

## **Role of Community Radio in Development: A Case Study on Sangham Radio, India**

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### **Abstract**

*Communication has a vital role in the development process of any country. Radio as a medium, can easily reach the rural mass in short span of time. The technology is simple and easy to use. The advantage of radio is literacy is not needed for the users, while incurring lower investment cost. When it comes to poor and illiterate people, community radio has a great role to play in improving their livelihood. In India, where the majority of the population lives in rural area, community radio is of paramount significance. Hence, the government issued license to hundreds of community radios run by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community, and educational institutions. Sangham radio is one of the first community radios in India run by the Deccan Development Society in Medak District of Andhra Pradesh State. Sangham radio focuses to educate the poor and marginalized women to improve their lives through different educational programs.*

**Keywords:** Community, Sangham, Radio, Deccan, Development

### **Introduction**

Most of the third world or developing countries, which are highly populated by poor and illiterate people, need community radio for their very development. These countries are mainly from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. They had an experience of colonization and exploitation by the great powers which led to their backward economy and development. There are many factors which facilitate the development process of one country. One of them is mass media. Since most developmental activities take place in remote areas and deal with illiterate rural people, it needs a thorough understanding of what type of media to use in order to promote the development process. Nowadays more than 850 million people in developing countries are excluded from a wide range of information and knowledge, with the rural poor in particular remaining isolated from both traditional media and new information and communication technologies, which would improve their livelihoods and development pattern (Patil 2010).

Many governments of the third world countries were looking for an effective means to reach their rural people to educate them to improve their livelihoods. Consequently, Radio was identified as the most accessible mass communication tool for the grassroots. Radio as a medium, can easily reach the rural

mass in short span of time. The technology is simple and easy to use. The advantage of radio is, literacy is not needed for the users, while incurring lower investment cost. The concept of community radio is gaining momentum in recent period. Community radio is a process. It is not simply about producing radio programme to put on air. Community radio is by the community and for the community. Community radio is giving opportunity for the people; representation for different ethnic, social and religious backgrounds and gender. The community participation is in all aspects of the radio station from establishment to management, from administration to financing. (Balan and Norman 2012).

Communication is central to the success of development and democracy. Community radio is a crucial communication tool particularly in communities where most people can neither read nor write. It is also an extraordinary and invisible medium to give voice to the voiceless as it provides an opportunity to the community to speak about issues concerning their lives. Community radio has the potential to bring significant positive change in the social fabric of the local community (One World Foundation India 2013). Many communication scholars have defined community radio in different ways. However, Balan and Norman (2012), define community radio as a radio which is owned and operated by community or members of a community to develop the community. Therefore, community radio is the best tool to promote developmental activities. Community radio is confined to a small geographical area. It depends on low power transmission covering not more than 20-30 km. radius. It serves a community which uses common resources for livelihood, has common development issues and concerns, which are relatively localized, nevertheless connected to national and regional development goals (Sharma 2011).

Modern-day community radio stations often serve their listeners by offering a variety of content that is not necessarily provided by the larger commercial radio stations. Community radio outlets may carry news and information programming geared toward the local area, particularly immigrant or minority groups that are poorly served by other major media outlets. More specialized musical shows are also often a feature of many community radio stations. Community stations and pirate stations (where they are tolerated) can be valuable assets for a region. Community radio stations typically avoid content found on commercial outlets, such as Top 40 music, sports, and "drive-time" personalities (Khan 2010). With all these points in consideration, there are thousands of community radios owned and operated by different communities all over the world to bring desirable change in the lives of communities. Likewise, in India there are many community radios throughout the country. In this article an emphasis has been given to describe the role of Sangham radio in community development in Medak District of Andhra Pradesh, India.

### **Community Radio in India**

One can easily understand the importance of community radio in India. It can effectively mobilize the community to undertake several developmental programs and projects which can help bring all the desirable changes in the society. In India, the campaign to legitimise community radio began in the mid 1990s, soon after the Supreme Court of India ruled in its judgment of February 1995 that "airwaves are public property". This came as an inspiration to groups across the country, but to begin with, only educational (campus) radio stations were allowed, under somewhat stringent conditions. Anna FM is India's first campus 'community' radio, launched on 1<sup>st</sup> February 2004, which is run by Education and Multimedia Research Centre (EMRC), and all programmes are produced by the students of Media Sciences at Anna University (Khan 2010).

