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Community Radio in Indigenous Languages: A tool for sustainable development in India.

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Indigenous languages are not only a means of transmitting information within a community but also a tool to keep our culture, roots, memories, acts, traditions, habits, and bonds intact. Community Radio with its inherent feature of involving audience not only as consumers but also as producers of information, that too in their own local slang and dialect, could be a potential instrument to preserve native languages. The project explores through a case study of Sangham Radio 90.4FM (Community Radio Station in Telangana, India) how the use of local language in community radio could actively utilize and preserve native dialects, aboriginal identities and cultures while leading towards sustainable development. It further suggests ways to promote local languages through community radio.

Key Words: Community Radio, India, Democratization, Alternative Media, Indigenous languages, Identity.

Français

Radio communautaire en langues autochtones : un outil de développement durable en Inde.

Les langues autochtones ne sont pas seulement un moyen de transmettre des informations au sein d'une communauté, elles constituent également un outil permettant de conserver notre culture, nos racines, des souvenirs, des actes, des traditions, des habitudes et des liens intacts. La radio communautaire, grâce à sa propension naturelle à impliquer le public, non seulement en tant que consommateur mais aussi comme producteur d'informations, dans son propre argot et dialecte, peut constituer un instrument de préservation des langues maternelles. Le projet explore à travers un cas d'étude de Sangham Radio 90.4FM (station de radio communautaire à Telangana, en Inde) comment l'utilisation de la langue locale dans les radios communautaires peut activement vitaliser et préserver les dialectes autochtones, les identités autochtones et les cultures tout en conduisant à un développement durable. Il suggère en outre des moyens de promotion des langues locales par le biais de la radio communautaire.

Mots clés : radio communautaire, Inde, démocratisation, médias alternatifs, langues autochtones, identité.

Español

Radio comunitaria en lenguas indígenas: Una herramienta para el desarrollo sostenible en la India.

Las lenguas indígenas no son solo un medio de transmisión de información dentro de una comunidad, también una herramienta para mantener nuestra cultura, las raíces, recuerdos, actos, tradiciones, hábitos y vínculos intactos. La radio comunitaria, con su característica inherente de involucrar a la audiencia, no sólo como consumidores, sino también como productores de información en su propio argot y dialecto, podría ser un instrumento potencial para preservar idiomas nativos. El proyecto explora a través de un estudio de caso de Radio Sangham 90.4FM (Estación de radio comunitaria en Telangana, India) cómo el uso del idioma local en la radio comunitaria podría activamente utilizar y preservar los dialectos nativos, las identidades aborígenes y culturas, mientras que se avanza hacia el desarrollo sostenible. Además, sugiere formas de promover los idiomas locales a través de la radio comunitaria.

Palabras clave: radio comunitaria, India, democratización, medios alternativos, lenguas indígenas, identidad.

"Mella mella pata panta...Challadaname pacha joanna....Vakasana poyyatoda varshikikya le-setoda....Pellalunnaru dasaratha yatla ellato yer-ra bhumi?" (Paatalu, 2018)

This is an old agricultural folk song in Telugu language, sung by Telangana women in their own dialect. While working in their fields, around two decades ago it was a usual habit for women to sing such self-tuned and self-lyricized song. Such songs are now again recalled, revived, and recorded in voices of local women to broadcast, in their own community radio Sangham 90.4 FM. In the song women are saying that the old crop is growing slowly...there is coolness in the green *jowar* (traditional crop) fields. They are addressing the clouds to give rain, taunting them by saying, what should I do with this red soil? Children are playing, don't you have pity?

Globalization is believed to have turned the world into a small village without borders with instant movement of information, ease of communication, transportation, and cultural exchange. The world though became a global village as predicted and termed by Marshall McLuhan¹ in 1962, we somehow lost our native villages. English, a language coming from the west, became popular as the language of future and development. We gradually started losing our vernacular languages, thereby losing out on our own aboriginal identities, individualities, and cultural ideologies. In our race to become a developed state and to become stronger at the global level, we somehow ignored development of our own local roots and sustainability.

Indigenous languages are not just a means of transmitting information within a community but also an important tool to keep our roots, culture, habits, crops, foods,

traditions and memories intact. They are needed for expression, symbolization, and associations. They provide us with the freedom to not only express but to also think, empower and develop in a sustainable manner. In the preservation and sustainability of regional languages and their dialects, media, particularly Radio, had played a key role. Nevertheless, in the aftermath of globalization, the revolutionary changes that ensued in the communication system completely overshadowed and undermined the relevance of vernacular languages. Consequently, the mass of local population in various regions gradually got alienated from the radio culture that reflected their aspirations and quite often articulation as well. Reconnection of local masses to the local media culture is essential not only to preserve and sustain local aspirations, languages and culture but at the same time to extricate the masses from the negative effects of globalization that have already begun to uproot the people from their traditional ethos and erode their value system. In this backdrop, community radio can serve as a potential rescue measure in preserving our languages and identities.

