



STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY RADIO IN INDIA

A NATIONAL CONSULTATION

New Delhi :: April 11-12, 2017

Organised by:



With support from:



Working Paper

INCLUSIVITY, EQUITY & DIVERSITY

By

Ashish Sen, Pinky Chandran, Kanchan K. Malik, Arti Jaiman, Radha Shukla

Introduction

Over the past decade, there have been several examples from community radio stations across the country that underscore the transformative role that community radio can and does play in matters of inclusion, diversity and promoting the rights and participation of the marginalized. Given that the foundation of community radios is built on the principles of access, participation and the ability to represent one's voice, this platform offers ample opportunities to challenge patriarchy, sexist and heterosexist, homophobic nature of popular narratives, as well as exclusionary practices built on race and class and stereotypes or caricatures of those who are discriminated on the basis of caste, class, gender, age, profession, sexuality, place, among others. Community radios provide people space to communicate, dialogue and debate, and enable them to define their identity by using their voice. The opportunities for inclusion created by this sector promote a sense of shared cultures and values, and also recognises the rights of vulnerable and marginalised people. These also facilitate networking with social movements, organisations and other communities and strengthen processes of solidarity.

Self-evaluation tools such as the Community Radio Continuous Improvement Toolkit, the Self-Assessment Toolkit and the Community Radio Self-Assessment Guide have emerged as useful mechanisms to gauge and assess levels of inclusiveness. Peer group sensitization programmes, initiatives like the Community Learning Programme of CEMCA and other agencies have also helped to highlight the importance of inclusion. These efforts are especially useful in terms of setting standards for participation. They also need to be documented and disseminated widely in the public space. If these efforts are to go to scale, they need to be acknowledged not just in the public space but also in the policy guidelines. Like the examples of Community Radio legislation in countries such as South Africa, Australia, and Canada, the policy guidelines in India should make explicit its emphasis on inclusion and promoting the participation of the marginalised.

Participation is a layered phenomenon. It encompasses aspects of access, inclusion and diversity. All three components are critical for its effectiveness. Any assessment of participation in community radio therefore warrants an investigation into the interplay

of both the social and the technological. We need to question not only who is participating but also how and to what extent. This paper seeks to revisit the potential of Community Radio as a sector to address Inclusivity, Equity and Diversity in programming, decision making, and ownership, deliberate on current limitations and challenges and how these can be resolved. These need to be reviewed not just in the context of the 2006 guidelines but also in relation to some of the good practices that community radio stations have demonstrated across the world. At the same time, it seeks to underline not just the letter, but also the spirit of the 2006 guidelines and highlight some of the intrinsic characteristics that are common to community radio across the world.

Community Radio (CR) and Marginalisation: Participation of Minority Groups

Marginalisation is a process of being accorded lesser importance, pushed down, excluded or rendered invisible. It is a social process and largely an outcome of political and intellectual domination. For the context of this report, we look at marginalisation from the lens of discrimination (implicit and explicit), misrepresentation, inequalities (political, social, economic, cultural), information poverty, access to and the lack of resources, lived experiences, practices, representation and voice in popular media.

The Community Radio Policy Guidelines 2006 state that:

“i)The programmes should be of immediate relevance to the community. The emphasis should be on developmental, agricultural, health, educational, environmental, social welfare, community development and cultural programmes. The programming should reflect the special interests and needs of the local community. ii) At least 50% of content shall be generated with the participation of the local community, for which the station has been set up. iii) Programmes should preferably be in the local language and dialect(s)”

The roots of the 2006 policy guidelines hark back to the landmark 1995 Supreme Court Judgement which stated that Airwaves are public property to be used for public good. They were inspired by recommendations of the Bangalore Declaration (1996) and the Pastapur Initiative (2000) which urged that “priority should 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 based on the fact that the least developed regions and communities of the country are also least served by media.”

What has been the sector’s achievement in this context? While spectrum saturation handicaps issuing of community radio licenses in urban cities, the rural landscape paints a sharply contrasting picture. How can this be redressed? With over 200 community radio stations in the country today, how many stations are exclusively run by marginalised communities no stations that are exclusively run by marginalised communities like the people with disabilities or tribal groups? Paradoxically, will not community radio stations that are exclusively run by marginalized communities run the risk of being exclusionary themselves? These are some of the questions which the paper seeks to explore.

