Seminar
Community Radio and Democracy
In
South Asia

india international centre
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IAWRT Seminar on Community Radio and Democracy In South Asia

The IAWRT Seminar on Community Radio and Democracy in South Asia was part of IAWRT India's annual festival marking International Women's Day. It offered a platform for community radio practitioners, activists, legal experts, grassroots level programmers and those involved in campaigning for policy level changes to come together, share and understand whether communities really have a say in running their radio stations: How democratic have community radio initiatives in South Asia been? What has worked and what has not? What is the way forward? Experts from India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan presented their respective country's experiences and the obstacles they encounter both from governments, the reigning commercial interests, and the emergence and increasing popularity of new media.

The seminar was conceptualised by veteran radio practitioner, Ratnabali Mitra and jointly coordinated by senior journalist Nupur Basu, both trustees of IAWRT India.

The seminar began with the welcome address by Anupama Srinivasan, Secretary, IAWRT India who spoke about how radio is a crucial part of IAWRT and the seminar is an effort to foreground it. Ratnabali Mitra, the moderator of the first session, then invited the observer participants, representatives from diverse Community Radio initiatives across India to introduce their work and briefly speak about their experiences.

Sanjay Chandekar, In charge, Radio FTII, Pune said that when they started in 2007, they had thought that the radio was only for the students and the staff of FTII. Later when they understood the true meaning of community radio they reached out to people around and found that the women and children were most forthcoming. Now Radio FTII has a wide range of participation from the local community as well as the students. They have also been partnering with UNICEF for organising workshops with adolescents in the community.

Bhagyamma, a CR Station Board member and Elavarasi, are both community broadcasters at the Namma Dhwani Community Radio, Karnataka. They spoke about their efforts to travel and meet the people of the community and collect
information about issues that affect their lives. Namma Dhwani Radio then takes up these issues and broadcasts awareness programmes that are of direct use to the community: health & hygiene, women’s issues, family planning, programmes for children etc.

G.R. Syed, Station Manager, Radio Jamia shared the success of this radio initiative in moving from addressing the needs of the student community to those of the local population, mostly migrants from different parts of the country who are working as domestic help or rickshaw walas in the city. The radio station broadcasts programmes focussing on their problems, and also produces entertainment programmes keeping their cultures and folk forms in mind. The success of such attempts, according to Syed, can be located in the fact that despite a prevalent purdah culture in the area, Radio Jamia has inspired women to participate in the radio station activities.

Radha Misra, Professor, Department of Communication Media for Children, SNDT University, emphasized the need for students to be involved in initiatives like community radio. She had brought 12 of her students from Pune to attend the seminar. Sevanti Ninan, Editor, The Hoot (a web portal that in addition to being a media critic highlights efforts in alternative media) articulated the need for governments’ encouragement in initiatives like community radio. Pooja Murada, Station Manager, Alfaz –e-Mewat, introduced her community radio centre that works with the Meo Muslims in Mewat.

The radio station is an initiative of the Institute of Rural Research & Development (IRRAD), Gurgaon, and has been on air for a year now.

Session I
Radio As An Agent Of Change

Rukmini Vemraju, Programme Officer CEMCA (Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia), New Delhi, began the session by defining the context of the seminar in her keynote address. While she felt that community radio indeed forms an agent for change, she highlighted the challenges in making it truly democratic.
According to Vemraju, community media is a crucial element in a situation of “Deficit Democracy” (Chomsky) where individuals feel that they are capable of doing nothing. In spite of such a need for community radio centre in the sub continent, most of the countries do not have effective policies in place. What is perhaps worse is that even if the radio centres are operative there are a series of government regulations and bars placed on them, like the ‘Not for Profit’ tag. Further, only the development agenda is imposed usually in a top down manner while the Rights perspective is seldom adopted.

She said that in the context of democratising community radio it is worthwhile to remember Lincoln’s words: of the people, by the people and for the people. She said it would be appropriate to add to this what an Indonesian scholar stated that our efforts should be “In and with the community. By this reference she aimed to articulate the priority which the community and the people should be given in the working and decision making processes of community radio centres.

