Community Radio

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Community radio enabling women's empowerment in remote communities of India

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Community radio enabling women's empowerment in remote communities of India

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About the authors

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Saisudha Sugavanam

Saisudha Sugavanam's association with radio dates back to her University days where she pursued her Masters in Electronic Media. She was the first broadcaster to go on air on Anna FM 90.4, India's first campus community radio.

In her career as a journalist-radio broadcaster with the British Broadcasting Corporation, she played the role of radio producer & broadcaster. Among other programmes, she hosted a popular talk show where she interviewed the likes of Late Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, Kapil Dev, Kamal Hassan, Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, A. R. Rahman and many others.

Post her BBC stint, Saisudha was Programme Director at GoSports Foundation, a premier Not-for-Profit that identifies & supports India's future Olympians. Saisudha now freelances as a journalist, and also runs her own education start-up called the Fountainhead Leaders which imparts emotional intelligence and leadership skills to school children. Saisudha Sugavanam is based in Bangalore, India.

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Ritu is Chair, IEEE Working Group - Internet Grades of service in Rural areas (India). She has over 12 years of rich professional experience in ICT development, managing programs, and implementing projects at different stakeholder levels of competency. She has a deep understanding of technology from human development aspects. Her area of interest, activity, and research is in Information Communication and Technology (ICT) at the grassroots level, Internet governance, environmental issues, community development, and open spectrum policy issues.

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Community Radio

ABSTRACT

Radio, by its very nature, is an ideal mode of communication for reaching large populations at a relatively low cost. It is also instant, portable, easily available and affordable. Radio's strength also lies in the simplicity of the technology, which makes it accessible for many to both produce and broadcast with ease. Availability of the radio spectrum enabled by the government of India also aids in the wide outreach of radio broadcasting in the remote rural locations in India.

Community radio, which forms the third tier of the communication platform along with public broadcasting, is managed, run and owned by a community for the benefit of the target community and serves its needs, interests and aspirations. In spite of the remarkable growth in communication across the country in the past few decades, when it comes to media and communication, rural India is still in the dark. The mainstream media has very limited or minimal airtime to cover issues related to rural areas. Considering that 70% of the Indian population lives in rural India, community radio plays a huge role in bridging the communication gap. Community radio can potentially contribute significantly to the social and economic upliftment of rural communities in India.

The study is situated in the broader context of women and technology usage aiming at an understanding of how community radio as a frugal technology has been instrumental in empowering women in remote rural communities of India. The study focuses on women led community radio stations in different parts of India, which are primarily managed by women radio broadcasters and station managers. We explore several factors such as technical literacy, cultural contexts, availability of connectivity, among others, that can prove to be barriers for women to use technology effectively. The objective of this study is twofold –firstly to understand how women have found self- expression through community radio as a frugal technology and how, in turn, it has helped them serve the community and empower other women in the community to find their voices. Secondly, this study examines how radio stations in remote rural locations have enabled local communities to voice themselves which in turn has facilitated flow of information between the local authorities and the people during the pandemic.

We have documented eight case studies of women broadcasters in different community radio stations across India. These case studies substantiate that women have overcome various societal and cultural barriers to associate themselves with community radio as a technology. These women act as agents of change in their communities and are followed as role models for other women and girls. It is observed that women in their roles as radio broadcasters feel enabled, empowered and are able to impact the community. All the women interviewed in this study felt comfortable using technology to record, edit and broadcast programmes. While they did not have any prior experience of using technology, they were quick to learn and adapt. Through our interviews we were able to infer that radio as medium supports frugal technology for its operation. Indeed, technology has the potential to empower people, it is evident that frugal technologies like community radio treat people as agents and not as mere users.

WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT

After two world wars and a series of National Liberation movements in the first half of the century, women across the world have begun to find their own voices and seek more active roles in public and academic life. Use of technology to manage household chores and the opening up of service sector jobs which do not depend on physical strength and increased life expectancy have played a vital role in women exerting influence on society. While modern women fight for their own rights, the rural women in India have also started seeking recognition of their rights. They play a catalytic role towards the achievement of transformational economic, environmental and social changes required for sustainable development. An article on women's empowerment by the United Nations has identified limited access to credit, health care and education as some of the major challenges that rural women face. It also states that these problems are further aggravated by the global food and economic crises and climate change. Given the large contribution that women make both socially and economically, it may be emphasised that empowering them is essential, not only for the well-being of individuals, families and rural communities, but also for the overall development of the community.

Community radio for community development

Community radio plays an important role in the communications of a country. Community radio has always been a fascinating medium due to its special characteristics of being an oral medium and its unmatched ability to reach out to rural masses. It continues to be as relevant and potent as it was in its early years of development despite the emergence of more attractive media. Primarily serving the rural communities, the community radio stations reflect the local culture, thoughts, norms and values of that particular community. Community radio stations in rural regions act as a platform to people's right to information and community participation by expressing the voice and thoughts of people at the grassroots level in the development process. As a three-tier platform, these community radio stations help communities to avail various utilities and amenities for their development like education, health, water and sanitation, protection from natural disasters, disseminating information to address social issues in the community, and connecting rural population with the local authorities. Chapman et al. reported that the growth of community radio stations in the country reflects the growth in information dissemination technologies and the shifting of the development paradigm towards a more participatory style of information and knowledge transfer.[1]

These radio stations are used to create awareness, provide information, improve community knowledge and skills, and provide for cultural, political and economic development for empowerment.[2] Community radio programmes should cater to all sections of the society and enable active community participation and also should reflect the special interests and needs of the listenership for which it is licensed to serve. The philosophy of community radio is to use this medium as "voice of the voiceless" and "the mouthpiece of the oppressed people", and in general as a tool for development. This community

1   Chapman, R., Blench, R., Kranjac-Berisavljevic, G., & Zakariah, A. B. T. (2003). Rural Radio in Agricultural Extension: The Example of Vernacular Radio Programmes on Soil and Water Conservation in N. Ghana. Agricultural Research & Extension Network. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/42765522_Rural_Radio_in_Agricultural_Extension_The_Example_of_Vernacular_Radio_Programmes_on_Soil_and_Water_Conservation_in_N_Ghana

2   Nirmala, Y. (2015). The role of community radio in empowering women in India. Media Asia, 42(1-2), 41-46. https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2015.1072335

led platform is useful for the development of particular target groups like women, the elderly and young adults to voice their opinions. During disasters or in times of emergency, community radio stations serve as information diffusion vehicles, where non-governmental organisations, civil societies and governments use the radio station to communicate developmental information in areas of education, health services, agriculture, and government entitlements.[3]

COMMUNITY RADIO FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

In a landmark judgement in 1995, the Supreme Court declared airwaves as a public property that can be used to advance public good, and this played an important role in firmly establishing community radio in India. In an article by the Confederation of Indian Industry, it has been quoted that community radio has been playing a catalytic role in bringing rural India closer to the national mainstream and serving as a vital tool in strengthening the "Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression" in rural India. The first community radio was set up in 2004 in Anna University, Chennai. At the time of writing this report there were 251 community radio stations in India.

Radio has been seen as a woman-friendly medium in terms of both the relationship women broadcasters have with the listeners and also in terms of the technology being easily adaptable for them.[4] Women have naturally radio-friendly voices that allow them to connect with their listeners easily. Also, in conservative setups where women hesitate to present themselves, radio with its anonymity to physical appearance, makes it a preferred medium to present themselves. Thus radio, as a medium, is women friendly, pertinent and accessible in terms of learning the production skills and techniques, working together to shape programme schedules and share stories as well as collect information for radio programmes. The portability of radio makes it accessible from anywhere and at any time, without affecting one's routine. This facilitates dissemination of information that is educational and relevant for women. With more focused training on both programme production and use of technology, radio can be used by women for empowering themselves and others.

The more decision-making positions women hold in the mass media, the more influential changes they can bring about in society. Radio has given voices to the women to fight for their rights, thereby creating awareness about various issues, beginning from the rights of women to domestic violence, health, maternity, violence and nutrition. Women are also using community radio stations to create awareness about their political rights, voting, and about women representatives in Panchayati Raj institutions and assembly, parliament, etc.

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3   See, for example: Fraser, C., & Estrada, S. R. (1998). Communicating for Development: Human Change for Survival. I.B. Tauris; Mhagama, P. (2016). The importance of participation in development through community radio: A case study of Nkhotakota community radio station in Malawi. Critical Arts: A South-North Journal of Cultural & Media Studies, 30(1), 45-61. https://doi.org/ 10.1080/02560046.2016.1164384; Milan, S. (2009). Four steps to community media as a development tool. Development in Practice, 19(4-5), 598-609. https://doi.org/10.1080/09614520902866421

4   Rikzana, A., & Neelamalar, M. (2015). The Role of Community Radio in Women's Empowerment: Case Studies from Developing Countries. Advances in Computer Science and Information Technology (ACSIT), 2(13), 22-26. https://krishisanskriti.org/vol_image/ 22Oct201506100510%20%20%20%20%20%20%20A%20Afreen%20Rikzana%20%20%20%20%20%20%20%202022-26.pdf

Community radio response to COVID-19

Since 2020, India has been combating the spread of the COVID-19 virus along with misinformation, blended with lack of access to official safety guidelines and verified information from the medical fraternity and lack of access in receiving essential and necessary items.

India has 22 officially recognised languages, and over 1,600 local dialects are spoken in an area of 3.2 million kilometres. Given the country's vast geographical diversity and also diverse tribal and minority cultures, it was burdensome for the central and state governments and philanthropic organisations to reach out to the rural and remotest regions. During these times, community radio stations became the first choice for the government, civil society organisations and humanitarian organisations to disseminate relevant and updated information regarding the lockdown, health measures, etc., as well as busting the myths around the virus.

As the last mile information providers, the community radio stations in India took up the responsibility of reaching out to the remotest locations with the help of local government authorities, village councillors, district magistrates and medical officials. Fighting against the pandemic, community radio stations ensured continuous access to verified information in a timely manner by acting as a bridge between the locals and local authorities, community radio stations not only battled against misinformation, but also resolved various problems that the locals were facing during the time of the pandemic.

Women-oriented community radio stations such as "Kadal Osai" in Tamil Nadu, "Yerlavani" in Sangli district, "Radio Brahmaputra 99.4 FM" in the tea gardens of Assam and "Pasumai Radio" in Dindigul district in the southern state of Tamil Nadu are helping their communities in times of the pandemic.

Managed by station head, Gayatri Usman, "Kadal Osai FM 90.4" is the only community radio station that is helping fishermen in Ramanathapuram's Pamban Island in Tamil Nadu.

In times of the pandemic, the fishing community, much like others in India, was not aware of the new measures implemented to contain the spread of the virus. In such a scenario, Kadal Osai started broadcasting information on COVID-19 protocols such as maintaining social distance, the importance of hand washing, etc.

