

Community Media as a Potent tool of Participatory Communication in North East India: A Case Study of *Jnan Taranga* CRS

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Abstract

Community media ensures media pluralism, diverse content and representation of different groups of the society. It encourages open dialogue and transparency of advocacy at local level. Community media empower people rather than treating them as passive consumers. They provide a vital alternative to the profit oriented commercial media and nurture local talents rather than replacing them with standard solutions. They offer concrete means for public participation and facilitates content driven by the practices of community life. As identified by Tachhi, Slater and Lewis, 2003, community media encompasses a variety of community-based activities intended to supplement, challenge or change the operating principles, structures and cultural forms and practices of the dominant media. It accommodates a diverse set of initiatives like community radio, participatory video, independent publishing and online communication to name a few. Radio is by far the most preferred community medium in the developing countries. Community radio represents a democratic and participatory medium with its unique feature of its accessibility and cost-effectiveness. The study highlights the potential of community media as a tool of participatory communication with special emphasis on community radio station *Jnan Taranga*.

Key words: Community media, participatory communication, community radio

1.0 Introduction

Community media ensures media pluralism, diverse content and representation of different groups of the society. It encourages open dialogue and transparency of advocacy at local level. Community media empower people rather than treating them as passive consumers. They provide a vital alternative to the profit oriented commercial media and nurture local talents rather than replacing them with standard

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solutions. They offer concrete means for public participation and facilitates content driven by the practices of community life. Radio is by far the most preferred community medium in the developing countries. Community radio represents a democratic and participatory medium with its unique feature of its accessibility and cost-effectiveness (Singh, 2011).

As per Anthropological Survey of India, there are more than 357 social groups or communities residing in North Eastern states excluding Sikkim (Hussain, 2010). We all know that insurgency is the longest prevailing social issue in India, particularly in this region that has been continuing their activities since 1952 (Kashyap, 2015). If we ponder upon the main issue concerning them, it is the identity crisis among the communities. In order to resolve the issue of identity crisis, community media may be considered as the most potent tool to establish their identity inside and outside the members of the community. Community media will include different types of medium used for communication. Such kind of media is targeted to a particular community and as such content is generated for the benefit of that community.

As identified by Tachhi, Slater and Lewis (2003), community media encompasses a variety of community-based activities intended to supplement, challenge or change the operating principles, structures and cultural forms and practices of the dominant media. It accommodates a diverse set of initiatives like community radio, participatory video, independent publishing and online communication to name a few (Howley, 2010). Social media is another medium that propagates participatory communication. However, it is used and more popular amongst the youth community who are techno-savvy.

2.0 Objectives and Research Methodology

2.1 Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- (a) To identify different tools of participatory communication in North East India
- (b) To study the potential of community media as a tool of participatory communication
- (c) To study Jnan Taranga community radio station as a tool of participatory communication

2.2 *Research methodology*

The study is qualitative in nature. Both primary and secondary data has been used for the study. Primary data has been collected from the staff members of Jnan Taranga community radio station (CRS) while few books, reports and internet have been used to compile the research.

3.0 **Discussion and Results**

Participatory communication is the theory and practices of communication used to involve people in the decision making of the development process. It is a two way process. Communication is disseminated in a horizontal approach. There is full and equal involvement and participation of the participants. Participatory communication happens at different levels in different areas. Generally common people participate in local institutions to share their views and opinions on different subjects of interest.

3.1 *Institutions involved in participatory communication*

Some of the popular institutions of participatory communication in our country particularly in North East India are as follows:

- (a) *Gaon Panchayats*: Gaon panchayats are institutions of local self-government in India. A gaon panchayat is headed by a Sarpanch who has the power to take crucial decisions. The 73rd Amendment of the Indian Constitution has brought various reformations in Panchayati Raj system, notable of which are introduction of three tiers of Panchayati Raj namely village level, intermediate level and district level. Gaon panchayat is the supreme institution of planning, discussing, decision making and implementing certain decisions and policies (Nath, 2012).
- (b) *Social Meetings*: Social meetings are the traditional forms of communication in Assam. Elderly people used to gather in some social places like markets, open spaces, community halls including Namghars and discuss issues of common interest. Such discussions help the participants to participate equally. They discuss significant issues concerning political, social, economic or local topics.
- (c) *Local institutions or Self-help groups*: Self-help groups are local institutions where common people take up entrepreneurship and gather to work together for a common cause. These groups help the people to be self-independent. They work, earn and make their livelihood. Self-help groups and similar associations

provide opportunities to work collectively and also a platform to have discussions on topics relevant to them.