Looking at community radio as an agent of change in the last decade, she stated that in recent years, these centres are not only dealing with women’s issues, but are expanding their areas of work to include the Khap panchayats, Right to Information etc. She said that while community participation is happening in most CRs, when it comes to financial decision making or buying technical equipment, the community is not involved.

Algole Narsamma, Programmer in Sangham Radio (part of the Deccan Development Society), narrated her experience of evolving a community radio station from a women’s organisation. Radio Sangham was established to give voice to women’s lives both in their private and public worlds. Radio Sangham also encouraged agriculturalists to come together and discuss their problems. For instance, the introduction of Bt cotton seeds was widely discussed at the station. Narsamma also screened a film on the same issue to focus on the problems of the farmers. Her firm belief was that people should be empowered to have their own seed banks and have the power to solve their own problems. She stated that Sangham Radio worked with this very spirit of self expression and self sustenance, asserting that “the problems are our own and the solution too would have to be our own.”
In the discussion that followed, Narsamma shared that the community itself was central in the decision making and maintenance of the station. She also spoke about Sangham Radio’s role in sorting out local issues and conflicts. When asked if the radio station was involved in any training programmes for young people, Narsamma answered that the paucity of funds have made such programmes unaffordable for the radio station.

Session II
Radio In Promoting Freedom Of Speech, Gender Rights & Peace - Voices From South Asia

Nupur Basu, the moderator of the session, began the discussion by establishing the importance of radio in certain South Asian countries due to the rugged landscape and territory, often difficult to access, and where communication is not easy. In Nepal for instance, a newspaper issue takes 15 days to reach the hills from the valley and the 213 radio stations in Nepal often compensate for this deficit, in news and information.

Raghu Mainali, Coordinator, Community Radio Support Centre, Nepal took the discussion forward by speaking about the role of community radio in conflict resolution. He stated the importance of free speech and critiqued any form of control on the same as a result of feudal, hereditary and arbitrary practices. He quoted J.Galtung, saying that one of the chief roles of community radio is to confront any form of violence, be it direct, cultural or structural violence, especially in the context of the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. In such a context, community radio serves as a third party arbitrator in the process of conflict resolution. The community radio during the conflict years was a low cost trusted medium to inform people about the emergency and the curfew, disseminating information on relief materials and dislocation of people, and spreading awareness about the Geneva Convention and human rights. Mainali also recounted situations when both the army and the Maoists attempted to use radio for furthering their own interests; and when the radio fraternity did not oblige, they resorted to violence.
Ayesha Siddika Anu, a programme producer and presenter in Radio Padma, the first community radio station in Bangladesh, spoke about the efforts of Radio Padma to bring to light the issues of the girl child. According to her, girls are considered a burden by their families and they are discriminated against from the time they are born. Radio Padma tries to bring about solidarity among the girls so that they can discuss their problems freely. By sharing what they are going through, an understanding has developed that theirs is not a personal problem, but a social problem. The radio gives them the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings, and also collectively seek solutions.

In Bangladesh there are 16 Radio centres currently, but whether these stations will continue broadcasting and be viable financially will be decided after the three year trial period during which the government will be watching their performance carefully. Ayesha is hopeful about the future as the stations are doing well and two new ones have started recently.

Tasneem Ahmar, Executive Producer, Meri Awaaz Suno, Karachi, Pakistan, said that in Pakistan there are no community radio stations, only FM stations and campus radios. There is no policy and no permissions given for operating a community radio station. Hers is a radio production house, an extension of the organisation Uks, a research and resource centre engaged in advocacy and rights based work that Tasneem founded. Meri Awaaz Suno is an all women production group that is involved in gender issues and gives a gender perspective to all issues. Their productions are mostly based on case studies and oral testimonies and struggles of women, and attempt to break media stereotypes of women as either ‘weepy’ or ‘objects of show’. They make it a point to have women as experts and opinion makers and try to present real, thinking women.