Yerala Vani community radio station, through its rural development work in 22 villages of Sangli district, has been broadcasting programmes related to health, education and agriculture. As the pandemic affected school education, Yerala Vani radio station started the programme "radio classroom" under its Scope Digital School (School of Progressive Education, Jalihal) enabling teachers to start teaching students from 8th standard to 12th standard using the radio station.

In the midst of the pandemic, "Radio Brahmaputra 99.4 FM" has become the only source of receiving information about the coronavirus for Assam tea garden workers and neighbourhood villagers. The community radio is assisting people during the lockdown period and helping to check the spread of coronavirus in tea gardens and riverine villages by creating awareness about the pandemic in local dialects. Since the lockdown, Brahmaputra radio has been broadcasting special programmes for farmers, municipal workers, frontline workers (including ASHA, ANM, AWW), child protection and protection from the virus.

Located in the Dindigul district of the southern state of Tamil Nadu, "Pasumai Radio" has been spreading awareness about COVID-19 in 1,500 villages in the blocks of Athoor, Reddiarchatram, Sanarpatti, Vedasandur and Dindigul.

OBJECTIVES

The prime objective of this report is to understand the role of community radio stations in the development of the community, specifically focusing on giving voices to women and also to understand their role during the time of COVID 19 pandemic. The specific objectives of this paper are as follows:

1　Explore women-led community radio stations that have helped women from the community to find self-expression.

2　Understand how community radio stations have helped local communities during the times of COVID.

METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out as a series of in-depth interviews with station managers and women radio broadcasters to understand station administration, content and impact. In all, eight community radio stations were studied. These eight stations were shortlisted based on expert recommendations.

The station managers were interviewed to understand their areas of focus, the needs of the community, the programmes they make, challenges they face, impact they have created and the ways in which they sustain the radio. Women broadcasters were interviewed to understand why they chose to work for the radio, the challenges they face, ways in which the programmes have impacted the community and in turn how their work has impacted them and their level of comfort in adapting to technology.

The researchers also listened to their programmes to understand the content and the format. This study was aimed to understand how women have found their self-expression through community radio.

Out of the eight case-studies, four radio stations were selected to understand further the role of community radio stations in COVID-19. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews at community radio stations and also monitored media reports in the last six months that are publicly available. These in-depth interviews were conducted with community radio station heads and staff members to understand how they had contributed and sustained during the pandemic. They were based on the following questions:

● How the station has created locally relevant content?

● How does the radio station sustain itself?

● How are community radio stations serving local communities in times of the pandemic?

CASE STUDIES

KADAL OSAI, PAMBAN

Community Radio
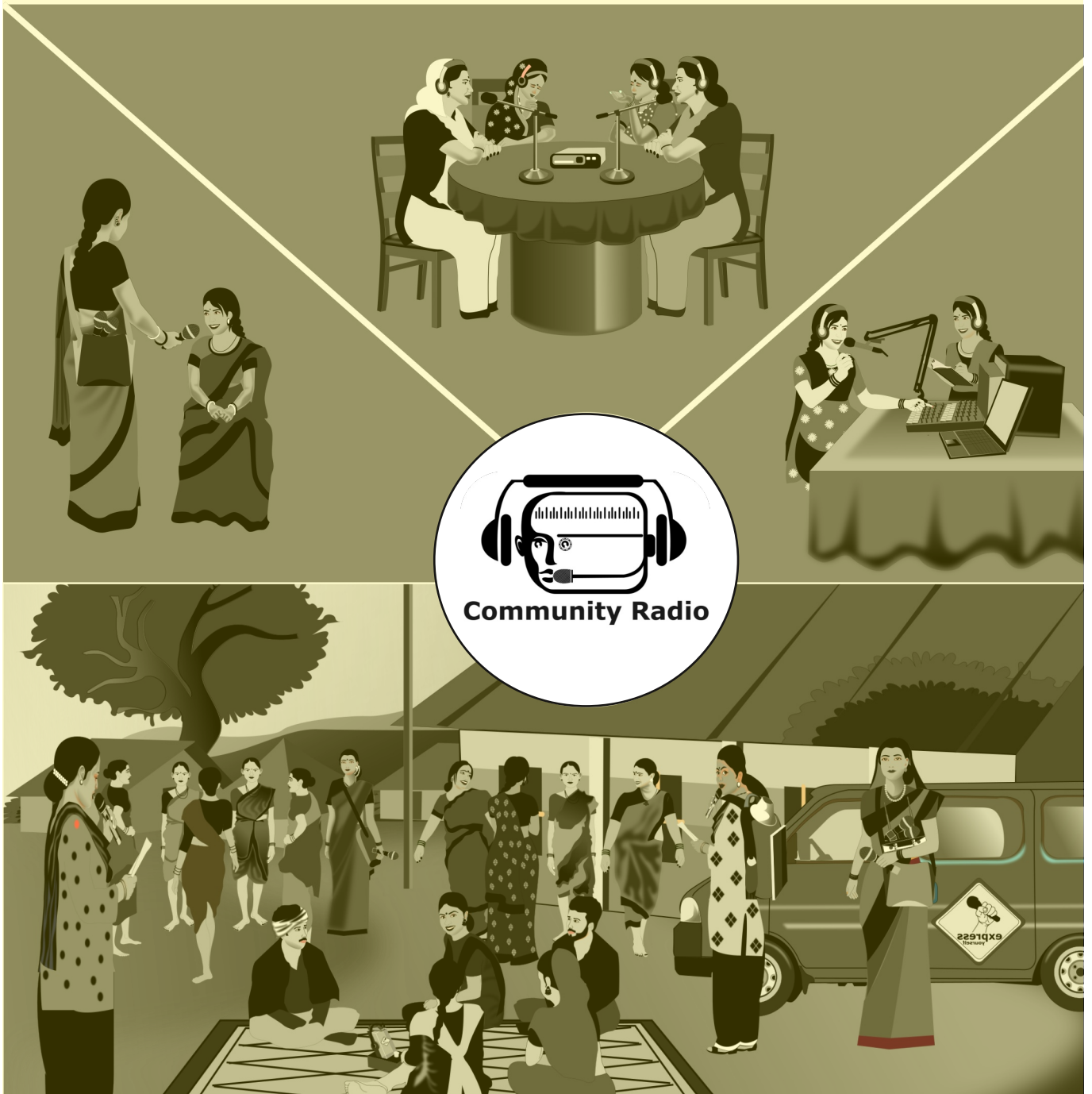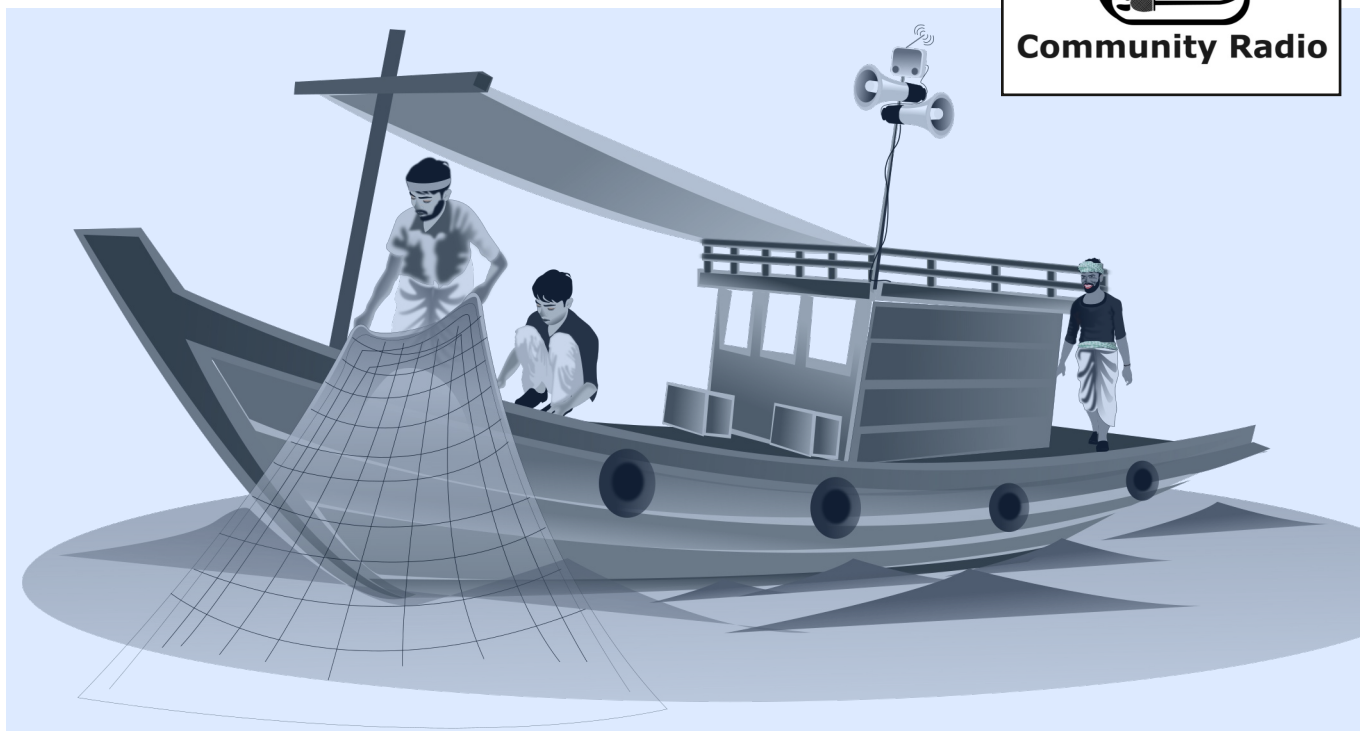
Name of the station	Kadal Osai
Year of incorporation	2015
Nature of funding	NGO and local advertisements
Frequency used	90.4 Mhz
Region of broadcast	Pamban Island
Total number of staff	12 members
Station head	Ms. Gayathri Usman
Broadcast timings	24 hours

Background

Pamban Island is located in the southernmost tip of the Indian peninsula. Fishing forms the major form of livelihood for the people living in this island. The community comprises fishermen and women, boat makers, wood workers, teachers and priests in the local religious centres. Their lives revolve around the sea. "Kadal Osai 90.4 FM" is the first community radio station in India that is exclusively for fisherfolk. It is founded by a fisherman, Mr. Armstrong Fernando with the help of an NGO (Nesakarangal Charitable Trust) that he operates. The station works with a team of 12 members, including the station head Ms. Gayathri Usman. Except the station head, all other staff members are from the community served by Kadal Osai community radio station.

Kadal Osai broadcasts announcements, phone-ins, studio interviews and also narrowcasts a range of programmes. Like most community radios, this station is also run by the members of the community, based on their awareness about their region and its existing cultural practices.

The radio station is making programmes on social issues faced by the community. The common themes of broadcasts are around safety standards, child marriage, women's rights, awareness about nutrition, health and menstrual hygiene. The station also deals with programmes targeting unemployment issues rampant in the community due to various causes. Thus, the programmes focus on creating awareness about the choice of courses and job opportunities that are available in the fishing and marine sector.

