

A letter to Kapil Sibal

Sir, community radio is on the threshold of changing the country's information landscape. On behalf of the myriad local communities that are waiting to be empowered through community radio, I request you to consider foregoing the spectrum fee altogether

Dear minister,

You are in a unique position which, in some way or the other, is responsible for connecting almost the entire country through the information highway. You are working on how all the 245,500 *panchayats* could be connected through broadband in the next few years; being the minister for human resources development, you also have the responsibility of seeing how you could introduce information and communications technology (ICT) in 1.4 million schools, more than 90% of which have no inkling about ICT. The success of the two initiatives could bring about a revolution and take governance in the country to a new level.

You are also aware how information is being democratized, thanks to social media networks and orally enabling technology tools—mobile phones and community radio—that are connecting the country. The information and broadcasting (I&B) ministry has allowed FM radio licences to be given to non-governmental organizations and non-profit institutions to broadcast to local communities within a radius of 5-15 kilometres. There are around 126 operational community radio stations and more than 500 at various stages of being granted a broadcast licence. There is a possibility of about 4,000 community radio stations broadcasting in our country if the coverage and geographical areas are calculated. The ministry of I&B has been working hard to put in place as many such radio networks as possible so that the local communities can find a voice, and communicate in their own dialect in their own area.



According to one calculation, each community radio covers about 20-40 villages and about 5,000 people. That means we are giving access to the media to thousands of villages whose residents perhaps never had a chance to read a newspaper or listen to the radio or watch television. This is a great inclusive programme devised by the government.

Sir, the licensing process of a community radio network goes through five ministries, including the two that are in your charge. One of the most essential parts of running a community radio is that it uses spectrum in the form of FM and for that each licensee was supposed to pay Rs. 19,700 until recently; the fee has been increased to Rs. 90,000.

I would like to bring to your notice that, according to a Supreme Court of India ruling in February 1995, "airwaves constitute public property and must be utilized for advancing public good." That implies that if the use of the airwaves is not commercial, no licence fee should be charged.

Community radio stations are run by not-for-profit organizations by law and are not meant for commercial use. In fact, more than 50% of the programmes aired on them are supposed to be made with the involvement of communities. Recently, in order to make community radio sustainable, the government also allowed 5 minutes of advertising per hour. Many government departments are now looking at community radio as a viable medium to reach out to the citizens with information about the programmes and schemes they are pursuing.

If we look at the history of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, it has launched several inclusive and participatory programmes aimed at enhancing citizens' rights and improving their life. They include the Right to Information Act, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and the Right to Education Act. Common service centres have been started in each *panchayat*, and community radio allowed. Given that background, it is only natural to expect that the government machinery would work together to ensure an integrated approach in framing and enforcing administrative orders.

Not only is charging not-for-profit organizations a spectrum fee for community radio (let alone increasing it from Rs. 19,700 to Rs. 90,000) a violation of the Supreme Court's 1995 order, it's also at variance with the policy approach of the UPA government. This shows a lack of coordination between various government ministries and departments.

Sir, community radio is on the threshold of changing the country's information landscape. On behalf of the myriad local communities that are waiting to be empowered through community radio, I request you to consider foregoing the spectrum fee altogether and be an agent of change in the movement we call an information revolution.

Hoping for a favourable decision from you.

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