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Voices of the people: A comprehensive review on community radio in India

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Abstract

The significance of indigenous peoples and their cultures has often been neglected by mainstream media. This lack of engagement with and connection to local communities has led to a growing demand for community-based media. Such media is crucial in amplifying the voices of marginalized groups and fostering a vibrant community. It empowers farming communities by addressing their informational needs through broadcasts in their local languages. Additionally, it plays a key role in socially and politically empowering women by raising awareness about various schemes, thanks to its participatory approach. This paper seeks to explore the impact of community radio's establishment in the digital age on society.

Keywords: Community Radio, women empowerment, agriculture, education

Introduction

Boundaries in human connection and communication have been eliminated as a result of the many changes taking place in the world today. People can now interact globally without geographical or time constraints, and trade across continents is possible. The internet and social media have transformed communication, creating a global village where information, culture, languages, and lifestyles merge. This interconnectedness means rural communities are now part of a larger, interrelated world. Global media has evolved into a dominant force for controlling the masses, increasingly driven by profit motives. As a result, people's voices are frequently marginalized and overlooked. This shift in communication dynamics significantly affects our lives and livelihoods. Controlled media wields substantial influence worldwide, leaving poor rural populations with minimal access to decision-making processes (Ambekar, 2004) ^[2]. However, it has also led to isolation, stress, misinformation, greed, and privacy loss. Technology has shifted our focus to the virtual over the real, making interactions less profound and spontaneous. Additionally, marginalized people in developing countries like India often lack last-mile connectivity.

Overcoming all these challenges, community radio continues to thrive in the digital era due to its 'Community first' approach (Sikdar *et al.*, 2020) ^[20]. A Community Radio Station (CRS) is defined by its ownership, programming, and the community it is designed to serve. It is managed and operated by a non-profit organization, structured to include members from the local community in its management, operation, and programming activities (UNESCO CR

Handbook, 4: 2000). Community radio can greatly influence rural development at the grassroots level. For instance, its programming can focus on addressing poverty, agriculture, gender inequality, education, and various social issues (Al-Hassan *et al.*, 2011) ^[1]. It offers a platform for individuals, groups, and communities to narrate their own stories, share experiences, and become creators and contributors in a media-rich world. It is distinguished by its ownership, programming, and the specific community it serves (Fraser & Estrada, 2001) ^[8]. Hence, a community radio station is also referred to as a voice for the voiceless. It caters for marginalized people in the society. It is a mouthpiece for the community. Community radio in India has been instrumental in development, tackling issues ranging from agricultural practices to social injustices, and promoting educational and moral growth (Sharma *et al.* 2021) ^[18].

Methodology

To examine the impact of community radio on different aspects of society, existing literature was reviewed using various online databases such as Krishikosh, the UNESCO handbook, Academia.edu, Google Scholar, and other weblinks. This article examines the role of community radio in advancing the development of marginalized women and boosting agricultural practices in India.

Community radio landscape in India: Community radio in India began to take shape in the mid-1990s. The earliest instance of using radio for rural development was the "Radio for Rural Development" farm forum, launched by the Indian government in April 1956. This program brought

together rural listener groups twice a week to listen to All India Radio broadcasts, followed by group discussions. The second such effort was the Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) started in August 1975 (Saini, 2013) ^[16]. The third major rural communication initiative was the community radio initiative under the Government of India policy of broadcasting in 2002.

On February 1, 2004, India launched its first community radio station, Anna F.M., with support from the Educational Multimedia and Research Centre (EMRC) to serve rural communities by focusing on education, health, environment, agriculture, and community development. Following this, 17 campus radio stations quickly emerged across the country, including those at Jamia Millia Islamia, IGNOU, Annamalai University, Pune University, and national media institutes like FTII, SRFTI, and IIMC. Notably, the campaign to legitimize community radio in India gained momentum in the mid-1990s, following a February 1995 Supreme Court judgment declaring that "airwaves are public property." This inspired groups nationwide and led to the establishment of community radio stations initially limited to educational purposes under strict conditions. By 2003, the Indian government issued its first guidelines for community radio. As of May 31, 2019, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting reported 251 active community radio stations in India. (Saini 2013, Sheopurkar and Shrinivasan, 2021) ^[16] ^[19].

Helping hand of farmers: Agriculture serves as the main source of livelihood and occupation for those residing in rural areas. Approximately 47 percent of India's population still relies on agriculture (GOI, 2023) ^[9]. In terms of agricultural development, it is crucial to share agricultural information with farmers. Many community radio stations cater to the needs of Indian farmers. Sangham Radio in Telangana is one such station, providing essential support to the poorest Dalit women and agricultural workers. It broadcasts programs that include news and reports on agricultural tools, women's land rights, ecological farming practices, and information about hazardous chemicals, fertilizers, and hybrid and genetically modified seeds. Additionally, it aids farmers in marketing their organic produce through a cooperative called Sangham Organics. This initiative not only helps farmers achieve better prices for their products but also promotes sustainable agricultural practices and empowers marginalized communities (Kothari, 2015) ^[11]. Sangham Radio plays a crucial role in fostering community development and social change. Krishi Community Radio, was established by the University of Agricultural Sciences, Dharwad in Karnataka. Dedicated to agriculture and the rural community, the station actively involves farmers in program production and aims to preserve local culture. It was observed that the radio station provides valuable information on agriculture, pesticides, new technologies, and improved farming methods, significantly enhancing listeners' knowledge of various agricultural practices, and improved varieties and innovations.

