

## Radio and Rural Penetration in India

Radio in India has a long history of both social change and agricultural extension activities. The history of broadcasting in India is deeply rooted in development discourse and colonialism. The first radio broadcasting in India took place as a commercial venture; the Indian Broadcasting Company (IBC) began broadcasting from its first station in Bombay (Mumbai) in 1927 (Kumar, 2003). The IBC lasted just over 2 years before going into liquidation, with the high costs of radio sets, difficulties associated with collecting license fees and 'Indian conditions and traditions' blamed for its failure (Kumar, 2003). The Government of India took control after this and introduced the Indian Wireless Telegraphy Act of 1933 to deal with the evasion of license fee payment while also effectively making the possession of radio receivers and equipment without a license illegal (Pavarala & Malik, 2007).

While broadcasting in India more broadly was struggling to find its feet, there were some early experiments that could be considered precursors to the community radio. Several public servants working in rural areas made cases for local broadcasting in local dialects with content that was relevant to the everyday lives of the listeners (Page & Crawley, 2001). Experiments were conducted in Lahore, Poona (Pune), Delhi, and Peshawar, though none survived very long with even the successful projects absorbed into the national broadcaster and subsequently losing much of the local focus (Page & Crawley, 2001).

The British investment and interest in Indian broadcasting increased around the second World War with Sir John Reith, Founder and First Director General of the BBC, arguing that central control was essential for efficiency: this structure and Reith's paternalistic legacy—'to "improve" the masses by giving them not what they sought to hear, but what they ought to hear'—influenced AIR for many years to come (Kumar, 2003, p. 2174). Indeed, using AIR for development purposes was a logical extension for the central government, for which development was a primary goal with AIR its natural, media partner (Page & Crawley, 2001).

Following India's independence, from the 1950s through to the 1970s, the dominant paradigm of development saw the mass media deployed to change the mindset of

the people in order to enable rapid modernization through the expansion of communication infrastructure, centralized economic planning and widespread industrialization (Kumar, 2003). During this time, AIR has enjoyed some notable successes: the Pune Radio Farm Forum in the 1950s was one of the earliest. Following a successful Canadian model, the Pune Project established a network of farm radio forums in five districts of Maharashtra with the aim of broadcasting agricultural information through a 30-minute programme on AIR and facilitating listener discussions about the content (Page & Crawley, 2001; Singhal & Rogers, 2001). The forums were, however, short-lived, with AIR failing to capitalize on the lessons of the Pune experiment (Singhal & Rogers, 2001). AIR's local broadcasting also played an important role in popularizing the 'Green Revolution'—the industrialization of farming—and linking farmers to agricultural extension (Page & Crawley, 2001). AIR's broadcasting to rural areas though, much like its broader goals, was aimed at furthering development goals through disseminating information. The broadcasts were in local languages and were intended for community, rather than individual listening (Kumar, 2003). This soon proved to work against local broadcasting, as radio sets quickly became cheaper and thus more ubiquitous, leading to a decline in group listening (Singhal & Rogers, 2001). The structure of AIR itself also worked against local broadcasting: while stations were broadcasting in many local languages, the programming objectives were set in Delhi and were often politically motivated (Page & Crawley, 2001). Despite its issues, however, AIR's local broadcasting, particularly broadcasts aimed at farmers, are still very popular. Echoing, or perhaps explaining, the success of farm radio programs on AIR, Ilboudo and del Castello (2003, p. 39) argued that radio holds particular importance for farmers:

farmers must be able to communicate with peers, local authorities and institutions and have access to relevant knowledge and information, including technical, scientific, economic, social and cultural information. However, to be useful, information must be available to the users in appropriate languages and formats. At the same time, it must also be up-to-date and communicated through appropriate channels.

Indeed, quoting an AIR official, Page and Crawley explained that AIR's programmes for farmers are 'perhaps the only service which is fully utilized by listeners because it closely relates to their life' (2001, p. 328).

Given the history of broadcasting in India, it is easy to see how a focus on development has become so ingrained and pervasive. Even the earliest experiments with community radio, which were subsequently absorbed and dismantled by the national broadcaster, have colonial, development-driven underpinnings. What does this mean for the contemporary community radio environment in India? The nature of AIR's successful experiments provides a clue as to the role of community radio outside of this overwhelming development discourse. Crucial to the success of these experiments was not an emphasis on aggressive development and modernization, but instead the involvement of local people and the sharing of local knowledge.

## Background—Community Radio in India

India represents a unique environment for explorations of community radio and social change. Page and Crawley suggested that, in South Asia, community radio 'is a term which is generally used to describe radio for the benefit of the community rather than radio which the community runs itself' (2001, p. 327). This is clearly quite different from the 'voice for the voiceless', 'maximalist participation' interpretations of community radio that seem to dominate global literature (see Carpentier, 2015; Downing, 2000; Harcup, 2015; Kivikuru, 2005; Rennie, 2006; Rodriguez, 2001; Tacchi, 2003; among others). From the very beginning, the odds have been stacked against the establishment of a community radio sector with opposition emerging in the form of the established media, the regulatory environment and disagreements within the movement itself. Pavarala and Malik (2007, p. 243) described the radio landscape in India as 'dominated by hierarchical, paternalistic public and profit-oriented commercial models of broadcasting.' Thanks largely to the Indian Telegraph Act (1885) together with the India Wireless Telegraphy Act (1933), which makes the possession of radio equipment without a license illegal, the exclusive rights to establishing, maintaining and operating radio and television broadcasting remain with the Central Government (Kumar, 2003; Pavarala & Malik, 2007).

Indeed, it was not until late 2002 that the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting finally released 'Community Radio Guidelines' after almost a decade of advocacy from scholars, practitioners and activists. Far from being a victory for the community radio movement, the guidelines restricted licenses to 'well-established' educational institutions and banned advertisements and news and current affairs programmes (SANCOM, 2015). Despite the disappointment of such restrictive guidelines, the following years marked a renewed push for community radio with a number of stations exploring alternative methods of distributions including narrowcasting and cablecasting (SANCOM, 2015). Finally, in late 2006, the India Telegraph Act (1885) was amended to include a second phase of guidelines for community radio stations (UNESCO, 2011). Alongside educational institutions, non-government organizations (NGOs) and agricultural science centres or *Krishi Vigyan Kendra* (KVK) were granted the right to apply for licenses. News was still not permitted but limited advertising was allowed (SANCOM, 2015).

More than 10 years after the updated guidelines were released, community radio in India now finds itself at somewhat of a crossroads. As of May 2018, there were just 217 operational stations (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2018), as opposed to the 3,000 or 4,000 stations that the country's size, population and diversity could accommodate (Kumar, 2018). Malik writes that the movement seems to have plateaued: 'It is neither growing nor prospering. While there is recognition and acceptance of its potential in the upper echelons of administration, it looks as if there is a decline in buy-in from grassroots practitioners and communities in India' (2016). In summary, establishing a community radio sector in India has been a long and arduous process. The sector is facing a number of internal problems associated with sustainability and independence. In addition, the contemporary regulatory environment in which community radio stations must operate is rigid and tightly controlled.

## Reference

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