Kadal Osai community radio station also contributes to environment conservation. The station gives out regular updates to create awareness about alternative sustainability and sea conservation. Apart from this, the station also broadcasts regular updates on weather, diesel rates, power supply rates, potential fishing zones, etc. These are done both in the mornings and evenings and have proved to be useful to the fishermen who venture out into the sea for fishing. Hence, when they return back from the sea, they are aware of the prices and can auction their catch efficiently. For the women in the community, Kadal Osai broadcasts the market rate of fishes every day. This ensures profitability for women when they sell the fish.

The community radio station also has some entertainment shows like phone-in talk shows, skits and songs on demand. These are also an integral part of the 24-hour-long broadcast. The fishermen carry their radio sets with them when they go into the sea and consider them their companions.

Keeping the local content relevant

The focus of Kadal Osai has primarily been on integrating local and traditional knowledge with scientific knowledge through programmes and broadcasts. This is one of the unique selling points of this radio station. Very often, the station features interviews of veterans from the community sharing their wisdom on identifying currents in the water, figuring out the direction one could possibly take to get maximum catches and their personal experiences on dealing with the uncertainties in the sea.

Raising awareness on sea conservation and water penetrating the main land, the radio jockey speaks about growing up playing in certain streets that are now engulfed with water. This helps them to reach the community better.

While GPS and the scientific data are helpful for the fishermen, the scientists from the Department of Fisheries from Pamban believe in the importance of local traditional knowledge along with the scientific information.

Kadal Osai has launched special shows for the local youth that relates to the day-to-day lives of the people in the community, such as the conflict between higher education and better job opportunities and

staying close to the community of which they are an integral part. As part of these shows, industry experts from the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute are invited to talk about the different opportunities that are available. To encourage children to speak their mind, Kadal Osai hosts shows where a school-going kid is invited to co-host the show. A broad range of topics are discussed – ranging from casual, social and career aspirations. The children talk about their career aspirations, their daily activities and their challenges. In this region, child marriage is highly prevalent which also leads to abuse, violence and abandonment of women. In order to raise awareness on these issues, Kadal Osai has a special programme to educate the community on the impact that child marriage has on women and the rights women hold in a marital relationship.

The Kadal Osai team makes efforts to create a repository of such knowledge and transfer it to the next generation.

Sustaining the radio station

Kadal Osai spends approximately USD 2,800 per month to run the community radio station. This is inclusive of the salaries, electricity bill and the running costs of the FM station. While they are able to generate USD 680 a month through local advertisements, the rest of the expenses are managed by the donation from the parent trust. A portion of the profits from the trust owner's business and the rents from the shop owned by the trust are allocated for the running of the radio station.

Some of the notable impacts created by Kadal Osai are increased awareness on the usage of life jackets by fishermen when they venture into the sea, reduction of plastic waste dumping into the sea, awareness about conservation of sea creatures, increased awareness on women's rights and intergenerational transfer of information from parents to children.

Kadal Osai contribution during COVID-19

In the times of the pandemic, the fishing community, much like others in India, was not aware of the new measures to contain the spread of the virus. In such a scenario, Kadal Osai has been the only radio station in Pamban Island to broadcast information on COVID-19 such as maintaining social distance, the importance of hand washing, wearing masks and related matters. During the lockdown, Kadal Osai's programme, "Pamban News" helped to bust fake news on COVID-19 and create awareness about COVID-19 protocols. The programme also aired general information including information related to fish markets and rates and restrictions in place during the lockdown, thus helping the fisherfolk to maintain their sales during that time. This effort was of great help in guiding the fisherfolk to earn on a daily basis.

Officials from the fisheries department, police and panchayats used the radio station to announce the new lockdown protocols in place, social distancing measures and other administrative updates.

The fishermen in Pamban Island believed that no virus could enter their village, and even if it did, the virus would not infect the community members because they eat fish every day. These kinds of misconceptions and myths were everywhere, so it was challenging for the radio station to convince the people about social distancing during the time of lockdown. A regular live session was aired from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. covering various topics around COVID-19. Though the lockdown prohibited the fishermen from venturing into the sea, some traditional fishermen however did break the rule.

Busting the myths and rumours around the virus amongst fisherfolk was one of the prime tasks for the radio station. People from the fishing community called the radio station with questions about the pandemic. Thus, Kadal Osai started broadcasting shows with local municipal staff, doctors and police to help them understand the concerns of the fishermen and local people and thereby address their issues and concerns. The authorities from the National Fishworkers' Forum stated that the central government

decided that fish was essential and fishing was allowed. However, opening markets was not allowed. There were no guidelines on how to operate logistics initially.

Due to the lockdown and since Tasmac (Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation Ltd.) outlets were closed, many fishermen started gambling, and incidents of domestic violence increased. The station held conversations with women to discuss their problems and resolve their issues. They also started broadcasting awareness programmes on the adverse effects of gambling. At the same time, when schools were closed due to the pandemic and students were mentally affected by the unprecedented situation, Kadal Osai radio connected with teachers and started broadcasting teaching programmes every day from 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Apart from the station manager, Gayathri Usman, the other 12 staff members of the station are part-time fishermen themselves or their family members are fishermen. As the radio station was only able to reach up to a radius of 10 kilometres, Kadal Osai started broadcasting audio clips through its social media platforms in order to reach out to the wider community

Featured impact story of Kadal Osai: Rabia Zeenat

Rabia Zeenat, aged 26, is a popular radio jockey in Kadal Osai. She is a single mother with two kids. A victim of child marriage herself, she says her life is not easy and she is battling several challenges.

In the last two years, Rabia has hosted shows dedicated to educating women on their rights and also about best practices to be followed in the sea. Currently, she is hosting a live chat show with the community where she talks about life, challenges and perspectives. She says that through these programmes, in addition to educating the community, she also seeks answers to her internal turmoil. For her, initially getting acclimatised to the technological aspects of community radio was daunting. But now, she uses the voice recorder, edits and mixes as per the requirement and finally broadcasts it, which has all become possible due to a lot of training she received. She believes that the radio has brought joy to her life and has given her the strength to learn and hone different skills.

Rabia wears a burkha (a long, loose garment covering the whole body from head to feet, worn in public by women in many Muslim communities) in her everyday life. She mentions that initially when she joined the radio station, she also had an internal purdah (a piece of cloth acting as a separation) due to her conservative upbringing. However, she says that when she walks into the radio studio, while she does not let go of her external purdah, i.e., the burkha, her internal one vanishes. Her fears, insecurities and problems, everything disappears; and she transforms into a vivacious, chirpy and happy person. She says that this has helped her connect with her inner self and in turn with her audience. When her listeners tell her that they missed her whenever she did not go on air or when people recognise her on the streets, she feels acknowledged. When asked what does radio mean to her, Rabia simply says,

> *"Radio means happiness. Radio has helped me forget a lot of things. When I do research for my programmes, I learn about how to tackle my own problems. When I talk to my colleagues and my listeners, I am very happy, but as soon as I get back home, my problems haunt me and makes me sad."*

HAMARA MSPICM COMMUNITY RADIO, SOLAN

Name of the station	Hamara MSPICM Community Radio
Year of incorporation	2009
Nature of funding	NGO and local advertisements
Frequency used	90.4 Mhz
Region of broadcast	Solan
Total number of staff	4 members
Station head	Ms. Lalita Panwar
Broadcast timings	12 hours
Language of broadcast	Hindi and Pahari

Background

Solan is a quaint town located in Himachal Pradesh. The town is also home to India's first hill station community radio, "Hamara MSPICM." Set up in 2009 by Mr. Brijender Panwar in his college, M.S. Panwar Institute of Communication and Management in Solan, Hamara MSPICM community radio was set up with an intent to create locally relevant programmes and also bind the community together. Being a campus-based community radio, they have the advantage of enthusiastic college students who also double as programme producers, radio jockeys and reporters. These students also actively involve community participation in their programmes. The radio committee of Hamara MSPICM consists of members of the Panchayat (village council), school teachers, social workers and senior citizens. They have regular meetings with the Board of Management of the Community Radio Committee. A lot of field work and research has gone into it during its initial days to understand the community and develop the programming format. The broadcast formats followed are announcements, phone-ins, studio interviews and narrowcast.

Keeping the local content relevant

On the social front, Hamara MSPICM hosts one talk show daily, where they invite locals who have interesting experiences to share. For example, there were many people who had moved from Solan to Mumbai to try their luck in music, art forms like dance, theatre, etc. However, some have succeeded and some have failed. Both the success stories as well as the failures are shared with the local youth to motivate them. This radio station also has a special segment for school and college students on career guidance and career counselling. With the support from Department of Science, government of India, Hamara MSPICM has produced programmes for women from the neighbouring villages on topics such as nutrition and hygiene, menstrual health, prenatal and postnatal care, importance of breast feeding, etc. This was based on a research that was undertaken by the radio station to understand why women typically do not prioritise their own health and well-being. Hence, the focus of these programmes is to increase awareness amongst women on the importance of their health and well-being.

Hamara MSPICM also develops programmes contributing to the economic empowerment of people in Solan. Solan houses the National Mushroom Research Center in Chambaghat. Hamara MSPICM radio station regularly interviews scientists from the research centre to educate the mushroom growers in the region on best practices of mushroom cultivation. Hamara MSPICM community radio also works very closely with the Horticulture and Forestry University and the Krishi Vigyan Kendra, which are located close to Solan. The farmers are encouraged to call in to the studio with their questions where experts can provide answers. The farmers themselves are also invited to conduct interviews. All these initiatives have helped the farmers to earn more and become financially stable.

The radio station also produces some entertainment programmes as well. Local and popular music is played on Hamara MSPICM in the form of phone-ins and requests. The women-oriented programmes have been able to bring in awareness amongst women on the importance of their well-being and focus on women's nutrition and hygiene. Involving the local community members in the various programmes of the radio station has brought in a sense of ownership and inclusiveness.

Sustaining the radio station

Hamara MSPICM spends approximately USD 1,000 per month to run the community radio station. The source of funding comes from the projects the station undertakes and local advertisements. The fees that they collect are given as honorariums to students in the university that houses Hamara MSPICM for radio jockeying and production course.

Hamara MSPICM has impacted the local region of Solan in various ways. There is an increased awareness about the best practices in agriculture and mushroom cultivation.

