrowcasting and Weekly Market Broadcasts using the Loudspeaker.

- Awareness and capacity building for making radio programmes marked the first stage of the project. This was done through a series of workshops starting with a modest exploratory two-day effort in April-May 2000 at MYRADA's training centre in Kolar.
 - By the end of six months the community were producing programmes with support from AIR , many of which were broadcast over AIR FM .
 - The Community Audio Production Centre '*Namma Dhwani Samudayik Doorsampark Matu Mahiti Kendra*' which was supported by UNESCO in Boodikote, Kolar was inaugurated on September 21st, 2001. The Centre is managed by two members from the community , supported by six community volunteers .
- Apart from periodic broadcasts over AIR , weekly community programmes are narrow cast at community centers .Since January 2002, weekly market broadcast/narrowcast using loudspeakers have been taken place .The mandi (market) takes place next to the production centre .

3. KUNJAL PACHAEE KUTCH JI (The story of the Saras Crane)

The project which strengthens community participation in radio is a partnership between Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan and the Dhrishti Media Collective.

Place: Kutch district of Gujarat

Target Group: Women in Kutch villages

Partners: Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan, Bhuj and Drishti Media Collective, Ahmedabad

Focus: Empowerment of women for Panchayat functions

Media: AIR MW station at Bhuj

In the first year the following specific gender related issues were raised in the serial:

- Women's leadership and governance
- A girl's right to education
- Female foeticide
- harassment of brides for dowry
- Unnatural deaths and suicides of women at their in-laws
- Pressure on women to produce boys
- Maternal mortality and disregard for mother's health

KMVS plans to make this into a regular feature so that the Ujjas team's work becomes a part of the co-ordinated effort of KMVS towards integrated development of Kutch both as a region and as a cultural identity.

4. PASTAPUR COMMUNITY MEDIA CENTRE

This is a partnership between the Deccan Development Society Pastapur , and Women speak to Women programme of UNESCO.

Pastapur , is a dusty three hours bus ride from Hyderabad . Here , seven Dalit women drive a community media centre which emphasizes both video and audio work . The details of their work and project is outlined below :

Place: Zaheerabad area in Medak District of Andhra Pradesh

Owners and Audiences: 100 Dalit women's groups (sangams) consisting of nearly 4000 members in 75 villages of Medak district

Partners: The Deccan Development Society, Pastapur, Women Speak to Women programme of UNESCO.

Focus: Participatory development and empowerment of women.

Media: FM station designed to work on audiocassette technology. It has a 100 watts transmitter, which can reach a radius of 30 kms. - DDS was identified as a suitable partner for UNESCO's "Women Speak to Women" project and received part funding from UNESCO, for the building, acoustics treatment, all equipment including recorders, mixers, microphones, cables, installation etc. The building has three octagonal shaped blocks consisting of the studio, transmitting/control room, the dubbing section, the director's cabin and the reception area.

- The Pastapur Women's radio, in spite of its long time readiness to go on air, has not received a community-broadcasting license from the Central government which is still finalising the regulations of the new broadcasting legislation. In the meantime, the studio facilities are being used to produce audiocassettes. They already have over 200 hours of recorded programmes, some of which are being edited into one-hour magazine modules. In October 2001 , a community media centre was inaugurated Pastapur.

CONCLUDING REMARKS :

In many ways, these are examples of community voices waiting to be heard.

The crucial question , however , is : *Is* New Delhi listening ? And , if so , why has it refrained from granting licenses for community broadcasting ?

To a substantial extent , the reason lies in the fact that the movement for community radio has not captured the dynamics of a mass campaign .

For a tangible dent to be made in the official wall of resistance, more amplification is required . This, in turn, demands support of other voices and other stakeholders . In order for this to gain momentum, these initiatives also need to be strategically located within a development paradigm and not merely articulate a rights approach .

More detailed discussions related to ownership, management and sustainability need to be evolved and demonstrated . This demands strategic networking which goes beyond the pale of the converted . Critical engagement with stakeholders from all sections of society – government , academia , corporate sector , ngos and , importantly, communities

need to be developed and rooted in terra firma . As yet, community radio remains outside the pale of academic media pedagogy .

Community Media /Radio has- in many ways - the potential to realize Gandhi's wisdom that Radio is Shakti . But this is dependent – *in many ways* – if the periphery of current Indian media broadcasting becomes its centre .

* These are voices of individuals who practise community radio (narrow casting) at Pastapur and Boodikote . Their efforts are more substantially discussed in the section on Ground level initiatives.

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