Moreover, while there are many sub-topics within the minority groups, this paper focuses on two important themes in community radio from the diversity point of view - Gender and Identity, and Caste, drawing in from the broader framework of participation in production, management and ownership.

The paper also outlines some of the other thematic components necessary to effectively straddle challenges of inclusion and diversity, namely, Geography, Emergency, and Social Movements.

CR and Issues of Identity

CR and Gender: When one speaks about Community Radio and Gender, it's not always about women. For the purpose of our report, we are looking at gender as a complex phenomenon with intricate interconnections and relationships. And there is a need to accelerate the emphasis on active participation of marginalized groups in driving the production and management of programmes. Most importantly in areas where women have been subjugated and prevented from speaking up, to recognising gender diverse individuals and communities, from breaking gender bias and questioning roles to speaking about sexuality and reproductive rights, the transformative power of the radio is evident. Anecdotal evidence has shown that in stations where women are in leadership positions, more women come forward to work or volunteer with the station.

In areas where the entire population harbours a feeling of injustice and exclusion, community radio has made a deep impact. A community radio station in North India has been able to get women on board, even though there was resistance at the start. The credibility, trust, security and comfort of working in a community sensitive environment led to their participation. Initially the process was slow, but it has gathered momentum over the years. Similarly, many urban community radio stations have been consciously reaching out to gender diverse communities, opening up different avenues for acceptance and recognition of identities.

CR and Marginality: Community Radios must branch out both to those without a voice and to those with alternative viewpoints. Identification of communities such as people with disabilities, People living with HIV, or occupation based communities like women in sex work and waste pickers, municipal waste workers that are often discriminated or made invisible need urgent attention in bringing to fore their voices to aid policy changes within the state and the country. Other communities such as garment workers, domestic workers, which are often misrepresented within the employer-employee relationship, or communities such as the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual + (LGBTQIA+), and Dalits need platforms for counter narratives of their identities, interests, issues, and culture.

There is a need for affirmative action within the CR sector if we are to truly see representation and for strengthening marginalized voices. Cases in point include Dalit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual + (LGBTQIA+), tribal, minority, and disability related voices.

There are stations that say they are working with tribal groups, with only one or not a single community reporter from the community. In order to ensure that CRs avoid tokenism either we need to create support structures within the policy that have an affirmative action principle such that the overall numbers of CR are able to show this diversity in ownership and content OR within the self-regulation ethical guidelines the affirmative action principle is emphasized.

Ideas of social justice are necessarily adversarial to the profit motive of corporations. In the current capitalist environment this pits CR working on rights issues directly in harm's way. It is important to create some form of legal (linked to other work being done with regard to journalists' protection) and other protection measures to enable CR stations to raise critical issues of social justice and inequity and not practice self-censorship. This also requires a greater and more meaningful networking and solidarity building with other movements including RTI, environment and forest rights, land rights and LGBTQ movements

CR and Caste:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech of "talking back," that is no mere gesture of empty words; that is the expression of our movement from object to subject - the liberated voice - bell hooks

Given that community radios are hyper local, and radio reporters are themselves part of the listening community, one of the pitfalls that stations are always in danger of falling into is replicating dominant caste dynamics at the station. It is not necessarily intended, but it is interesting to witness how over a period of time a particular caste tends to become dominant in the CR team, unless corrective steps are taken consciously.

First-hand accounts from those who manage community radio stations have affirmed that despite no effort in that direction, reporters of a particular caste tend to join, and then move ahead. Why has this happened? It is not as if any preference was given to a particular caste at the time of hiring. In fact, a lot of hiring at CR stations is quite organic, through word of mouth, through people finding out about the radio station, recognizing it as a space for learning, and taking the initiative to come and work at the station despite not being paid, or being paid a small stipend meant only to cover travel cost. It takes a while to understand how the dynamics work.

Dominant caste groups typically have access to more resources. In the case of locals, it is land, and hence the family has access to unearned rental income that gives the young person freedom to explore an unusual career option such as radio without the burden of having to immediately start earning for the family. In the case of migrants, dominant caste groups typically have parents who are earning better than most, who have had access to education, and who have been brought up with the confidence to seek out and grasp new opportunities which members from typically depressed communities hesitate to reach out for.