Featured impact story of Hamara MSPICM: Lalita Panwar

Lalita Panwar, who is currently the station head of Hamara MSPICM community radio, says she used to be extremely introvert – a typical housewife whose life revolved around her family. This was until her husband founded the community radio, Hamara MSPICM. Her husband wanted someone to spearhead the community radio activities. As Lalita felt a deep calling to break out of the shell she built around herself and take up the leadership of the community radio station, she immediately jumped in. Initially, she had apprehensions such as if people would listen to her, whether she would be able to speak to experts, if the panchayat heads buy into her idea and cooperate, and other similar thoughts that impeded her progress. She found her inner strength and slowly began to interact with people. She fondly remembers the first doctor she interviewed. She spearheaded the Department of Science and Technology's "Women's Health programme" and visited the nearby villages to understand their challenges and educate them on nutrition, hygiene, maternal well-being and anaemia. She feels the programmes she produced helped her as much as they helped the community. It educated her significantly and helped her improve her lifestyle. More importantly, it gave courage and strength to others, while giving her the strength to break her own barriers.

PASUMAI FM, DINDIGUL

Name of the station	Pasumai FM, Dindigul
Year of incorporation	2007
Nature of funding	NGO and local advertisements
Frequency used	90.4 Mhz
Region of broadcast	Dindigul district, Tamil Nadu
Total number of staff	6 members
Station head	Ms. Sangeetha
Broadcast timings	17 hours

Background

Pasumai FM is located in Dindigul district, a semi-arid hard rock region. It was founded in the year 2007 by the late Mr. Paul Bhaskar, an All India Radio veteran with the support from his non-profit organisation, Peace Foundation. There were many challenges that the local farmers, weavers and the immigrants were experiencing in the district. Mr. Bhaskar wanted a platform for the local community to raise their voices and find their own solutions. With that intent, he started Pasumai FM. The FM station is currently run by six full-time staff and many volunteers from the community. As most of their staff hail from the local community, their understanding of the region and the challenges experienced by the community plays a significant role in producing regionally relevant programmes. Pasumai FM broadcasts its programmes in the format of announcements, phone-ins, studio interviews and narrowcasting.

Themes of the programmes

The community in this region includes farmers, weavers, adolescents, tribal people and housewives. Their field reporters speak to different stake holders in the community to get a holistic picture of the issue. They get the voices from the community, industry experts, local representatives and government officials. When the programme is consolidated and aired, the community listeners not only get to hear their voices but also the perspectives of all the stakeholders involved. This has empowered the radio station to be a solution provider for the various challenges the community faces.

Some of the social aspects that Pasumai FM focuses on are as follows:

- In Dindigul district, there are 153 spinning mills and they employ 87,400 workers. Here, cotton is converted to yarn and the yarn is then sent to Tiruppur, the knitwear capital of India. Most of the workers in these mills are adolescent young girls in the 14 – 18 age group drawn from other districts of Tamil Nadu and migrant workers from states like Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, West Bengal, Assam and North Eastern states. Workers report long hours for meagre wages, with inconsistent labour practices and industrial safety. Pasumai FM produces programmes on labour laws, child rights, importance of education to help labourers to become cognisant of their rights. Pasumai FM's constant support has helped these workers to reach out to them in case of any hardships they face. The local authorities work in tandem with Pasumai FM to offer support and protection.

- Also, in Dindigul town, weavers belonging to the Saurashtra region are engaged by the saree manufacturers. These weavers, mostly semi-literate women, working on home weaving units, play a major role in the supply chain of saree manufacturing meant for Northern Indian states. In partnership with the Department of Science and Technology, Pasumai FM produced programmes for them to teach basic mathematics. This has helped them get a fair price for the raw materials they buy and has also helped them to negotiate better wages.

- Pasumai FM also produces programmes on women's health, nutrition, sanitation and the importance of education to make the community socially aware.

- Pasumai FM also contributes to environment conservation and preservation through various programmes. Dindigul, being a semi-arid hard rock region, is dependent on ground water for drinking and agriculture purposes. There are no perennial rivers. Therefore, seasonal rivers like the Kudakanar and its tributaries, Nangachiyaru and Santhanavarthiniyaru, which go dry during the summers, are relied upon for drinking and irrigation purposes. With low storage capacity and worsening ground water pollution due to the tanneries in the region, the Kudakanar's waters are sub-optimally used. Other than this, legal and illegal sand mining has spoiled the river basin, lakes

and ponds. This has significantly affected the farmers. Along with producing programmes on the best practices in farming, Pasumai FM also creates programmes on water conservation, rainwater harvesting, desilting of ponds and lakes, effective water sharing among farmers, drip irrigation and stopping scrupulous digging of bore wells.

The programmes and broadcasts of Pasumai FM also support the economic empowerment of its target community. Pasumai FM produces several programmes on best farming practices and regularly shares input on crops that could produce higher yields with limited resources. This radio station also provides information on rearing cattle, growing fodder for cattle, etc. to supplement their income. In addition, there are programmes geared to housewives on the importance of financial independence and ways to achieve that.

Apart from the social and economic relevance, Pasumai FM also broadcasts entertainment programmes for their listeners. These are in the form of skits, phone-in, talk shows and songs on demand.

Keeping the local content relevant

When the team at Pasumai FM identifies a problem in the community, they speak to the people concerned about the problem and potential solutions that they may have in mind. Then the team takes perspectives on the issue from the elected representatives, government officials, and subject matter experts and weaves the programme together. When the members of the community listen to the programme, they not only hear their own voice, they also get a holistic picture of the problem and the role of different stakeholders in solving the problem. For example, Sirumalai is a region, about 25 kilometres from Dindigul district. There are around four tribal villages in this region. The villages have no access to either transportation or electricity. The Pasumai FM team reached out to these villagers to understand their needs and their lifestyle. During the interview, the villagers expressed their desire for growth by asking for education facilities for the next generation, electricity, better roads, caste certificate and transportation facilities. Then the team reached out to the local school teacher (an employee at the electricity board) the elected local representative, and the government officials to get their perspectives on the issue. This activity brought out the efforts that are taken to address these issues, the challenges they face in implementing various government schemes and the expectations the authorities have from the community. When this programme was finally aired, it gave a holistic picture to all the stakeholders.

Sustaining the radio station

Pasumai FM spends approximately USD 1,340 per month to run the community radio station. This is inclusive of the salaries, electricity costs and the running costs of the FM station. Government advertisements, local sponsors, and undertaking projects form their key source of funding.

Impact created

- Improved working environment for the weavers.
- Awareness amongst farmers about the best practices in farming and alternative practices to improve their livelihood.
- Many who had quit farming have returned to farming.
- By being the most popular media with around 85% listenership, Pasumai FM has become the community's go to medium to voice their concerns.
- Increased awareness on the importance of education amongst the population.

Featured impact story

Ms. Sangeetha hails from a family of farmers. During her growing up years, radio had always been her companion. When Pasumai FM was started in Dindigul, she became a regular listener and aspired to work at the station. Her aspiration turned into reality in 2010, and she is currently the station head. Her background in agriculture has helped her in understanding the needs of the farmers and gives her a sense of gratification. In the last 10 years, she has acquired a lot of knowledge on various subjects. This education has given her a lot of confidence. When asked what has been the biggest impact radio has had on her, she says that in a world of information overload, the responsibility of broadcasting in radio has helped her differentiate facts from fake news. It has taught her to analyse various sides of the story and form her own opinion. She claims that it has empowered her to develop clarity of thought.

> *"I believe in the power of knowledge and education. Through my radio experience, I've learnt a lot. I've learnt to differentiate facts from fake news. Before we present a programme to our listeners, we take perspectives from all the stakeholders, and that has opened my eyes on how different people view the same problem. I tell my two daughters to focus on education because I believe that it will help them grow in life. In my programmes on radio too, I advocate the same thing. I believe that girls can fight all social evils like child marriage, child labour, exploitation of women in workplaces, lack of awareness on health and hygiene with education."*

Pasumai FM contribution during COVID-19

Pasumai FM has been spreading awareness about COVID-19 in 1,500 villages in the blocks of Athoor, Reddiyarchatram, Sanarpatti, Vedasandur and Dindigul.

When the "Janata Curfew" was announced last year in 2020, the radio station started reaching out to people by providing information about the essential items available in the shops, providing health tips to increase immunity and tips on social distancing through their programmes that were aired from 6:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. Amid the COVID-19 crisis, the station also aired bytes about the Tamil diaspora, narrating their stories about how they have been coping with the pandemic.

J. Paul Baskar, station head at Pasumai Radio when this research was conducted, explained, "In villages, nobody stays indoors, unlike cities. So, we have to keep reinforcing the message of social distancing to warn people that this is a matter of life and death. Our listeners are mostly humble farmers or fisherfolk. So, our radio jockeys compose folk songs, skits or jokes in the local dialects to connect with them. Positive messages about villages which have successfully battled COVID-19 are also relayed to inspire them."

As the country began emerging from the prolonged lockdown, Pasumai community radio station, under "#TheNewNormalcampaign" anchored by SMART, mobilised communities to accept and adapt to a new normal life with masks, social distancing and practising hand hygiene in times of COVID-19. Pivoted through radio, this is the first of its kind countrywide behaviour change initiative.

YERALA VANI COMMUNITY RADIO, JALIHAL

Name of the station	Yerala Vani Community Radio
Year of incorporation	2010
Nature of funding	NGO and local advertisements
Frequency used	91.2 Mhz
Region of broadcast	Jalihal block, Jath taluka in Sangli district
Total number of staff	4 members
Station head	Ms. Anuradha Atul Kunte
Broadcast timings	11.5 hours
Language of broadcast	Marathi and Kannada

Background

Yerala Vani community radio station was established in Jalihal in Sangli district of Maharashtra on 31 July 2010 by an NGO, Yerala Projects Society. The radio station aims to broadcast programmes for the local community as Jalihal is a drought prone region. Low rainfall has led to poor soil texture and that in turn has resulted in farmers giving up agriculture and temporarily migrating to nearby regions to harvest sugarcane. Jalihal struggles with problems like illiteracy, poor health, alcohol addiction and lack of education for their children. The NGO, Yerala Projects Society, has been working for the people living in the village for over 35 years by implementing projects to raise awareness in the space of agriculture, health, education and women's empowerment. While implementing these projects, the team realised that bad roads and poor public transportation were barriers to the programme as they struggled to reach the households in the village to enable project incentives. Lack of telephone lines and effective electrification further added to their woes. Also, Jalihal village experiences, on an average, power outages for 14 – 15 hours every day. The team also realised that the government schemes, advertisements and campaigns which were meant for the villagers were not reaching them. In order to build an effective communication channel for the villagers, Yerala Projects Society founded Yerala Vani Community Radio Station. The radio programmes are broadcast in various formats like announcements, phone-ins, studio interviews and narrowcasting.

Themes of the programmes

Yerala Vani works in tandem with its parent organisation in implementing its programmes. The programmes aired include interviews of progressive farmers sharing their best practices. They also frequently speak to experts and get their opinions on cropping patterns, usage of insecticides and pesticides, animal husbandry, health problems of children, women, educational career guidance for local youth and support for local teachers.