Community Radio or Participatory Radio could be an effective form of communication media that has the capacity to be personal, intimate and much native than any other means of communication. Radio can serve communities staying in accessible urban nooks and remote corners of a state. It can cater to all, rich or poor and literate or illiterate. It tends to be interesting with its narratives, stories, sounds, anecdotes and anonymity. For Radio, all one needs is spoken words, a language. On air radio with its limited radius has the capacity to serve audience separated by communities and languages, thereby, actively preserving languages, cultures and identities.

1. Use of Telugu language in Sangham Radio 90.4 FM: A case study.

Sangham Radio 90.4 FM is a community radio developed by Deccan Development Society, a not for profit organization working with women's *sanghams* (Voluntary village level associations of poor people) in various villages around Zaheerabad block in Medak district in Telangana, Southern India. It was developed with an aim to represent the unheard voices of the extremely under developed and pre dominantly agricultural region in their own local language, Telugu. Its activities are spread in three blocks of Medak district - Zaheerabad, Nyaykal and Jahrasangam. Sangham Radio was already operational on ground with narrowcasting 700 hours of recording before it finally established itself on air on 15th

October, 2008. The station is managed by Dalit women (Women from marginalized section) of Medak district. Men and women from various villages come and participate in station programming that includes variety on agriculture, agriculture folk songs, Telangana culture, women issues, *Burrakatha* (Traditional story telling), stories, local news etc....

Sangham radio has been selected as a case study to understand and examine the impact of local language based media system in preserving and sustaining parochial traditions and culture. Data was collected using a schedule through a stratified random sampling method

¹ The Gutenberg Galaxy: The making of typographic man.

with 100 regular listeners of Sangham Radio, men and women, in the age group 18 years and above, who heard the station at least once a week. 84% listeners stated that they found Sangham Radio different from other mediums of communication that they have been exposed to. The reasons cited by these respondents included:

- Direct participation of villagers and familiar voices.
- Local language, dialect and slang.
- Local news and stories,
- Discussions on village problems and vital issues.
- Agriculture related information and animal husbandry programmes
- Stories and information presented in an innovative manner.

Respondents who cited language as a feature that makes Sangham Radio different from other means of communication came out with interesting observations:

“When we used to watch Television, we used to think that only educated and privileged people can participate in TV programmes. But with Sangham Radio even we could be on Radio.”

“They use our own local slang. We speak Telangana Telugu. People in other channels are very polite. We are not rude but our language is very rough. When we listen to that similar language, we think one of us is on air.”

“When we listen to familiar voices, own language, we also feel the urge to participate and listen.”

“There is no other channel that speaks our own language in a local style, discusses our own issues and allows us and our neighbors to participate in programme making.”

Some of the other interesting statements made by respondents who found the station unique:

“They get involved with us and provide practical solutions, this can’t be done by other media. Out-

side media is just outsiders and are concerned with big cities like Hyderabad and Delhi, not us.”

“For other media, our daily lives and struggles are not important, but for Sangham our lives are important.”

Respondents feel a kind of familiarity and attachment with the station when they listen to their own local language. Though other mediums like Television, Newspaper and Internet are available in Telugu language, Radio is the best medium for them since the majority of respondents are uneducated or least educated.

Telugu is widely spoken in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana states of India, but respondents have clearly mentioned that Sangham Radio uses their area’s local slang and dialect that makes the station different from other mediums that they have been exposed to. A participatory radio limited to a radius has this uniquely inherent feature of being earthy and using particularly the community language and slang that not only makes listeners intrigued to listen but easily participate without a sense of hesitation. This democratized nature of community media where the audience are free to participate in their own language and manner, provides them with a culture wherein they can freely express themselves and decide on the issues that concern them and their community. Unlike other mediums of communication which could be in a similar language, a community media extends an added advantage of active utilization of that language by its audience. When respondents were asked if they ever participated in programming for the station, 68% stated to have participated in hosting and making various kinds of programmes. This included:

- Agricultural discussions- Which crop to be sown when, seed conservation, damage caused by mechanization.
- Going to various villages for content recording.
- Women issues
- Organizing village meetings for content
- Special recordings during *Jatras* (Regional agricultural festival)