The primary goal of expanding community radio in rural India is to promote sustainable agricultural communication. To improve communication efforts and ensure farmers' active involvement, it is essential to train them in

communication skills, enabling them to actively participate in the exchange of knowledge and technologies (Dighe, 2008) ^[6]. In Uttarakhand's Nainital district, the Kumaon Vani radio station seeks to unite communities across multiple villages and promote sustainable development within the local farming community. Hello Bargarh is primarily a programme of Radio Gunjan for raising community awareness and for discussing various local issues. CRS have direct contact with the farmers in Khet Khala, who share their knowledge and difficulties. It also offer them the professional guidance of numerous agriculture scientists and professionals. One of the highly regarded programmes, Antaranga, features interviews with prominent locals, such as heroes or young people who have a significant impact on the community (Ansari *et al.*, 2020) ^[3]. Radio Green FM has begun airing a show about farmers. Additionally, it spoke with farmers who were distressed and thought about killing themselves. It started giving counselling to those farmers. Counselling programmes of Shivar foundation are mostly for poor farmers. Foundation and Green CRS are the platform where the farmers and government agencies can interact and help each other. Interviews of successful farmers along with interactive sessions encourage direct participation of people (Ansari *et al.*, 2020) ^[3].

Education and Awareness: Radio, as a medium, engages listeners' imagination, enhancing abstract thinking through its purely auditory content-speech, music, sounds, and silences (Dubey, 1990) ^[7]. Similar to radio, teaching is an oral communication method, historically rooted in listening and speaking. Thus, radio broadcasts can both complement and substitute classroom teachers when needed. A key advantage of community radio is its ability to educate and inform the local population. Community radio stations offer educational programs, health awareness initiatives, agricultural guidance, and vocational training, providing listeners with essential knowledge and skills. These efforts contribute to the socioeconomic development of the community (Rajesh, 2024) ^[14].

Women Empowerment: Community radio, as a third tier alongside public and private broadcasting, plays a crucial role in women's empowerment. According to Kumar and Varghese (2005) ^[12], this empowerment involves helping a powerless woman gain autonomy, self-control, and confidence while fostering collective influence over oppressive social conditions. Achieving women's empowerment is challenging, requiring a significant shift in self-image and mindset at the personal level and a collective effort for positive social change at the community level. CR stations like Namma Dhwani (Our Voices), Sangam Radio, Radio Namaskar, and Manndeshi Tarang are notable examples of those continuously striving to empower women through this medium, involving them as participants, listeners, activists, and contributors (Sapna and Rakesh, 2019) ^[17]. Namma Dhwani in Karnataka launched a program that significantly impacts women by raising awareness about health and sanitation, education, savings, food habits, and family matters. Manndeshi Tarang in Maharashtra offers programming designed to enhance civic and cultural life, which has proven beneficial to the community (Ray,

2009)^[15]. Radio Namaskar from Orissa launched a program that aims to enhance the psychological, economic, cultural, political, and social status of their female audience (Bandelli, 2011)^[5]. Anna FM launched by Anna University, Tamil Nadu is the oldest CR station and was the first to receive broadcast license in the country. It played an important role in social empowerment i.e., knowledge and skill development, and political empowerment of women i.e., knowing the panchayat representative, voting in assembly and general elections (Kar, 2010)^[10]. *Puduvai Vaani* is one of the great initiatives started by Pondicherry University, Puducherry which aims at improving lifestyle choices of people by creating awareness among them. It was found that the community radio program *Puduvai Vaani* contributed to women's education, nutrition information, and also improvement in their attitude (Balan and Norman, 2012)^[4].

Similarly, various community radio stations across different regions of the country are broadcasting programs aimed at empowering, awakening, and enlightening women. For instance, Waqt ki Awaz in Uttar Pradesh airs a program to raise awareness among women about the dangers of open defecation, which poses health risks and threats of violence. Rudi no Radio in Gujarat, from the West zone, launched a program called 'Satvik Jeevan' to improve livelihoods and women's health. Green Community Radio initiated 'The Unacceptable Truth: Menstruation' to foster a more comfortable society for women during their periods.

Conclusion

Looking into the above perspective it seems pertinent and essential to rely on community radio for sustainable agriculture, and rural and women development. Community radio has been effectively utilized for information dissemination, transfer of various technologies in agriculture, women empowerment, and social and political development of women. Community radio has emerged as an efficient communication medium, especially for marginalized people as it is location-specific and mostly participative. Hence, Community radio medium of the people, for the people, and by the people. It was found that community radio does not seek to replace other forms of broadcasting. Community radio improved women status in society. It promoted local culture, language, and tradition by approaching the participation of the community in programmes. Community radio promotes both formal and non-formal learning. It can expand the capabilities of listeners, hence, it helps students in learning by expanding their thinking capacity.

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