

# Community radio as a means to empower rural masses

The beauty of the sudden emergence of community radios in India is that they are designed to be for and by the community

There are no school dropouts in the Gop block of Puri district in Orissa and it has nothing to do with the efforts of the government. For several years, nobody applied for work under India's rural job guarantee scheme from the area; recently, 123 families applied on demand from the local administration and 120 farmers received job cards.

Last year, a primary school was opened in Tailo village so that children do not have to walk to another school 2km away, because of which most were unwilling to attend it.



Like Gop, other neighbouring blocks such as Nimapara, Astarang and Kakatpur are suddenly enjoying a sudden spurt of development activity. This has happened because of the recently started Radio Namaskar community radio station, which is available at 90.4 MHz FM and covers all villages in a 10-15km range around the famous Konark sun temple.

Radio Namaskar broadcasts eight hours a day and covers almost all developmental issues such as government schemes, school- and education-related topics, women's rights, agriculture, and so on. Since the programme is by the community, they persist with many that are complaint-oriented and critical of the government.

As a result, local authorities have become alert, responsive and are delivering benefits that they never used to.

The beauty of the sudden emergence of community radios in India is that they are designed to be for and by the community. In the case of Radio Namaskar, 70% of the programmes are made by the community, who are part of the 70 listener groups that have been created. They have not only being able to make group listening a common practice but also have been able to involve community members to use mobile phones extensively to make the programmes interactive.

Being a member of the screening committee for licensing of community radio stations at the ministry of information and broadcasting, my observation is that most that are being set up are extensively using the reach and penetration of mobile phones as a complementing tool, which is providing extraordinary power to these broadcasts. There is a significant ownership of mobile phones in villages and small towns; most feature phones come with FM radio receivers, and if the radio station has a mobile number for a phone-in programme, they can then directly connect with everybody in the 10-15km radius.

Besides, the broadcasting ministry is aggressively pushing registered not-for-profit organizations to apply for community radio stations, which means if we divide the country into small clusters of 10-15km each, we can have several thousands of community radio stations managed by communities through registered non-governmental organizations. And if they are integrated with mobile phones, they can become a killer application for the society.

Ever since the licensing of community radio stations was opened in 2004, 913 applications have been received by the ministry. Of these, 349 have been given letters of intent, and there are 113 operational community radio stations. Out of those that are actively broadcasting, only 31 are run by NGOs, 74 are run by educational institutions and eight are run by agriculture universities, or Krishi Vigyan Kendras.

If I look at the nominations in the community broadcasting category in this year's Manthan awards, some that left the deepest impact are Radio Bundelkhand in Jhansi run by Development Alternatives, Rudi no Radio in Ahmedabad run by Sewa Academy of Self Employed Women's Association, Tilonia Radio in Ajmer run by Barefoot College, *Puduvai Vaani—Samuthaya Vaanoli Nilayam* run by Puducherry University.

There are three things common among all these radio stations: they use mobile phones extensively to involve listeners; involve and have a huge impact on women, and involve communities to take control of the station for day-to-day operations and programming.

I see community radio as one of the most potent information and communication technology tool that can work in tandem with the proliferation of mobile phones, which could be adopted by the social sector and telecommunication firms to reach the rural masses and involve them to help themselves economically and educationally and in availing themselves of government services.

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