2. All the listeners

Agreed that they freely participate in station programming. The station is managed daily by three women, General Narsamma, Alcole Narsamma and Anjali who belong to the same area. Many listeners mentioned that management only provides them with technical support and they are free to decide what to say and what not to. P.V Satheesh, Director, Deccan Development Society stated, “For us, community radio is total control of

the communities over the radio. And that includes everything, it includes the language, it includes the format, it includes the expression and entire sequence of what will come there.” (Pavarala and Malik, 2007)

“Someone was explaining how he or she was involved in working with rural women and had given them radio training. We asked, what is training that you give? They

said when women come to the radio they talk a lot. We trained them how to talk for a short period. I was absolutely stunned. I think, the whole character of community radio is that. It is a very different kind of articulation, it is a different kind of oral culture, it is a different kind of expression. And if you curb that, then you have completely contained that culture.” (Satheesh in Pavarala and Malik, 2007). Usage of language in a community radio is not just a tool to transmit information rather it is a whole package that provides not only voice but expression, emotions, stories, culture and beliefs of a community. Some statements made by listeners:

“It is our own space, where our own issues are discussed by our own people and sometimes by us only”

“Earlier we were not confident to speak on Radio but after listening and participating, we are able to handle with much ease.”

A democratized environment for communication with an ease of own language allows the audience to associate with the station and consider themselves a part and parcel. During a personal interview, General Narsamma, Sangham Radio producer, said, “Listeners consider this as their own station as we speak in their own language, their stories and issues. Even if one person has to record, they come in groups because they like being here, they like to see them recording. We don’t mind. They connect with us.” Listeners had a good recall value of programmes and mentioned some of their favourites:

Mana Oori Pantalu, (Our village crops) Yaralla Murchatlu (Friendly chit chat) Ramappa songs Mee Letters, (Your Letters) Paatalu (Songs) Mana Ruchulu (Our Recipes)

A democratized public sphere that allows audience to participate freely in their own local language further develops a strong connection with their own roots. An Indigenous language is not just a means of communication rather brings along with it a whole set of culture, traditions and habits of people using that language. Sangham Radio in its Indigenous Telugu language not only involves the community but also constructs programming that makes their aboriginal roots even stronger. Listeners mentioned a variety of content that they heard and even participated in its programming:

- Agriculture information (the main occupation of the residents is agriculture)
- Extinct crop information (local healthy crops which people have stopped growing)
- Nutritional benefits of Millets (local crop which people

stopped growing)

- Handmade and organic fertilizers and manures to reduce pesticides use
- Traditional agriculture methods (which people stopped using and adopted modern techniques alien to their land and roots)
- Old Agricultural Songs (Which the station has recorded in local voices and preserved)
- Discussions on local festivals (this includes all religions)
- Women rights and government schemes for them.
- Information on medicinal uses of crops and herbs (Locally grown/available)

Some of the statements made by them reflect the importance of how a media in native language could strengthen their identities and bring them nearer to their cultural and social realities:

“Those who do not listen to the station are unaware of old unheard songs, village values and culture.”

“I have developed pride in my own Telangana culture and land.”

“We got to know about old generation cultivation practices, less dependency on machinery and how to get better yield with cattles.”

“It revives old dietary habits and informs us about nutritional benefits of our local cereals and crops.”

“Earlier we used to celebrate only our own festival Pongal² but after getting information about other festivals like Christmas, Muharram, we together celebrate and eat a variety of food.”

“We never sang songs while working in fields, older generation sang it. After listening on Radio, I often sing those old songs now.”

The most important characteristic of sustainable development is involvement of people in their own development. A community radio while involving people in their own language, also has the capacity to connect them culturally, revive old native traditions and practices, and actively preserve their culture. This not only strengthens and builds up pride and confidence in an individual’s cultural and aboriginal identity in an atmosphere which is increasingly becoming imperialist and culturally alien but also empowers them to think about individual and society’s development. This thoughtful process leads people to not only understand their requirements, but also unite and act together. Such an act directed towards commu-

2 Harvest festival of South India

nity's development guarantees sustainability.

Women audience of the station mentioned that they developed confidence after listening and participating in station's programming. Women who never spoke outside their homes, now confidently raise their voices and actively participate in discussions. All women work together in *Sanghams* (groups) for programmes without any differences. With programmes like *Yaralla Muchattlu*³ and discussions on issues like girl child education, women rights and information on government schemes, they not only developed their thinking but also were able to work towards many issues relevant to the audience, which is evident in statements made by respondents. One of the woman listeners said,

"Earlier I used to be confine to my own house and would never speak. Now, I have a say in the house. I even encourage my sister in law, and other women to have an opinion. I think women should always have an opinion as they are better advisors."