- (d) *Samitis/Committees*: In many areas, people form committees or samitis to discuss their common or social issues. People participate in discussions, debates and also take decisions on certain issues. The womenfolk face the highest issues of expressing their views and opinions. They remain engaged in their household chores and thus do not get an opportunity to participate in any communication process. Mahila samities are groups or associations where such women meet and discuss on different subjects of interest. These associations are held once, twice or more in each month to have discussions, implement new schemes or policies, activities etc. among themselves.

3.2 *Tools for facilitating participatory communication*

Participatory communication plays a significant role in democracy. Understanding the potential, it is revered by all in the recent times. However, in the true sense two mediums are most effective in propagating participatory communication in the country. They are social media and the community media.

- (a) *Social media*: We all know that social media is the most recent and popular mode of communication. It provides equal opportunity for participation to all. Every participant of social media is linked to one another by virtual communities. They can communicate in their own groups or can communicate to everyone who is a member of this virtual community. Some popular tools of advocacy of social media are Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, WhatsApp etc. According to the Global social media research summary till April 2016, Facebook is the leading social network with more than 1.5 billion active users followed by WhatsApp having 1000 million users, 900 million Facebook Messenger, 400 million Instagram, 320 million Twitter and 300 million Skype users all over the world (Chaffey, 2016).
- (b) *Community media*: Community media is the media or different types of medium which caters to the needs of a particular community. In this age when almost every one of us faces identity crisis, community media can be the most potent medium of participatory communication. Community media is the best alternative for rural audiences who are hitherto neglected by the commercial or mainstream media. It targets to a particular community and as such it can be termed as the local media. The local issues of a community get space in

this kind of media. The International Association of Media and Communication Research states that community media “originates, circulates, and resonates from the sphere of civil society”. (Rennie, 2006). Community media can be comprised of different aids like community newspaper, community radio, community video and community television. All these mediums are potent tools of advocating participatory communication in a community but they are yet to be fully explored in our country. Different tools of community media are discussed as below:

Community newspaper: Community newspaper is an effective tool of community empowerment. The mainstream newspapers print stories relevant to state, regional, national or international values. The stories of different communities remain unheard and unpublished. Community newspapers have been evolved to cater to a particular community. Though *Rongmela*, *Mukta Akash* and some other newspapers cater only to the children community, they cannot be called community newspapers in the truest sense. These newspapers are concerned to children at large. A particular community well defined by its geographical boundary, their culture and tradition can publish a newspaper for their own. A community newspaper will highlight only on stories of their own community, their views, expectations, events etc.

Community television: Community Television is a nascent concept for rural development. The notion is similar to community radio which is originated to cater to the community people. A national Public or Private Broadcaster somehow fails to fulfill the needs and issues of the people at the grassroots level. In this context community television can play a pivotal role. Community TV can provide a public platform to the marginalized sections of the society which is otherwise neglected by the mainstream media. The local people want their culture, tradition, social, political or economic problems to be reflected in front of other people or local governance that can provide them possible solutions. The mainstream TV channels either in form of Public Broadcaster or by Private/Cable channels focus more on movies, songs or news of state, national or international repute and thus do not offer such scope to the weaker sections of the society. Community television on the other hand provides opportunities to the local people to uphold their culture and traditions at a common platform.

Community video: As the name suggests, community video is a community medium generated, produced by the community and for the community.

Video being a powerful medium of displaying facts can be utilized for presenting community stories for community development. Positive and successful stories can be exhibited in simple way by the use of this medium. Community videos can be of any duration and depends only on its ability to project a particular story. A community can use this medium to provide insights or exhibit about their culture, tradition, customs, language, food habits etc. to other communities as well. Video volunteers have been emerging in different parts of the country and they have been able to present powerful videos to showcase their stories.

Community radio: Among all the other community media, community radio is operational and catering to its local communities in the north eastern region of India. Community radio belongs to the third tier of broadcasting which is different from public and private broadcasting. It is characterised by the active participation of the community in the process of creating content, research, production and broadcast of programmes with an emphasis on local issues and concerns. Community radio is an effective instrument of societal development. It is a not for profit organization and owned, managed and run by the community people. It comes under the periphery of 10-15 kms of distance. According to the data of Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, there are 188 operational community radio stations in India as on 20th November, 2015 though 323 applications are still under process. In the north eastern region of the country, presently three community radio stations are fully operational namely *Jnan Taranga* (2010), *Radio Luit* (2011) and *Radio Brahmaputra* (2015).