Social aspects

- To prevent farmers from abandoning their land and migrating to nearby villages for sugarcane harvesting, the Yerala Projects Society promoted dragon fruit cultivation amongst the farmers. A series of programmes were made on 'Why to grow dragon fruit?' The scientific reasons and favourability of the agro-climatic conditions of that area, the techniques involved in cultivation of dragon fruit, saplings and the infrastructure required were aired. This resulted in over 100 farmers visiting the demonstration plot of Yerala Projects Society. They also aired the interview of a successful lady farmer on her experience of growing dragon fruit. This created a lot of awareness amongst the farming community, which resulted in around 40 farmers applying for the saplings and also receiving hands-on training from Yerala Projects Society.

- They also have a special segment for school and college students on career guidance and career counselling.

- With the support from Department of Science, Government of India, Yerala Vani produced a series of programmes to educate the 50.00 % community on the social and health challenges of an early marriage. The topics covered were on the reasons why early marriages were banned in India, the physical and mental health of girls, etc. They would narrowcast these programmes and get women to share their stories on the hardships they experienced due to early marriage. They then dramatised these stories and broadcast them as skits through this radio station.

- It is a practice in Jalihal village for men to abandon their wives for not giving birth to a male child and remarry another woman. Yerala Vani produced a series of programmes to raise awareness on

this issue by providing scientific knowledge on the gender formation in the mother's womb and narrowcasted the same. During narrowcasting, many women shared their experiences on how they were abandoned by their husbands for not producing a male child. They also brought to light the perspective that remarriage did not guarantee their husbands a male child.

Keeping the local content relevant

Community participation forms an integral part of Yerala Projects Society and Yerala Vani. The Gram Panchayat members and self help groups heads contribute to identifying the challenges faced by the community. Yerala Vani's field reporters speak to the community to collect the stories and problems of the people and seek experts' guidance on them.

Sustaining the radio station

The community radio station spends approximately USD 1,200 per month for its running expenses. Their sources of funding are from the parent NGO, projects they undertake and local advertisements.

Challenges of the community

Jalihal experiences power outages for 14 to 15 hours every day. One of the biggest hurdles for the Yerala Projects Society team during the process of setting up Yerala Vani was to ensure uninterrupted power supply. To address this, a small windmill was spared for uninterrupted power supply. Another challenge was to get the radio tower assembled and established. Considering that Jalihal is located in a remote region, there were no professionals available to set it up. To address this, the team reached out to the locals. The Yerala Vani team educated the volunteers on how to set up the tower, and together they made it happen. Initially, the team also struggled to find listeners, let alone people willing to participate and produce programmes. Today Yerala Vani has two studios for recording, one at Jalihal and another at its head office in Sangli. They have trained professionals who work out of the Sangli office and with their support, they have also trained the locals to participate in programme production.

Impact created

- Increased awareness on best practices in agriculture and sustainable farming
- Awareness on the impact of child marriage
- Reduced harassment of women not giving birth to girls.

Yerala Vani community radio's contribution during COVID-19

At the time when the lockdown was going to be announced, the station head of Yerala Vani community radio, ex. station head Uday Godbole, was receiving frenzied messages on the station's WhatsApp group to broadcast the Prime Minister's address on the inevitable 21 day lockdown due to the spread of COVID-19 across the country. Due to limited internet access and electricity problems, villagers were not able to access TV. As a result, Uday quickly broadcast the Prime Minister's speech live through the community radio station.

Since the lockdown, Yerala Vani through its rural development work in 22 villages of Sangli district, has been broadcasting programmes related to health, education and agriculture. As the pandemic affected school education, the radio station started the programme "Radio Classroom" under its Scope Digital School (School of Progressive Education, Jalihal), enabling teachers to use the radio station to teach students from standards 8th to 12th.

As part of the Mission Corona programme, an initiative of UNICEF, the radio station broadcasted several shows on adopting new strategies during the pandemic and discussed the measures to be taken

during the lockdown. Under this programme, the station broadcasted shows on the importance of wearing three-layer masks, handwashing, quarantine and maintaining social distance. The radio also aired interviews of doctors, ASHA community health workers,[5] psychologists, teachers and local authorities who were contacted over the phone. Through these programmes, listeners were informed where to get essential services, how to apply for government relief funds, how to practice quarantine and social distancing.

Featured impact story

Ms. Rajashree has been working as a radio jockey at Yerala Vani for the last three years. Hailing from a family of farmers, She has been a regular listener of Yerala Vani and had always wanted to present programmes on the radio. Once the opportunity came up, she immediately signed up. She currently produces programmes on raising awareness on the best practices in agriculture. Providing valuable information to the very community she belongs to and helping them lead a better lives has been a gratifying experience for Rajashree. When asked what has changed post the radio experience, she says that she no longer just speaks; instead, she thinks and understands how she will be perceived and then communicates. This has become the norm both on and off the radio. When asked what radio means to her, she says that both the medium and her listeners have become her friends.

> *"I'm from the farming community. I've seen the kind of struggle my family has experienced because of constant drought. Through the community radio, I've learnt a lot about the kind of sustainable crops we can grow, best practices in irrigation and ways in which we can get better rates for our crops. Sharing that information with the community makes me feel empowered. I feel like I'm giving them the knowledge that will help them get out of their sufferings."*

Impact story of Yerala Vani community radio: Ms. Gita (name changed)

Ms. Gita (name changed) is a mother of two girls and was pregnant for the third time. She was told by her in-laws that her husband would marry another woman if the third child also turned out to be a girl. Gita was part of the Yerala Projects Society project and was also an ASHA worker. The family would regularly listen to radio programmes from Yerala Vani. Soon, Gita delivered a baby girl and her in-laws fixed the marriage for their son with another woman. Gita walked away from the marriage with a resolve to take care of her daughters. It was during this time that Yerala Vani was broadcasting a skit on how a man who abandoned his first wife for not producing a male child ended up having two girls from his second marriage too. Gita's husband listened to these programmes and on the day of the marriage, walked away from it and joined Gita to live happily ever after.

On the economic front, Yerala Vani contributes to it by offering regular updates on the prospective rates of agricultural produce in the cities. The programmes also discuss different ways by which farmers and members of the community can market their produce for better market rates.

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5   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Accredited_Social_Health_Activist

RADIO KOTAGIRI, KOTAGIRI

Name of the station	Radio Kotagiri
Year of incorporation	2013
Nature of funding	NGO and government projects
Frequency used	90.4 Mhz
Region of broadcast	Kotagiri, Nilgiris district
Total number of staff	2 Members
Station head	Ms. Jeyanthi
Broadcast timings	10 hours
Language of broadcast	Tamil and languages of the tribal communities

Background

Radio Kotagiri was launched by Keystone Foundation in 2013. This community radio station is located in Kotagiri, a town in the Nilgiris District of the Western Ghats – A UNESCO world heritage, renowned for its biodiversity. The content aired focuses on filling up information gaps in areas like health and sanitation, agriculture, wildlife conservation, climate change and preservation of local languages and culture. Thus it directly contributes to improving the capacity of the communities to address their issues themselves.

Broadcast formats

- Announcements
- Phone-ins
- Studio Interviews
- Narrowcasting

Themes of the programmes

Kotagiri is home to five native tribal communities Irula, Badaga, Toda, Kota and Kurumba. The communities have their own languages and culture. One of the key agendas of Kotagiri radio is to preserve the culture and languages of these indigenous communities. They also produce programmes to curb the usage of pesticides and in turn its impact on the environment.

Social aspects

- Mostly men from Toda and Kota communities practice agriculture. In the last few years, they have either resorted to usage of pesticides and fertilizers to increase production or given up agriculture for better prospects. In partnership with the local administration and the parent NGO, Radio Kotagiri produces programmes to raise awareness on organic agriculture and its impact on the environment. The programmes include interviews with successful farmers on their best practices as well as scientists and government officials on the schemes available to promote organic cultivation.

- For better employment prospects, tribal youth relocate to bigger cities, and in the process, lose touch with their indigenous culture and language. Through their programmes, Radio Kotagiri has been documenting the cultural practices of these tribal communities and their languages. Their idea is to create a repository of the communities' knowledge and practices.

- In partnership with the Department of Science's "Science for Women" project, Radio Kotagiri created a series of programmes to raise awareness on women's health, hygiene, role of nutrition in prenatal and postnatal care, etc.

- They also produce programmes specifically targeted towards girls to raise their awareness on the importance of education, better nutrition and menstrual health.

Sustaining the radio station

The radio station is stationed in the premises of the parent NGO, Keystone Foundation. This gives them access to free internet and electricity. They spend approximately USD 667 per month for other expenses. Apart from the funding from the parent NGO, they also get some basic support from organisations like UNICEF, CRA and SMART for the projects they undertake.

Impact created

- Increased awareness on the benefits of organic agriculture and millets cultivation.
- Awareness amongst women on the importance of their well-being and special focus on nutrition and hygiene.
- An openness in the community to seek alternate perspectives to solve their problems.
- Increased awareness on different tribal languages and their customs.

Featured impact story

One of the key members of Kotagiri Radio, Ms. Jeyanthi, belongs to the Irula tribe of this region. She says that her husband passed away in 2012, leaving a void in her life. She also needed a job to take care of herself and her three children. She started with a job at Keystone Foundation as a barefoot journalist and eventually transitioned into being one of the pillars of Radio Kotagiri. She says that she was not a natural broadcaster, and it was only with a lot of practice and training that she learnt the fine art of writing for the audience and presenting comfortably in front of the microphone.

She says that she was overwhelmed by the responsibility of facing life all alone, but her interactions with the people from the community for her programmes gave her the ability to seek perspectives to solve her problems. One of the perspectives she developed through her interactions was that her own problems were much smaller when compared to those she was listening to. By being the voice of the community and with her work to solve their problems, she feels that she has not only developed a sense of satisfaction but also an identity within the community. When asked what radio has given her, she replied with an enthusiastic, *"happiness."* She also believes that radio has given her an inner strength to solve her problems.

> *"We discuss a lot of the community's problems in our shows. We get perspectives from the members of the community, experts, administrators, etc. When we get different perspectives on the problems, we also come up with different ways of solving the problem. "In fact, this is the skill I have learnt after I joined the community radio. I no longer feel alone and feel overwhelmed by my problems. I seek people's perspectives and with that I try to solve my own problems."*

RADIO BRAHMAPUTRA, DIBRUGARH

Name of the station	Radio Brahmaputra
Year of incorporation	2015
Nature of funding	NGO and local advertisments
Frequency used	90.4 Mhz
Region of broadcast	Dibrugarh District in Assam
Total number of staff	6 Members
Station head	Mr. Bhaskar Bhuyan
Broadcast timings	14 hours
Language of broadcast	Assamese, Sadri, Bhojpuri, Mishing and Bodo)

Background

Radio Brahmaputra is a community radio station situated near the banks of the river Brahmaputra in Dibrugarh district of Upper Assam. The radio station broadcasts programmes in local languages and dialects with the direct involvement of local communities. The radio was started in 2007 by the Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research with the support from UNESCO. While they got the official license to broadcast only in 2015, they have been narrowcasting their programmes to the community since 2007. With Mr. Bhaskar Bhuyan as the coordinator, Radio Brahmaputra has six full-time staff. The uniqueness of this station is that it practices multi-lingual broadcasting in Sadri (dialect of the tea tribe community), Assamese, Bhojpuri, Bodo and Mishing. While the community radio seeks to reach the most marginalised groups on the 14 islands and 30 tea plantations and more than 180 villages in Dibrugarh district, its footprint reaches across the Brahmaputra to other districts as well – thanks to their social media outreach.