Ahmar also believes that radio has advantages in certain aspects because unlike television channels that are closely scrutinised by the government and hence cannot openly criticise the establishment, radio slips under the radar and escapes such censorship. Their production house is about to start a programme called Raabta to look at sectarian, ethnic and religious conflicts and try to create a bridge between communities. 60 producers have been trained to take up this theme in a sensitive manner.

Ahmar concluded her presentation by saying that in Pakistan community radio is not being given the importance that it deserves, and its power and potential is not being recognised. The wide reach of cable television is an important reason for radio taking a back seat. However she believes that radio
has a crucial role to play. In areas like Northern Baluchistan and Swat valley it is radio, which has a more powerful position than any other mass media.

From the experience in Pakistan, the seminar moved on to Sri Lanka. Wijayananda Rupasinghe, Senior Lecturer, Department of Mass Communication, University of Kelaniya presented community radio as an absolute misnomer for Sri Lanka because most of the community radio centres have no proper equipment or man power to operate these stations. Kothmale is the only popular community radio in Sri Lanka but it too has extremely limited and restrained participation of the community. In Rupasinghe’s opinion the most crucial reason for community radio not being a success in Sri Lanka is the government’s control over all these radio stations. Moreover the ones where the community participated, concerned themselves only with education and social welfare, and ignored discussions around party politics or ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka.

Rupasinghe concluded by expressing regret that in spite of Sri Lanka's pioneering role in the introduction of community radio, today it is lagging behind as a result of the 30 long years of conflict. Also, today the state policy regarding radio stands as “No Policy”, and checks all possible growth in the radio sector. He believes that creating awareness about community radio and introducing the Right to Information Act will be useful in resurrecting the role and position of community radio in Sri Lanka.

The last speaker of the session, Najiba Ayubi, Managing Director, The Killid Media, and one of Afghanistan's leading women journalists, spoke of her experiences in starting radio stations across the country in the post Taliban period. The initiative “Killid” or “The Key” marked an attempt to unlock everything that was held captive during the Taliban period in Afghanistan. One of the first contributions of “Killid” was to publish a women’s magazine, and later they established the first radio station in Kabul in 2003. The new government was also approached to support this effort. The growth of radio did not stop with one station but went further with the establishment of more stations all over the country dealing with diverse topics. Ayubi was proud to announce that Afghanistan now has 153 radios (53 of them community radio stations), ranging from news stations to rock music stations.
Killid has 8 radio stations now in different cities in Afghanistan and they take up issues like transitional justice and social protection, and are also involved in investigative reportage. According to Ayubi, the financial sustainability of radio stations is the most important reason behind this success of community radio in Afghanistan. Also the laws in Afghanistan allow NGOs to generate income and therefore radio stations were affordable initiatives even though they worked within a NGO model.

According to her, the media has always faced a control in Afghanistan, be it during the Taliban period or after that. During the Taliban period it was an extreme form of silencing of media—all expect Taliban owned radio stations and Shariat newspapers. Now they have thousand voices and it is a big change. She said that while the new government initially supported the growth of media but soon it became less forthcoming when journalists started asking tough questions. Those in the media are lobbying for the Right to Information Law.

While the story of radio in Afghanistan is a success story, there have also been many setbacks in the last decade. Lack of social protection and constant threat to the lives of the journalists has made working in Afghanistan very difficult, but at the same time one can also trace the unfailing growth of media in Afghanistan. Women also have had a role in this growth and today they have a voice in Afghan society and are fighting for their rights within the society and their own families to establish themselves as successful independent women. Yet Ayubi believes that there is much to be done and the development that has begun must be maintained.

As all the representatives stated their accounts of the role and position of community radio in their respective countries, the moderator opened the floor for questions. Suman Basnet posed the first question about the status of ownership of community radio in Afghanistan and the community radio policy. Najiba Ayubi said that while there is no community radio policy, they have a very good media law. Also receiving a licence for community radio is relatively easy in Afghanistan.

When asked about the audience base of the radio stations, the speakers from Pakistan and Afghanistan stated that the audience base for the community radio is indeed large in both the countries. The accessibility of radio services through mobile phone and internet connections was proving very useful in popularising radio stations.