The rationale for community radio in India is strong on legal/constitutional, social, cultural and development grounds. India is multi-linguistic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious with more than 4000 castes, tribes and nomadic communities. If one considers village as a community then there are more than half a million villages; and hence communities. Today's era of cable channels and open skies, privatisation, liberalization and globalisation not only promote cultural imperialism but also threaten to dislocate ecosystems, cottage and small scale industries and local jobs and employment pattern in India (Patil 2010).

In India, where literacy remains a substantial barrier to development, radio especially community radio, can reach a large number of poor people because it is affordable and uses little electricity which is low supply in many countries and barely affordable for many poor. In 2000, All India Radio programmes could be heard in two-third of all Indian households in 24 languages and 146 dialects, over some 120 million radio sets. Community radio gives a voice to the community they serve with programmes in local languages, respecting local culture, traditions and interests. It facilitates dialogue within the community; while on a national level it encourages diversity, creativity and citizens' participation in democratic processes. Community radio provides a counterbalance to the increasing globalization and commercialization of media. Most TV and radio stations, including public stations, are concentrated in urban areas (Sharma 2011).

This is one of the main reasons for community radio's importance in India. To reach all these highly segmented communities, community radios should be introduced to cater the specific needs of the society. To teach the poor rural people of India about development issues community radio can play a great role.

By 30 November 2008, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, had received 297 applications for community radio licenses, including 141 from NGOs and other Civil Society Organizations (CSO's), 105 from educational institutions and 51 for 'farm radio' stations to be run by agricultural universities and agricultural extension centres (Krishi Vigyan Kendra's). Of these, 107 community radio stations have been cleared for licensing through the issue of letters of intent. 13 Grant of Permission Agreements (GOPA) has been signed with license applications under the new scheme. By November 2008, there were 38 operational community radio stations in the country. Of these, only two are exclusively run by NGOS/CSO'S and the rest (36) by educational institutions. These two community radio stations are 'Sangham Radio' of Andhra Pradesh and 'Radio Bundelkhand' of Madya Pradesh (Fig.- 1). Later, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB) has also issued license to 'Mandeshi FM Tarang- Community Radio' of Maharashtra State (A Patil, 2010). Currently there are more than one hundred community radio stations present in India. The number of operational community radio stations has doubled from 64 in 2009 to 143 in 2012. The first ever community radio station of North East came up in Assam in 2010. First ever permissions to community radio stations were issued in Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh (One World Foundation India 2013).



Fig.-1 : Rural women gathered to listen Radio Bundelkhand in a village in Madya Pradesh, India. (UNESCO, 2012)

### **Origins of Sangham Radio**

Sangham radio is one of the first community radios in India. Sangham radio is established and owned by the Deccan Development Society (DDS) in Medak District of Andhra Pradesh State. It has a specific mission of enabling the voices of the poor and dalits to get a channel. The DDS Community Media initiative started around 1997 and was founded on the principle that media has always treated rural people in general and women from marginalized sections in particular, as consumers, not as producers. A media of the people, for the people, by the people is the only way to respond to their marginalization. Sangham, referring to village level women's collectives, is the cornerstone of the work of the DDS. Every activity is designed, planned and implemented by these collectives. Therefore, it is most appropriate that the radio which was planned, owned and controlled by them should bear their name. (One World Foundation India 2013).

Initially, UNESCO, Malaysia, funneled out Rs 28 lakh to establish the radio station. These funds were utilised for buying the land for and construction of the station. The transmitter also came in as a donation from UNESCO. DDS pays for the maintenance and production of programmes which costs around Rs 2.5 lakh a year. Around 2,000 Sangham women members contribute Rs 01 lakh a year to keep the station alive. In all, it cost about Rs 30 lakh to set up the radio station (Menon 2010).

The DDS is a two and half decade old grassroots organization working in about 75 villages with women's Sanghams (voluntary village level associations of the poor) in Medak District of Andhra Pradesh. The 5000 women members of the Society represent the poorest of the poor in their village communities. Most of them are dalits, the lowest group in the Indian social hierarchy. The society has a vision of consolidating these village groups into vibrant organs of primary local governance and federates them into a strong pressure lobby for women, the poor and dalits. A host of continuing dialogues, debates, educational and other activities with the people, facilitated by the society, try to translate this vision into a reality (<http://ddsindia.com/www/default.asp>).

### **Objectives of Sangham Radio**

Every community radio is established to meet certain objectives of the owners. Usually, community radios are created to serve the needs of the target audience through giving them the opportunity to participate in the overall activities of the radio. Sangham radio is a community radio which is mainly concerned about promoting various developmental activities in Medak District, thereby, improving the

livelihoods of its community with a main focus on the poor and dalits in the area. Sangham radio has different development related programs.