Broadcast formats

- Announcements
- Phone-ins
- Studio Interviews
- Narrowcasting
- Quiz shows

Themes of the programmes

Dibrugarh district is home to many tea gardens. Along with many local workers, immigrants from Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Orissa and Bihar work in the tea gardens. Lack of education amongst the population due to lack of primary schools has led to anaemia, hypertension, substandard food habits, child marriage, high maternal mortality rates and high infant mortality rates to name a few. One of the main focuses of Brahmaputra Radio is to educate its population on the importance of health and well-being.

Social aspects

- Until they received their license in 2015, the team was narrowcasting awareness programmes on health, sanitation, diet and nutrition for the tea workers in the estates. Initially, there was a lot of struggle involved in getting acceptance both from the community and the tea estates' management for these initiatives. Currently, the workers not only consume these programmes, but also produce programmes. Some of the key challenges faced by the community are maternal mortality, infant mortality, child marriage, anaemia, lack of awareness on nutrition and diet and lack of awareness on the importance of education. The community volunteers identify these challenges and record perspectives from the community. They then reach out to experts on ways to combat these challenges. When the programmes are made by the community, there is a sense of ownership amongst them.

- While initially they were broadcasting only for Dibrugarh district, soon the station realised that there was a lot of participation from Hajong community from Dhemaji district for their popular quiz programmes. They identified volunteers from Dhemaji and trained them on programme production. People from Dhemaji did not come to the studio, but rather recorded programmes from their region

using their mobile phones. The clips were then sent to the station via the messaging app, WhatsApp. The team at Radio Brahmaputra would edit the programmes and broadcast them. Radio Brahmaputra conducts quiz programmes regularly to map its listeners.

Environmental aspects

- Because this region is prone to floods, apart from planned regular programmes, Radio Brahmaputra broadcasts regular updates on weather, flood alerts, etc.

Entertainment aspects

- The radio station showcases local talent for the listening public by encouraging entertainment, competition and information.

- The content of the radio programmes is primarily broadcast in five different languages and dialects in the coverage area. Radio Brahmaputra caters to around six lakhs (600,000) listeners in its coverage area. The coverage provides opportunities to the media dark regions, such as the Dibrugarh tea garden areas, Dhemaji and a few parts of Lakhimpur district to listen to the radio programmes in their own dialects.

Keeping the content locally relevant

Assam is home to many languages and dialects. Being a multi-lingual broadcaster, Radio Brahmaputra encourages its audiences to be aware of the different languages and dialects being spoken in this region, which also helps in keeping these indigenous dialects alive.

Sustaining the radio station

Radio Brahmaputra's spends approximately USD 800 to USD 1,340 per month to run the community radio station, which is inclusive of the salaries, electricity costs and the operating costs of the FM station. Government advertisements, local sponsors and projects form their key sources of funding.

Impact created

- Educating the local population on the importance of education.
- Acceptance from the community and tea garden owners.
- Local participation from the community as community reporters and programme producers as well as showcasing of local talent has created ownership amongst the community members.
- Increased awareness amongst the community about child marriage, nutrition and diet, care during pregnancy, infant care, etc.
- Created a repository of local languages and dialects.

Featured impact story

Ms. Tutumoni Munda is a 30-year-old programme producer at Radio Brahmaputra. She belongs to the tea garden community. She moved to Dibrugarh district after her wedding. Radio Brahmaputra was very popular amongst her family members, and she also got hooked on the channel. She actively participated in their phone-in programmes and quiz shows. This eventually lead to a job offer from Radio Brahmaputra. Now she produces programmes on women's health, early childhood education and a talent show to showcase local talent. From being a housewife to a radio professional, she feels that her biggest growth has come from earning respect from her community and her family. She also feels that the

appreciation she gets from her listeners gives her the motivation to do better. Initially she was very apprehensive about being able to manage her home and the job. She then began to schedule her day more effectively, using the quiet time in the night after her chores, to write her scripts. Ms. Munda says,

> *"Initially I was very apprehensive about taking up the job. I wasn't sure if I would be able to manage both my work and home. But I realised that the programmes I make are helping me manage my home better. By educating my listeners, I'm educating myself."*

Radio Brahmaputra's contribution during COVID-19

Amidst the pandemic, Radio Brahmaputra 90.4 FM has been the only source of receiving information about coronavirus for the Assam tea garden workers and neighbouring villagers. The community radio station assisted people during the lockdown and helped check the spread of coronavirus in tea gardens and riverine villages by generating awareness about the pandemic in the local dialects. Radio Brahmaputra 90.4 FM, situated near the banks of Brahmaputra river in the district of Dibrugarh, Assam, serves around 700,000 people belonging to various ethnic communities of Upper Assam.

In collaboration with the District Health Society and Assam State Disaster Management Authority, the radio station started broadcasting two hours of live COVID-19 awareness programming every day, where listeners could participate through phone calls and WhatsApp before the lockdown was imposed. Radio Brahmaputra broadcasts 12 hours of programming, including three hours of live programming between 8:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m., ranging from quiz shows to awareness on COVID-19 from all around the world. Radio Brahmaputra has been broadcasting special programmes for farmers, municipal workers, frontline workers (including ASHA, ANM and Anganwadi workers) and parents on child protection and safety from the virus. To engage with their audience, the radio station started a live interaction programme with doctors of community medicine, psychiatrists, local MLAs, Panchayati Raj Institution members and government officials. As part of the awareness shows, Radio Brahmaputra follows UNICEF and WHO guidelines and also broadcasts information received through the Directorate of Information and Public Relations, National Health Mission and the local district administration related to COVID-19. Community radio serves as an information bridge between the government and the public in remote areas. Breaking the barrier of language, Radio Brahmaputra has been broadcasting programmes in the Assamese language as well as in the local dialects like Sadri, Bodo, Hajong and Mishing.

Station head Bhaskar Bhuyan stated,

> *"People in the tea gardens do not understand English. We first translated the guidelines from WHO and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare on coronavirus into Assamese. After that, the contents are translated in Sadri (the dialect of the tea tribe community), Bodo and Mishing languages for those living inside the tea gardens in Dibrugarh and in the remote riverine villages in Dhemaji district."*

The station is also making radio spots that focus on bringing awareness about COVID-19 and how it can be avoided by maintaining social distancing and hygiene. Agriculture experts were also brought in to help farm-based entrepreneurs during the lockdown. At present, the community radio reaches 32 tea plantations and more than 180 villages within a radius of 10 to 15 kilometres.

RADIO MUSKAN, KANDHAMAL

Name of the station	Radio Muskan
Year of incorporation	2012
Nature of funding	NGO and government projects
Frequency used	90.4 Mhz
Region of broadcast	Kandhamal District in Orissa
Total number of staff	3 Members
Station head	Mr. Daneshwar Sahoo
Broadcast timings	15 hours
Language of broadcast	Oriya and Kui Language

Background

Kandhamal district in Orissa is dominated by tribal communities. Considered one of the most underdeveloped and poverty-stricken districts in India, the local youth are prone to taking up anti-social, often violent activities. Radio Muskan was founded by Mr. Daneshwar Sahoo with the support from his NGO, Disha Foundation, which has been active since 2003. While implementing a project in one of the hilly regions of the district, the team figured out that the people there were completely unaware of any of the government projects or schemes. They were completely cut off from the rest of the world. There was no electricity nor a source of entertainment. In order to create a communication network for people in these remote villages, Disha Foundation started Radio Muskan in 2012.

Broadcast formats

- Announcements
- Phone-ins
- Studio Interviews
- Narrowcasting

Themes of the programmes

In their 15-hour-long broadcast, the themes that they cover are spirituality, children's education, agriculture, health awareness, phone-in with experts, quiz programmes and local music programmes. Through their programmes, Radio Muskan has been able to connect with the local population and build a communication channel for them.

Social aspects

- Pregnant women delivering at home is a commonly followed practice in this region. In order to promote institutional delivery, the government has introduced financial schemes. Radio Muskan produces programmes to raise awareness about the dangers of home delivery for the mother and the fetus and promote institutional birth.

- Engage local youth in developmental activities in order to keep them out of alcoholism and unethical activities.

- In partnership with Department of Science's "Science for Women project", Radio Muskan created a series of programmes to raise awareness on women's health, hygiene, role of nutrition in prenatal and postnatal care, etc.

- Every weekend they broadcast a phone-in show, where the locals get to call up and speak to experts. It is one of the most popular shows as it truly enables the community to have its voice heard.

Environmental aspects

The locals grow rice, seasonal vegetables and fruits in this region. The radio station produces programmes on the correct usage of fertilizers and pesticides and also stories of successful farmers from that region.

Entertainment aspects

- Apart from playing local music, they also look out for local talent and get them to exhibit their talent on the radio. They believe that when the community members get to hear their own voices, it

makes it more relevant for the community to actively listen to the programmes.

Sustaining the radio station

Radio Muskan spends approximately USD 675 to run the radio station, which is funded by the donations received for the NGO. Apart from the funding from the parent NGO, they also get minimal support from the government projects they undertake.

Challenges of the community

Lack of communication with the outside world is one of the key challenges of the community. This leads to lack of awareness on their rights and various schemes offered by the government. In the last eight years, Radio Muskan has played a significant role in bridging the gap for the community. Like all other community radio stations, Radio Muskan also faces financial difficulties in running the station.

Impact created

- By being the only source of connection to the world, Radio Muskan has earned the trust of the community by ensuring that various schemes reach the locals.

- From domestic violence to long power outages, the locals call up the radio station hoping that their problems are addressed. Over the years, Radio Muskan has built connections with the local administration and authorities and has become a voice to address the local population's issues with them.

- Women form the majority of their volunteer base and feel empowered by doing so.

Featured impact story

Shibani is a vivacious, bright and an enthusiastic 28-year-old radio jockey, nicknamed Muskan. She is the face and voice of Radio Muskan. She has been listening to the station ever since its inception and slowly started volunteering by covering local events. Eventually, she figured out that radio was her calling and she became a full-time radio jockey with Radio Muskan. She says she has always been a daredevil and a go-getter and always wanted to work for the people. With Radio Muskan, she found an outlet to express her personality. Her phone-ins are extremely popular with people. People call her up with their problems that range from "my husband is beating me" to "please get the fallen tree removed". She speaks to the local authorities and tries to solve their problems irrespective of the magnitude of the ask. This has earned her a lot of trust and the status of a celebrity in the region.

