

Who's afraid of radio in India?

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We claim to be the world's largest democracy, but fear opening up the airwaves to the commonman. Our democratic traditions are far stronger, yet countries like Nepal, Sri Lanka and perhaps even Bangladesh are edging past us in making radio relevant to their citizens. India's reluctant march towards democratising radio indeed makes the intentions of its rulers suspect.

Broadcasting in India is speedily shifting its profile. Indian radio is currently changing from being a government monopoly to highly-commercialized broadcasting. But this media needs to be democratized too. Privatization and total deregulation will not mean much to the average citizen if radio fails to get a chance to play a vital role in their lives. India has so far clearly given step-motherly treatment to public service, community, educational and development broadcast networks.

Over five years back, the Indian supreme court gave an interesting ruling. This judgement strongly critiqued the long - held government monopoly over broadcasting in this country. In early 1995, the court declared the airwaves as public property, to be utilized for promoting public good and ventilating plurality of views, opinions and ideas (AIR 1995 Supreme Court 1236).

This judgment held that the 'freedom of speech and expression' guaranteed by Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution includes the right to acquire and disseminate information. And, in turn, the right to disseminate includes the right to communicate through any media: print, electronic or audio-visual. "The fundamental rights", said the judgement, "can be limited only by reasonable restrictions under a law made for the purpose ... The burden is on the authority to justify the restrictions. Public order is not the same thing as public safety and hence no restrictions can be placed on the right to freedom of speech and expression on the ground that public safety is endangered".

This judgement rightly noted that Indian broadcasting was being governed by archaic laws. The Indian Telegraph Act of 1885 was meant for a different purpose altogether. When it was enacted, there was neither radio nor television, but both these concepts were later sought to be fitted into the definition of 'telegraph'.

In view of this, the judges said it was essential that the Indian Parliament "steps in soon to fill the void by enacting a law or laws, as the case may be, governing the broadcast media, i.e. both radio and television". Also, the judges instructed the Indian federal government to "take immediate steps to establish an independent autonomous public authority representative of all sections and interests in the society to control and regulate the use of the airwaves".

What has the official response been?

Reluctantly, the state-controlled broadcaster All India Radio (AIR) was given some level of 'autonomy'. For the most part, this meant that the organisation would have to concentrate on earning revenues, and foot a growing part of its own bill. Further, Indian radio broadcasting is right now shifting from being a government monopoly to highly-commercialized broadcasting. In mid-November 1999, the government announced that the bidding process to set up 140 FM (frequency modulation) stations in 40 cities had closed to 'overwhelming response', with 349 potential broadcasters finally left in the race for a license. Questions were, however, asked as to who was given a chance to enter this race, and how much publicity had been in fact accorded to the move to privatise radio broadcasting.

By early August 2000, it was announced that some 26 companies have received letters of intent, from the Indian government, after bidding to set up FM radio stations in 40 Indian cities. Three companies were not given letters 'as clearance had not come from the Home Ministry', as the news reports put it.

But how open is open? Can the diversity of the country of one billion be reflected by a little over two dozen companies, who will be broadcasting mainly entertainment programmes from cities across urban India?

For decades, India's radio stations have been centralized, government-controlled, over-dependent on relays and lacking in editorial independence. In recent years, a small number of citizens' groups across India have been pushing for something very different, through the community radio model. If the government is really serious about freeing broadcasting from state monopoly, then it needs to proceed to its logical conclusion by expanding the available media space and permitting communities and organizations representing them to run their own radio stations. A truly people's radio should perceive listeners not only as receivers and consumers, but also as active citizens and creative producers of media content. Community radio should have three key aspects: non-profit making, community ownership and management, and community participation. It is distinguished by its limited local reach, low-power transmission, and programming content that reflects the educational, developmental and cultural needs of the specific community it serves.

What we need now are dedicated frequencies, earmarked for the creation, maintenance and expansion of community broadcasting. Although permission for low-cost community radio has long been on the cards, the rules for setting up non-profit stations are yet to be framed. However, dozens of FM (Frequency Modulation) radio stations are currently being set up by the private sector.

Non-profit and development organisations have been lobbying for more than five years to get permission to broadcast information that could help the 'information poor' to get an understanding of issues critical to their lives. Recently, neighbouring countries like Nepal and Sri Lanka edged past India by allowing non-profit community radios to be set up. Asian countries like the Philippines have already shown the beneficial impact of such locally-managed, non-profit initiatives taken up by citizens themselves.