There is also an unsaid concern about discrimination at the workplace. And then there is the complete absence of minority communities, again a seemingly unspoken acceptance that it is unlikely they would have access to the opportunity to become a broadcaster. How do you break this conundrum? Especially when CR stations have such scarce resources that hiring a large team which can be representative of diversity in the community is a bit of a stretch? How do you create an environment at work where team members are highly sensitized to caste dynamics but have to learn to break out of learned

behaviour and respect each other? How do you “show” listeners that a spectrum of voices is a priority for the station? One can only do it by doing it – by showing it in the sounds we broadcast. When you begin to slice a community to analyse it, there’s gender, caste, religion, economic class, age, disability...each slice ideally needs a voice on radio. How do we do this, with a team of, say, just four or five? Can we build a system of volunteers? Part time anchors? What processes do we put in place so that even in the selection of volunteers this diversity is reflected?

CR - Geography and Emergencies

After a decade of community radio in the country, there is a need to urgently undertake a mapping of community radio stations in the country and focus on efforts that ensure the sector’s representative growth across all regions in the country. The Pastapur Initiative (2000) made the point succinctly in its recommendation when it stressed the need for licenses to be given on a priority basis to applicants and regions who/which were based in remote and far flung areas of the country where access to media is less. However, it still remains to be substantially addressed. Many of these are also relatively deprived regions of the country that security apparatus treat as ‘conflict zones’ thereby denying them a CR license and a right to voice. Opportunities for democratic articulation of voices through processes and means like community radio may obviate the need for violent means of addressing concerns about economic inequities and social justice.

On a parallel plane, there is a need to investigate the relationship between geography, cultural diversity and inclusiveness, and their implications for community radio. This assumes added significance in a country like India where communities reflect not only socio-cultural but also daunting linguistic diversities.

The role of community radio in addressing disaster preparedness and mitigation has proven credentials across the globe. Yet, it has remained on the backburner of policy reform in India. While the Tamil Nadu floods in December 2015 finally enabled the country’s first emergency radio to go on air in Cuddalore, there has been no follow up in

terms of clear policy guidelines which enable emergency based community radio to substantially take roots in the country.

The policy guidelines need to provide clear mechanisms for fast track clearances of community radio applicants in areas vulnerable to natural calamities/disaster. These mechanisms should not be restricted to providing temporary licenses which are usually reactive and provided post disaster. Fast track clearing of license applicants in these regions should be provided so that we do not continue to have experiences like that of stations which had to wait for three to four years for its license to be given. It might also be worthwhile to mention the potential and relevance of mobile transmitters (based on the experiences of countries outside India) in disaster affected areas. In this context the paper appreciates the recent efforts of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting through a policy amendment to include the provision to shifting transmitters during disasters with the permission of the District Magistrate.

Recommendations:

- Even as many questions need to be answered in substantial measure within thematic issues of Inclusivity, Equity and Diversity, an important linkage that cannot be overlooked is that community radio must build associations with social movements. These linkages must move beyond the narrow, myopic views of operating a station within the confines of four walls. Community radios need to amplify the diverse issues, perspectives, and voices from a range of movements. This will in turn reaffirm the right to communication, collectivisation of voices, and create active citizenship. The role of community radio in strengthening movements around issues such as Right to Information, Food Security and Sovereignty, Education, and Disability Rights are just a few cases in point.
- Community radios need to also look at newer forms of cultural diversity, that include lifestyle changes, social equations within peers and representations, art

forms and artistic expressions, public spaces and the new media for forge new networks, build varied connections, assimilate experiences and practices

- The term 'community' is a contested concept and its manifestation on ground is very complex. Efforts must be made by the CR stakeholders to develop a more nuanced understanding of 'community' as heterogeneous and dynamic and be sensitive to the power structures that operate within, making it difficult for everyone to participate equally and for all perspectives to be represented.
- AMARC gender guidelines and other documents related to gender-sensitive programming must be included in all capacity sharing efforts to sensitise the radio station staff, volunteers as well as management about the need for democratic communication and diversity. Internal policies of CR stations must adopt codes and practices that ensure gender equity and inclusion.
- The CR policy must make provisions for pro-active licensing in conflict prone areas and regions under-served by media. Efforts must be made to encourage spaces and opportunities for democratic deliberations and collective action on issues that affect the lives of the communities who are at the receiving end of development.
- There must be provision in the policy for issuing of emergency and mobile community radio licenses to facilitate disaster mitigation, prevention, management, and relief measures.
- The government should provide support for organising capacity building workshops that sensitise CR stations on the principles, processes and practices to encourage Inclusivity, Equity and Diversity.