When asked how radio has impacted her, she says that earlier a lot of things happening in the community would anger her, and her helplessness would only make things worse for her. With radio, she has found an outlet to channel her anger. She also feels that the radio has made her more responsible. For example, in her health programmes, she advocates for her audience to eat healthy food. When her listeners spotted her eating junk food and brought that up on air, she eventually had to stop eating junk food. With a big grin, she says that,

> *"These are little prices I have to pay for being popular. Earlier, I would get angry whenever I would see something wrong happening in the community. My inability to take any action used to make things worse. Now that I'm with the radio, I've found an outlet to take actions and solve their problems. Every single marriage proposal I've got so far, they have asked me to quit my radio job. I've put my foot down and told them all that I would never quit my radio job. I've stopped getting marriage proposals now, but I don't care. I get many calls from girls saying that they want to be brave like me. I am their role model and I feel very good about that."*

VOICE OF AZAMGARH, AZAMGARH

Name of the station	Voice of Azamgarh
Year of incorporation	2011
Nature of funding	NGO and local advertisments
Frequency used	90.8 Mhz
Region of broadcast	Anjan Shaheed, Azamgarh
Total number of staff	6 Members
Station head	Ms. Seema Bharati Srivatsava
Broadcast timings	10 hours
Language of broadcast	Hindi

Background

The Voice of Azamgarh community radio station was started in 2011 with the vision of holistic development for the community members of Anjan Shaheed village in Azamgarh district of Uttar Pradesh. Devoid of any other radio station in Azamgarh, this community radio station has become the real voice of the community and has dedicated shows to create awareness regarding pertinent everyday issues, identify local talent, and most importantly, to empower marginalised people, especially women. Their programmes revolve around educating women on their marital rights, impact of child marriage on girls and the need for prenatal and postnatal care.

Besides using the community radio station as a prime medium for dissemination of information, Voice of Azamgarh uses social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Twitter, to build an online community of conscious citizens, create awareness among community members about pertinent issues, empower them with information and encourage a problem solving approach amongst community members.

Broadcast formats

- Announcements
- Phone-ins
- Studio Interviews
- Narrowcasting
- Dramas

Themes of the programmes

As Azamgarh is widely considered the hotbed of extremist activities, Voice of Azamgarh works largely towards upliftment of underprivileged women in Anjan Shaheed Village located in Azamgarh in eastern Uttar Pradesh. Educating women about their rights, bringing awareness about education, health and sanitation, and helping the local women to find their voices forms the key agenda for Voice of Azamgarh.

Social aspects

- Gender disparity is one of the biggest problems of the community. Girls cannot move around without restrictions or talk freely on subjects like menstrual health or even hope to stay in school beyond Class VIII. Child marriages are very common, and an equally common practice is for men to give "talaqs" or verbal divorce to their wives. The consequences of these practices are brought out through dramas and discussions.

- With the support from Department of Science and Technology's "Science for Women project", Voice of Azamgarh produced programmes on women's health such as menstrual hygiene, importance of breastfeeding, prenatal and postnatal care, etc. Initially, the radio team confronted a lot of inhibition from the community to participate in these programmes. Now, they have managed to break the barriers, and the community volunteers accompany the radio team to the nearby villages to get voices from the community.

Economic aspects

- Because the majority of the population in this region is involved in farming and cattle rearing, Voice of Azamgarh produces programmes on best practices in farming and cattle rearing.

Entertainment aspects

- In order to integrate the community, they involve the community and produce entertainment programmes that showcase the talents of the locals, games like antakshari by college students, etc.

Sustaining the radio station

As the community radio station is located at Mirza Ahsanullah Beg Niswan Girls Degree college, the college provides free electricity and infrastructure to the radio station. The radio station spends around USD 1,350 per month to run it. The radio station is sustained by taking up government projects and local advertisements.

Impact created

- There is a shift in people's attitude towards educating girls. Girls are able to vocalise themselves to their parents on their wish to pursue education over getting married.

- Men are morecomfortable to women and are comfortable talking to them.

- Increased awareness on subjects like health and hygiene, breast feeding, prenatal and postnatal care.

- Women are more willing to address their health issues by visiting a doctor.

- Women have become more outgoing and have received more access to technologies like phone and internet.

Featured impact story

Seema Bharati Srivatsava relocated from Lucknow to spearhead Voice of Azamgarh. She always aspired to have a job which would enable her to empower people and incite real progress. It was this passion that gave her the strength to relocate to a highly patriarchal place like Azamgarh and work with its people for their development. Initially, it was very difficult for her to get the acceptance of the locals. They were quite surprised to see a single woman walk around in the streets without the *"purdah"*. She says that men would refuse to sit with her for meetings because of their fear of accidentally touching her. She identifies gender disparity as a major problem, and with persistence, she has been able to raise awareness about these biases amongst the local population. Today, she is supported by a huge team of local women volunteers who accompany her for field visits to raise awareness on menstrual health, child marriage, marital rights, etc. She feels this is her biggest success.

> *"Very early on, I had decided that I wanted a career that would allow me to influence real progress. This has given me the courage to fight patriarchy and lead by example. When I relocated to Azamgarh, my fear of being accepted in such a conservative and male-dominated society began to unfold. In an area where purdah wearing is a reported norm, people were surprised to see a person not wearing one. Eventually, everyone warmed up to me because I gave them a chance to talk about their lives and issues that were close to their heart."*

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1 & 3 - Brahmaputra, 2 & 4 - Kotagiri, 5 - Pasumai, 6 - Hamara MSPICM

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7 & 11 - Brahmaputra, 8 & 12 - Yerala Vani, 9 - Pasumai, 10 - Hamara MSPICM, 13 - Kadal Osai

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14 - Hamara MSPICM, 15 & 18 - Kadal Osai, 16 - Kotagiri, 17 - Yerala Vani

WOMEN FINDING SELF-EXPRESSION THROUGH COMMUNITY RADIO

For centuries, men have overshadowed women in expressing themselves, and rural India is no exception. In a cocooned patriarchal world, they struggle with violation of their interests with abuse, suppression and simply not being given an outlet to express and discover themselves. While rural India battles with many of its own challenges like lack of infrastructure, economic growth, lack of access to education and social and cultural stigmas,[6] the humble community radio has come out as a medium for women to spearhead change in their communities and in the process find their own voices to express themselves.

Self-expression can be defined as the expression or assertion of one's own personality as in conversation, behaviour, poetry, painting or any art form. In this paper, by conducting in-depth interviews with eight community radio broadcasters, we have explored how women have used community radio as a medium of self-expression.

A brief snapshot of how community radio has played a key role in empowering women with self-expression is given below.

Kadal Osai, Pamban

In a region where there is very little penetration of mainstream media, Kadal Osai, apart from empowering the fishermen community, has also truly become the voice for the women in this region. A passionate and a self-driven woman with commercial radio experience is running the station and has inspired many local women to break personal barriers and be part of the radio station. For those women who come from patriarchal societies and conservative homes, this radio station has given them the exposure to understand their rights, help them understand their struggles, find solutions to their problems and empower other women in the community on various social issues like child marriage, marital abuse, conservation of the environment and parenting the future generation.

Hamara MSPICM, Solan

The station head grew up in a patriarchal family where she was not encouraged to speak nor had she the courage to express herself. When her husband set up the community radio station and was looking for someone to spearhead the initiatives, she felt that she could use it as an opportunity to break her barrier and find her voice. She feels that the metamorphosis she underwent has not only given her the voice to express herself but also the drive to encourage other women in the community to speak about their challenges.

Pasumai FM, Dindigul

The biggest impact radio has had on the station head is the awareness to differentiate between facts and fake news. She feels that the sense of responsibility that comes with broadcasting has opened her to look for perspectives, analyse the data she receives and then present it to her audience. She believes that education will empower girls to broaden their perspectives and fight against the community's social evils like child marriage, exploitation of workers and lack of awareness on education and health. She empowers the community by advocating education.

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6   Kapur, R. (2019). Problems and Challenges in Rural Areas. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332187494_Problems_and_Challenges_in_Rural_Areas

Yerala Vani, Jalihal

Abandoning women for not giving birth to a male child is a common practice in Jalihal village. Helping farmers with best practices in agriculture and educating the community with ill effects of child marriage and breaking the stigma around giving birth to girls are some of the prime issues of focus for Yerala Vani community radio station. Impact stories from the region elicit how the programmes have given voices to the women in the community, and in turn, have caused a ripple effect in empowering these women to provide voices for the community. For them, the environment they grew up in shaped their voices. Giving it back to the community is what makes them feel empowered. For one it was agricultural knowledge; for the other it was acceptance of a girl child in the family.

Radio Brahmaputra, Dibrugarh

Lack of education has marred the lives of the tea garden workers in the Dibrugarh district in Assam. This has led to many challenges like lack of awareness about their rights in their work place, child marriage, increased maternal mortality and infant mortality. The lack of infrastructure and connectivity only increases the complexity of the problem. For the broadcaster in this radio station, producing programmes to raise awareness on these issues has empowered her to manage her life better. Initially, while she was apprehensive about managing both work and home, the programmes she produces have given her the self-management skills to multitask.

Radio Kotagiri, Kotagiri

A personal loss left the station head with a sense of void. When she was overwhelmed by the responsibilities of life, a job in Radio Kotagiri gave her the opportunity to understand various problems faced by the community. She feels that by listening to the community's problems and seeking perspectives, she has found a voice to open up to others about her challenges and be open to the idea of seeking outside perspectives to solve her problems.

Radio Muskan, Kandhamal

One of the most backward districts of India, Kandhamal has limitations in infrastructure, connectivity and communication. People in this region are unaware of their rights as well as benefits offered by the government. This has led to a lot of resentment and anger amongst the population. The radio broadcaster at Radio Muskan is one of the disenfranchised population. She saw pain and suffering all around her. Her inability to act angered her. With the radio station, she found an outlet to serve the community, solve their problems and get them to speak up. In the same way that she found her medium of self-expression, she also empowers the community to find their voices with the radio station.

Voice of Azamgarh, Azamgarh

Azamgarh, a hotbed for extremists' activities and patriarchal norms, was neither receptive to the idea of community radio nor to a woman station head who broke every patriarchal norm to bring out change in the community. While there was initial resistance, the station head's will to make a change kept her going. Now she empowers women in the community to speak about their challenges on the radio and also encourages other women in the community to voice their opinions.

ADAPTATION TO USING TECHNOLOGY

In this research study, all the women interviewed, felt comfortable using technology to record their programmes, edit their programmes and broadcast them. While they did not have any prior experience of using technology, they were quick to learn and adapt. They also mentioned that they did find it challenging initially, but eventually with training, they had become comfortable using the devices.

During the interviews, it was observed that mobile phones were predominantly used to record the interactions with people in the communities. For example, the community members of Brahmaputra Radio record and edit their programmes on their mobile phones and send it to the studio for final mixing and broadcasting. Through our interviews we were able to infer that radio as medium supports frugal technology (like mobile phones) for its operation.