The freedom to raise an opinion in one's own language, also lets people to think about their development in their own language that is feasible to their culture, region and their very own survivals. Listeners pointed out various development requirements:

- Job opportunities

- Reduction in Poverty
- More schools in the area
- Better transportation facilities
- Proper electricity
- High dowry (cash and kind for marrying) demands from poor brides

While talking about development, one of the listeners said, "*Can Radio give us food to eat?*" Another said, "*Sangham is in our village, but its employees are from other villages. We are poor people, we need employment.*" Programme Producer, General Narsamma added, "We can't say that all benefit and every development is by this Radio. There are other factors like Government and other agencies, but this station also works for the villagers. When we started our main agenda was developing local agriculture and self-reliance, during farmer's suicides⁴. We want to build confidence and sustainability among people." She further added, "Local language attracts people, the similar speaking style, old songs, stories, burrakathas. We share border with Karnataka. We get calls asking to do programmes in Kannada language." A community Radio might not have the ability to provide bread and butter, but it certainly has the ability to involve its audience, give them their right to freedom of expression and participation, speak in their own language and culture, and empower them to think about their development requirements and future.

3. Recommendations for promotion and preservation of Indigenous languages

India being a multicultural and a pluralistic society can boast of multiple languages and varied cultures. "More than 19500 languages or dialects are spoken in India as mother tongues. There are 121 languages spoken by 10000 or more people in India, which has a population of 121 crore." (PTI, 2018) Indian history has already witnessed the power of vernacular media for mobilization of masses against British propaganda during pre-independence era. Urdu is known to be a beautiful language that dominated Bollywood for the longest time. Its absence was largely felt a few years ago, with its presence only in library books, museums, and some schools. However,

er, Indian media, popularly ETV Urdu played an important role in getting the *zubaa* (language in Urdu) back on our lips. Vernacular media is stronger and closer to its audience because it caters to the public in their language. Community radio has the potential to be much powerful because of usage of local language and as it is driven by its own listeners in their own specific slang and style.

When a language becomes extinct, its people not only migrate to another language but also to another region in search of livelihood and a better life. To save languages from dying, it is important to create employment and

³ A friendly discussion programme on issues relevant to the audience

⁴ "Located in the drought-prone state of Telangana, the station has helped women, who do most of the farming. Among its accomplishments, the stations claim to have reduced the suicide rate and to provide people with the knowledge needed to develop strategies to deal with drought. Reflecting the women's interest in ecological farming and Indigenous crops, the station has helped the women cultivate some nineteen different organic, Indigenous crops, promoted the exchange and preservation of traditional seeds, helped identify new markets and provided growers with the information they need to access them." (Sen, 2016)

survival opportunities and a life in regions where such languages are spoken. An extinct language takes along with it a culture, tradition, and a whole clan of generation.

Community radio can serve as an effective tool for preservation of local language dialect and consequently the cultural and parochial identity.

4. Community radio for promoting local languages

- **Community Radio for specific language communities:** In India community radio stations are proposed according to the region. However, a region can have people speaking different languages especially in urban areas. There is a need to promote community radio stations catering in particular languages in regions having different communities speaking vernacular languages. The language on the other hand would take care of the culture, traditions, food and habits of that community.
- **Celebrating language days:** In Indian metropolitan cities there are people who migrate for work from smaller cities. We can have language days for specific languages promoted through media.
- **Narrowcasting community radio programmes:** Community radio programmes in various local languages could be a good source to teach language lessons in schools and colleges if the programmes are narrowcasted for students learning vernacular languages. On the other hand, students can develop innovative programmes in learnt languages for evaluations. With dedicated language lessons it

could act as an educational media.

- **Concentration on native languages:** Every nation has a certain number of native languages. Not all schools in India teach various domestic languages, although many have opted for international languages. Schools should be directed to include options of domestic languages, so that students after graduating could be well versed in at least one vernacular language apart from their state language.

Policy makers need to think in this direction and promote community radio stations in Indigenous languages, permitting the local population to participate with complete freedom of expression. Community radio could be used as one of the tools for inclusion of local people in their own development agendas as only they could understand their requirements. This will not only strengthen our democratic culture and Indigenous roots, but at the same time would potentially empower the local people to achieve sustainable development goals.

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