Nepal's Radio Sagarmatha, run by a body of environmental journalists, has attracted attention globally for its unique style of operation in a subcontinent where radio has so far been tightly government-controlled. Despite an unhelpful attitude by the government, it has

managed to promote information-based and green messages. "In Sri Lanka, we are using a community radio station in Kotmale to find information on the Internet, which readers ask for via phone or post. This helps simple villagers to get access to the information super-highway too", University of Colombo journalism lecturer Michael J.R. David said during a recent visit to India. He is the project leader of the Kotmale community radio station, which took off in May 1999 but is already being studied worldwide as an innovative experiment in development communication.

India's state-owned radio (AIR) had set up a string of local radio stations some years ago. But the stations were not locally relevant and community-run. By contrast, community stations can play an important role. Today, it is technically and economically feasible to set up hundreds, if not thousands, of low-powered FM radio stations across the country. On FM, the bandwidth permits a very large number of low-powered radio transmitters. There can be up to 5,000 FM stations, roughly the same number of tehsils (district sub-divisions) in India. Cost and technology are no barrier, what is lacking are laws that permit this, and the political will to allow radio to play its role.

Recently two young people, Markanday and Dayal Singh of Rohtak in Haryana, both aged 21, have assembled a low-cost FM radio transmitter that they hope will spread useful information that could make a vital difference to the lives of villagers, including on agricultural practices.

"Such a type of a radio can play a vital role in low-cost communication. Rural developmental issues can be taken up. Illiteracy (bottlenecks) can be overcome. Farmers in the field could easily be given the information inputs they need", says Markanday. Both the young men belong to Nutra Indica Research Council, a non-profit NGO in Rohtak that seeks to put rural innovators in touch with scientists, and also create a platform for the exchange of ideas, particularly on the rural front.

Weighing approximately 12 kgs., Markanday and Dayal Singh's entire 'radio station' fits into a briefcase. The transmitter has a range of 10 to 15 km radius. A radio network of such small transmitters, each having one studio with recording and broadcasting facilities, and flexible broadcast hours (for example, before and after field work in early morning and late evening in rural India) can very easily be made operational.

Media advocacy groups have been pressing for licenses to be given to universities (particularly agricultural universities, medical institutions, adult and legal literacy organisations), registered cooperatives, women's cooperatives and suitable public bodies.

"Our problem has been a Delhi-centric approach to broadcasting that we in this country has taken. One fear is that (community broadcasting and grassroots radio) could become inconvenient for the existing power-structure", prominent media critic Prof.K.E. Eapen of Bangalore argued recently.

India's middle classes seem to have re-discovered radio with the commercial FM boom. But for the bulk of the citizens of this country, radio is virtually the only electronic gadget they can afford. There's no medium other than radio that can offer relevant, local information too, provided it is aptly utilised. Recent studies suggest that radio in India has a potential listenership of 98.5% of the population of this vast country. There are some 104 million radio homes, double the number of TV homes. Radio has a far broader reach than

television. Over the last decade, All India Radio has focused more on the rural population and the urban lower middle classes, unlike TV's preoccupation with the relatively smaller number of urban upper middle classes. It has also been argued that considering the low levels of literacy in India and the low purchasing power of the large majority, radio will inevitably retain its edge over the print media and television in terms of outreach.

But radio is not only the 'poor man's' option. Even in affluent Europe, radio plays its role in the community's life, taking across relevant, local information in a way perhaps no other media can. It is particularly effective in the busy, morning hours, while TV takes over in the evenings.

So far the official response has been undiluted fear about opening up radio to the people. Officials argue that AIR's low-powered stations in semi-rural areas (some 89 already exist) could offer one-hour time slots to *panchayats* or 'bonafide' representatives of the communities. Official quarters then entangle the entire debate in the question of how they should ascertain which non-profit or voluntary organisation is a 'true representative of the community'.

Official thinking currently seems to be to block non-profit groups from setting up their own broadcast facilities, if possible by using the sops of offering them time-slots on existing official channels. Besides, the strictly 'no-news' policy on all sectors of non-official radio betrays the paranoia that our ruling elites have about this medium. Officials argue that radio stations in a 'remote corner' of India would be difficult to monitor. If so, doesn't the same hold true for tiny newspapers? Anyway, why should the government presume that all citizens of this country have malafide intentions? Is it not possible to have a broadcasting regulatory authority to ensure that broad guidelines, and preferably a voluntary code, is respected?

Why is the government so nervous about opening up a medium that has powerful development potential? Are media groups such as the owners of *The Times of India* and *Midday* more benevolent than development groups? Why is a 52-year-old democracy so terrified of positive decentralisation?

Questions that indeed could do with answers...