Radio Brahmaputra, while initially was broadcasting only for Dibrugarh district, soon the station realised that there was a lot of participation from Hajong community from Dhemaji district for their popular quiz programmes. They identified volunteers from Dhemaji and trained them on programme production. People from Dhemaji do not come to the studio, but rather recorded programmes from their region using their mobile phones; clips are then sent to the station via messaging app WhatsApp. The team at Radio Brahmaputra would edit the programmes and broadcast them.

In Radio Muskan, smart phones are used by the volunteers to record the voices of the community. As the audio recorders are too expensive, smart phones are used as an additional resource for recording. Smart phones are also used to listen to the radio programmes.

Invariably all radio stations use smart phones to interact with their listeners. Audience feedback, listener groups, phone-ins and quiz contests are various forms by which the radio stations uses smart phones to connect with their listeners.

CHALLENGES

Women's empowerment

Suppression of women has been practised in these regions for many years. Initially it was very difficult for the community to accept the radio station. Women feared expressing their thoughts and opinions. While Azamgarh is one of the largest districts in Uttar Pradesh, it lacked access to media. When the radio was launched, even getting people to listen to radio was a challenge. It was also tough to convince the local administrators on the role that community radio could play for the community. In the last ten years, they have managed to overcome these challenges and have truly become the voices of Azamgarh.

Community radio challenges during the pandemic

The pandemic has once again shown that community radio stations have proved to be one of the most potent mediums of local media, highlighting not only the local issues but also helping the local community to stay connected. On the one hand, community radio stations in India became the key medium for spreading awareness about COVID-19, the preventive measures and bringing the latest government updates to the local communities. On the other hand, during the nationwide lockdown, despite having minimal staff support, it was challenging for community radio stations to not only cover the stories from the ground, but also create different varieties of programmes, edit the shows and broadcast them.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the most daunting task was to maintain the mobility and accessibility of the staff members within the villages covered by the community radio station. Some of the

programmes were preceded by workshops, orientation or training of teachers, collection of material, research, scriptwriting, etc. Obtaining permission from the local authorities was also challenging for the radio stations.

One of the common challenges that community radio stations faced was limited availability of human resources. During a discussion, the community radio stations mentioned that limited funding was another prime challenge. The payment of rent, salaries and other miscellaneous expenditures were worrying factors. For Radio Brahmaputra, involving their staff in other activities outside of broadcasting has become a necessary source of sustenance.

In the last eight months, community radio stations have shown immense commitment by complementing the work of the district authorities in broadcasting the official updates, busting myths and providing information during lockdowns in their areas.

This is in spite of the Government of India's claim of providing financial support to community radio stations for not only setting up, but also helping with maintenance costs by raising the advertising air time.[7] According to the government's community radio policy, the stations are allowed to air advertisements for seven minutes for every one hour presently[8] Information and Broadcasting Minister Prakash Javadekar announced that the advertisement air time will be raised to 12 minutes per hour of broadcast.[9] However, many radio stations stated in their interviews that they were not even able to increase to five minutes of advertisement per hour of their broadcasting time because of serving in low socio-economic demographic regions.

Moreover, funds allocated under the Community Radio Support Scheme go to organising national sammelans (conferences) and awareness workshops for encouraging organisations to apply for a community radio license.[10] Thus, these funds do not support the existing community radio stations towards their maintenance fees or the cost of programming, volunteer support, staff support and training.

It should be noted that broadband penetration in rural India is limited to a mere 29.2%.[11] Unreliable internet connectivity and shortage of power supply are major challenges for community radio station staff members for creating and broadcasting programmes from their homes. As many of these community radio stations are located in remote or geographically difficult terrains, they need to keep a backup internet connection for broadcasting, which is burdensome for them. Working remotely and transferring heavy audio files via the internet also poses a problem as costs of the data connection rise.

Thus, these are the challenges faced by community radio stations in India which are working to help tackle the pandemic despite a considerable financial cost to them; and also putting the health of their staff members at risk, without much support from the government.

7   PTI. (2020, 23 May). I&B ministry considering raising air time for ads on radio to 12 minutes: Prakash Javadekar. Brand Equity. https://brandequity.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/media/ib-ministry-considering-raising-air-time-for-ads-on-radio-to-12-minutes-prakash-javadekar/75910879

8   Community Radio Policy, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. https://mib.gov.in/sites/default/files/Revised%20format%20for%20fresh%20GOPA%20%281%29.pdf

9   Economic Times. (2020, 3 January). Govt approves 2,636 new charging stations in 62 cities: Javadekar. Economic Times. https://energy.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/renewable/govt-approves-2636-new-charging-stations-in-62-cities-javadekar/73084186

10 Community Radio Support Scheme (CRSS), Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. https://mib.gov.in/sites/default/files/Guidelines_for_financial_assistance_under_CRSS.pdf

11 Sharma, S. (2020, 17 September). Modi's 'Digital India' still a far-fetched dream for hinterland; not even 30% of rural India has internet. Financial Express. https://www.financialexpress.com/economy/modis-digital-india-still-a-far-fetched-dream-for-hinterland-not-even-30-of-rural-india-has-internet/2085452

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Community radio is often defined as the radio "for the people, of the people and by the people" that understands the local issues of the local people in their local language. Thus, this media platform acts as the eyes and ears during a disaster and serves as the prime vehicle for sharing information for preparing communities and reducing risks. Being a persuasive, flexible, speedy and powerful local medium, it is sensitive towards understanding the needs of the people. Community radio stations are a trusted source for disseminating information in the remotest regions of the country and have the ability to establish the last mile information connectivity.

Like every other media agency, community radio stations in India have been working against the pandemic at considerable risk and cost to their staff members without having any support from the government. Moreover, community radio stations do not enjoy the formal recognition as media in many parts of the country do. Hence, it was challenging for community radio station reporters to get local administrators and authorities to speak to them over the phone or include them in social media groups meant for distribution of official circulars.

The governments in many countries, recognising community radios as a valuable public resource, extended emergency funding to stations and offered other kinds of financial assistance. In India, however, there was no specific financial support provided to community radio stations by the government.

The current isolation period is a gentle reminder to the authorities to bring adequate policy level changes for leveraging community radio stations covering every block of India and be able to provide uniform access to information and bring equity in communication. The policy recommendations are as follows:

The support for setting up costs mentioned by the minister have been disbursed so scantily over the last few years that the funds allocated under the ministry's much flaunted Community Radio Support Scheme goes mostly to organising national sammelans in Delhi and funding awareness workshops across the country with the objective of encouraging more organisations to apply for a community radio licence. But despite these workshops, there are still less than 251 community radio stations in a country of our size (as contrasted against 350 in Nepal). This calls for another in-depth analysis of the reasons, including insurmountable bureaucratic hurdles, in obtaining a licence. The long-standing demand of the community radio movement that the government establish an autonomous community radio support fund similar to what exists in many other democratic countries, with transparent grant distribution for a range of needs, including setup costs, acquisition of infrastructure, salary support, volunteer training and content production has fallen on deaf ears. The Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity of the ministry, which had started releasing government publicity advertisements on various welfare schemes at considerably low rates, has been defaulting on prompt release of payments. During the current pandemic crisis, there have been suggestions that if the government would at least release the payment of its arrears to the stations, let alone emergency funding, it would be of great help.

As India is signatory to the Constitution and Convention of the International Telecommunication Union, the government should sincerely consider having a small proportion of the Universal Service Obligation Fund in terms of supporting community radio stations in the way the Universal Service Obligation Fund has been established to promote small internet service providers in the country.

As of 31 January 2020, 1.34 lakh gram panchayats (village councils) have been made service ready under all the phases of BharatNet.[12] In order to address the issue of unreliable internet connectivity, it is

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12 Aryan, A. (2020, 6 February). Panchayat net connectivity project set to miss deadline: Only over half service ready. The Indian Express. https://indianexpress.com/article/business/panchayat-net-connectivity-project-set-to-miss-deadline-only-over-half-service-ready-6286719

recommended that BharatNet's internet connectivity be given to the community radio stations at marginal costs, thereby alleviating their financial burden on internet data. This will help them to serve the community in a better way.

In India, over 70% of the population lives in rural regions, out of which only 7.3% rural households have electricity. As a result, the means of accessing information through other mediums such as television becomes challenging. In that scenario, community radio plays a potential role to offer inclusive spaces for those left out of the digital dream.

The reach of community radio stations in the plains is around 25 to 30 kilometres, but in mountainous regions where there is dense forestation, the signal does not reach very far due to low voltage radio (50 watts). The neighbouring country, Nepal, which is very small, has almost 300 or more stations. However, in a country like India, where for every 10 kilometres, there are changes in agriculture, culture and dialect, there is a strong need to encourage community-based organisations to own and run stations communicating in local languages in order to cater to the local needs.

As noted above, the Community Radio Policy in India permits community radio stations to broadcast seven minutes of advertising for every one hour of air time. As a matter of financial support to the stations, the Minister of Information and Broadcasting suggested this could be raised to 12 minutes for an hour to broadcast. However, this shows an ignorance about the fact that community radio stations in the country struggle to raise advertising to even five minutes per hour of broadcast time because of locational disadvantages, lack of marketing skills and socio-economic status of audiences.

Suggested model

While community radio has provided voice to many voiceless communities, there are many loopholes that need to be addressed before more community radio stations are established in the country. Based on our study, here are some of the areas that we feel need to be addressed immediately:

- A community radio model to establish guidelines on content, production and management.
- A governance model to monitor the functioning of community radio.
- A self-sustaining financial model.
- Community participation in planning and production.

Dr. R. Sreedher, one of the pioneers of the community radio movement in India, recommends that as a high priority, the Government of India should set up an autonomous regulatory body which will work towards a structural model for community radio in India as compared to increasing the number of community radio stations in the country. The model will encompass a detailed process for:

- Establishing an advisory board for the station which is reflective of the community. The role of the advisory board is to identify the themes of the programmes and ensure local participation.
- A model to develop training modules to create content and management of the station.
- A financially sustainable model which integrates the local economy with the community.
- A monitoring and reporting structure for the community radio to make its programmes and finances available for review by the governing body.

CONCLUSION

It is evident through these case studies that women, those who are part of the radio stations as well as those who listen to, have found their voices and act as agents of change. Positive change was brought about by empowering other women in the community and by catalysing social and economic development within the community. While the cultural settings, social conditioning and challenges faced by of the interviewed women are very different, the consistent thread has been that the programmes they produce have helped them find their voices, and with that, they are empowering their community.

It may also be noted that community radio has a huge potential as a medium to disseminate vital information and raise awareness. It also can play a pivotal role in integrating the community. Considering that the need for the medium is well established, funding still remains an area of major concern. It is important that a model for community radio is established where processes are put in place for training the stakeholders in programme production, management and financial governance. An autonomous monitoring set-up must also be established to maintain transparency in the operations of the medium.

Community Radio