Fig.-2: **On air:** Women who have never been to school are successful radio presenters now (Bhuvana Balaji, 2012).

*Ek duniya anek awaaz* (One World, Many Voices), a web based free and open audio content and resource exchange platform for community radio broadcasters lists the thematic focus of Sangham Radio as into several categories. The following are the areas of focus for Sangham Radio:

- Women and biodiversity
- Women and ecological agriculture
- Women and land ownership
- Seed sovereignty and women
- Food sovereignty and women
- Ecological enterprises of rural women
- Healthcare and plant medicines
- Herbal care for animal diseases
- Making children's education relevant to rural milieu
- Violence against women
- Legal education for women (<http://edaa.in/sanghamradio/>)

All the aforementioned areas or programs of the Sangham Radio lead to the development of the society. Even though all the programs of the Sangham radio are targeting women it can help the community at large develop and improve their livelihood. Because, educating and empowering women is empowering the family and the community at large.

### **Challenges to Community Radio**

Every community radio's story is not only a success story. There are several challenges and limitations in community radio. Most of the challenges are technical problems and lack of properly skilled and trained staff who can run the community radio. Arpita Sharma (2011) has identified the following challenges faced by community radios.

Community radio plays a central role in community development. To play this role they need to provide quality programmes to ensure continued audience, and support from the community. It has been a great success in developed nations but has lacked in developing countries because of illiteracy and lack of awareness among people. Community radio faces the challenges in effective and quality programme production in terms of content, production quality and community involvement:

- A high turnover of staff that causes a lack of journalistic and technical skills and thus a consistent demand for training. Training offered in most countries does not address the specific needs of community radio.
- Community radio derives its strength and popularity from community participation. In practice participation is harder than it seems, because it is labour intensive, requires the right attitude, skills and mobile equipment.
- Without proper management skills, as well as some knowledge of financial management and income generation, it is very hard for community radio to survive without donor funding, which will always, eventually, dry up.
- Community radio is by definition relatively small and often situated in locations where basic services, like a constant supply of electricity, are lacking. Due to these conditions equipment suffers and needs to be vigorously maintained and/or regularly replaced.
- In many countries there is still a lack of a clear regulatory framework in which community radio operates.

Among the various challenges faced by the community radio, the participation from the people is the major one and no community radio can survive without participation of people as it demands 70% participation of the community people (Sharma 2011).

Sangham radio is not an exception. It has all the challenges faced by many community radios. Since members of the Sangham radio are not professionally trained journalists, the major challenge could be lack of proper knowledge of producing media contents and management of the radio station. Thus, it affects the quality of the production. The society's perception towards women can also be a challenge for the radio station. In many societies, including rural Indian society, women are confined in their houses taking care of their family members. Spending time in the radio station may take much of their time which in return creates a conflict with their husbands or other family members.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

Community radios are very important in countries like India where the majority of the population is illiterate and live in rural areas. It is very difficult to address the needs of the highly segmented or heterogamous population of India through main stream media like All India Radio. Because there are thousands of communities with different languages, dialects, cultures, beliefs, and traditions. Hence, the Government of India decided to allow the operation of community radio in different parts of the country. In India community radios are owned by NGOs, Civil Society Organizations, and Educational Institutions. These Community radios are owned and operated by community or members of a community. The main objective of a community radio is to cater the specific needs of a community which are ignored by the main stream media. Community radios are operated in rural areas dominated by illiterate people and usually address developmental issues to improve the livelihood of the rural people.

Sangham radio is one of the community radios in India which is owned and run by Deccan Development Society to empower the rural people in general and women in particular in Medak District of Andhra Pradesh State. Since its establishment Sangham radio has played a great role in improving the lives of thousands of women in Medak District. Sangham radio is an inspiration for other communities in India and elsewhere in the world to establish a community radio to augment their development programs by addressing their problems. The challenges of community radio are not without solutions. Through proper planning, thinking, and consultation with concerned authorities or professionals the problems could be overcome. Sangham radio is operating in a state where there are many highly reputed academic institutions, teaching journalism and communication, are present. By establishing a linkage with these institutions of higher education they can get professional training and assistance on how to produce quality radio programmes. More advertisements from local business, which doesn't dictate the principles of the community radio, can solve the problems of funding. Sangham radio should have attractive



advertisement policies to get more revenue from the local business whose target consumers are the people in Medak District of Andhra Pradesh state.

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