Radha Misra posed a question to all the representatives about the one “Aha” moment in their experiences in Radio. The panelists from Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan recounted about the role which radio has played in empowering women in the respective countries. Mainali narrated an interesting instance when members of the station subverted the government’s restrictions on airing news by singing out the news. Rupasinghe said that in Sri Lanka efforts in community radio need to be enhanced and rejuvenated in order to reach a moment of exuberance.
Dr. P.N. Vasanti, Director, Centre for Media Studies, moderated the third session. She spoke about radio being an exciting medium because of its sense of inclusivity for all strata of the society; but she also pointed out that we live in a very ‘noisy’ age where we are bombarded by television, print, internet and other media, and we need to look at the role of radio, especially community radio in this context.

Namrata Bali, Director, SEWA Academy, Gujarat, spoke about their new community radio initiative called “Rudi No Radio”. This community radio station has been a means to empower communities involved with SEWA and the radio station is completely controlled and managed by the community, so that the community finds expression and empowerment through it. Beginning from designing the logo to structuring the programmes, and maintaining the functioning of the station, it is all responsibly handled by the community.

In the aftermath of the earthquake in 2000 and the riots in 2002, the need for communication in the community was deeply felt. She recounted how the SEWA women used to visit the camps and speak to the women and children; they would play with the children and tell them stories. Soon they started recording voices of children and playing back the recordings to children in other camps. After a period of time, they realised that although the children were in different camps, they were really interacting with each other through the programmes and this communication was helping them to come out of their trauma. Thus SEWA bought some air time from All India Radio to broadcast community programmes to voice concerns of the community members and empower them. The community radio centre also maintained a dedicated phone line and a post box number to include the larger community in the programmes aired.

The combination of video and radio has helped the organisation and its members to document, archive and sustain their work within the co-operative setup. Now the use of internet and phone technology is also being harnessed to do away with the 10 km radius limitation to reach out to all the 17 lakh members.
Today capital formation, capacity building, social security and organizing women for self security form the four basic pillars of empowerment in Rudi no Radio. SEWA has now introduced training from CEMCA and One World for the women who work in the radio centre. Also there are a lot of young girls who have gone to school and have received computer training, and who are now a part of sound editing section in the radio centre.

Pinki Chandran, Director, Radio Active, Bengaluru highlighted that community radio does not always need to be involved with a homogenous community. In fact, the effort of Radio Active has been to include the multiple and diverse voices of different sections of the community. The station has given space to the voices of the common man, whether an auto driver or a transgender person—all have received an identity and voice through the various shows of the radio station.

Radio Active being radio centre in an urban area has also introduced many outreach programmes like eye camps and health camps. Community engagement was of utmost priority for the radio station and so programmes dealing with waste management, dry waste collection camps and door to door awareness campaigns were also supported by the radio. Even governance issues related to Right to Information and Karnataka State Pension Parishad have been taken up by the radio station to discuss in its shows.

Chandran stated that in spite of being registered under the Jain University in Bengaluru, they soon realized that they cannot sustain based on programmes catering only to students. Engaging with the various communities was the only way of guarding against routine programming. She said that participating in celebrations, having ‘chai sessions’ are ways of bringing out the concerns and issues of the community. She concluded the presentation by articulating her firm belief that once an initiative has been able to engage with the community there is no need to go the extra mile to work for marketing or advertising.

Archana Kapoor, Director, Radio Mewat, spoke about her experience in working with the Meo Muslim community in Mewat. The Meo community has converted from being Hindus to Muslims and vice versa several times till finally in the late 1940s they decided to continue being Muslims. Kapoor stated that it is a very difficult community to work with. The position of women in the community is extremely vulnerable and the crime rate is unbelievably high. Beginning a radio station in
such a community was a very challenging task because one had to really consider the type and the content of the programmes. Also involving women in the station has been quite difficult. Despite these obstacles, within two years it has become a pulse of the community in Mewat and received the Sustainable Programme Award last year.