3.3 The case of community radio station Jnan Taranga

Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University, the only open university of the North eastern region of India launched the first community radio of the north east on 28th of January, 2009 at 90.4 MHz with an experimental broadcast from Assam Administrative Staff College, Guwahati. The regular broadcasting of the radio was formally started on 20th of November, 2010. At present, *Jnan Taranga* has been broadcasting for 24 hours of which 9 hours are Live and the remaining 15 hours are repeat broadcast.

Jnan Taranga CRS has a number of programmes that highlights participatory communication of the community. Presently, the popular programmes involving

participatory communication are as follows:

- (a) *Manar Khabar*: This is a regular one hour Live phone-in programme of the radio station. A topic of discussion is provided to the common listeners and they make calls to provide their own views and opinions on the concerned topic of the day. In this way, a platform has been created to raise the voices of the common masses.
- (b) *Amar Kobologia Ekashar*: It is a Live community programme from the field. The radio reporter talks to a group of community people on a certain subject of environment. He takes views and opinions of the local people and broadcasts it directly from the field.
- (c) *Punwar Kiran*: Apart from providing current affairs, health and beauty tips, information on traffic rules, science etc. this programme broadcast in the morning hours also offers a platform to the common people. A regular open quiz is held in the programme and a winner is selected everyday. A number of listeners make calls to the station to provide the correct answer.
- (d) *Angana*: This is a woman based programme. With an aim to empower woman, this programme focuses on successful women entrepreneurs, social workers, sports women, awardees in different sectors etc. to send a positive message to the womenfolk. This programme is listened to and participated by women from different fields.
- (e) *Sasthya Charcha*: As the name suggests, it is a health based programme. A physician is generally interviewed regarding a particular disease, symptoms, preventive measures etc. Atleast once a month a physician remains present in the studio of the radio station to answer all kinds of queries put by the local people over the phone. This is a participatory programme as a number of inquisitive listeners make calls to the station to ask the doctor about different ailments and related information.
- (f) *Topal Topal*: This is a special programme designed to reach the marginalized people of the society. People from different marginalized communities take part in this programme and speak about their issues, livelihood, social life etc. Everyone including a cobbler to rickshaw puller, a blacksmith to the local vegetables seller, a sweeper to the garbage picker finds a platform to share their stories.
- (g) *Xonali Xopun*: This is a programme to highlight the upcoming talents of the state. There are many people possessing some unique talents or qualities but

are not known by others as they do not get a proper platform to showcase it. This programme reaches out to such people and provides them opportunities to showcase their qualities to the audience.

- (b) *Anubhab*: This programme offers opportunities to the common people to write poems, stories or other literary forms. The listeners write their creative works and send them to the radio station. They are then narrated, enacted or performed by the anchors of the radio station. The audience love to listen to their works being aired with proper acknowledgements.
- (i) *Rengoni*: This is another programme aimed to showcase the works of self-help groups, mahila samitis, NGOs for the betterment and upliftment of the society. People from these associations participate in this programme to speak about the objectives, their roles and achievements of their organisations.
- (j) *Sishu Tirtha*: This is a special programme for the children. This programme is produced by a 10 year old child. The child goes to the field for recording the programme. He interacts with other children regarding their areas of interest, issues, difficulties etc. As such the children from different age groups, backgrounds, social groups etc. get opportunities to place their voices in front of others.

4.0 Conclusion

This study has highlighted the significance of community media and its potential in facilitating participatory communication. Though community media has huge potential in community development, it is still in the nascent stage particularly in the north eastern region of India. Community radio is the only community medium functional in the region but that too is in quite a disheartening condition. After repeated announcements of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, the community radio movement is still not successful in this region unlike in the other parts of the country. Referring to the words of Mahatma Gandhi that a nation cannot develop if all its citizens do not participate in the development process, community media is the only way to address the same. Identity crisis being a major issue concerning all the communities of a nation, community media can put rest to all such issues. Being a potent medium, all the tools of community media can be equally explored and utilized by the communities. The Government and concerned authorities can also take requisite steps to promote community media among the communities.

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