Encouraging the community to come out and participate was not at all easy for the radio station and so initially had no structure or script for programming. Programmes like “Aaj ka Mehmaan” and “Gaon Gaon ki Baat” became popular with the community and involved the participation of community members who would come in person to the station to be a part of it. Today the role and contribution of the radio station in the community is commendable and often the people acknowledge the radio station’s role in giving them an opportunity for a better life.

She emphasized that in the case of community radio, social sustainability is the priority. She believes that the community’s involvement in the decision making process has kept financial problems at bay and that this will ensure smooth sailing in the coming years.

Dr. Vasanthi then invited Bhagyamma and Elavarasi to share their experiences with the Namma Dhwani Samuday radio. They spoke about how self help groups plan their own programmes. Their community radio station tries to educate people about a healthy and empowered life. Initially the station began with narrowcasting and since 2008 it has received the licence for broadcasting its shows.

During the discussion that followed, the concept of defining the community emerged as an important issue. Pinki Chandran commented that it is very crucial to be an inclusive and expanding space and not just limited within a certain community. When asked about the need and the degree of government intervention desired by members of community radio centres, all representatives present expressed that the government’s non interference is what they most wanted. They said that they urge the government to extend help in capacity building and support them by making the annual frequency charges more affordable.

Session IV
The Road Ahead

Dr. Jane Schukoske, CEO, IRRAD, Gurgaon, chaired the concluding session of the day. The first speaker, Shalini Raghaviah, a Lucknow based independent researcher spoke about the importance of baseline studies and impact analysis research in the community radio sector. She pointed out that ensuring proper use of funds and validating notions about the target audience can be best achieved through empirical
research. She believes that the data collected on the socio-economic conditions of the listeners and media habits of the audience helps community radio stations to make their programmes more effective.

When asked about her suggestion of hiring professionals from BBC and AIR for training or research in the area of community radio, Raghaviah explained that this was only to increase professionalism and confidence in the community radio stations and not to undermine the role of the community in any way.

The next speaker, Suman Basnet, Regional Coordinator, AMARC (World association of Community Radio Broadcasters) Asia-Pacific, discussed the challenges and the scope of growth of community radio in Asia. According to Basnet, there are four main challenges in the path of community radio—community radio policy, sustainability of the venture, availability of technology, and provisions of knowledge sharing and capacity development.

In Basnet’s words legislation and streamlining of license for spectrum allocation forms the biggest challenge in South Asia. Other limitations such as minimum freedom to structure programmes, lack of recognition and high taxation impede the sustainability of the community radio initiatives in the region. He spoke about the need for creating a CR fund for the South Asia region, and the need for ensuring community auditing of CR stations. Basnet concluded by emphasizing the poor state of participation of women in ventures like community radio. He pointed out that compared to men, there is a very small proportion of women who work as volunteers. He quoted figures from a survey in South Asia that showed that only 28 percent women are in leadership positions in the radio sector and community radio is no exception. He articulated the urgent need for reforms to include women journalists and volunteers in this sector.

Iskra Panevska, Advisor for Communication and Information, UNESCO, New Delhi, endorsed Basnet’s perspective. She too strongly articulated that to establish favourable conditions in a society where the rule of law is weak and freedom of expression is not fully respected, community radio needs recognition and encouragement from the policy makers. Economic and technical support from the government and community is yet another important aspect for the successful working of the community radio enterprises.
Panevska said that community radio offers a strong platform for people to come together and become more aware about their rights and duties. It gives them a chance to air their views freely, thereby furthering their right to freedom of speech and expression. She spoke about the need for creating a more enabling environment for community radio stations to function, particularly in an era of ‘media saturation’. She stressed the need to set up decentralized Support & Resource Centres and an independent regulatory body.

The questions posed to the speakers were generally oriented towards understanding the nuanced differences of functioning between commercial radio and community radio, and to comprehend the sources of funds for the functioning community radios. According to both Basnet and Panevska the commitment community radio centres have towards the development of society make them stand out from any other form of radio initiatives. And to continue this advantage, community radio centres are attempting to bring in an independent financial mechanism to keep off any bureaucratic influence from their functioning and the spaces they have created.

**Recommendations That Emerged From The Seminar**

- Clear and explicit recognition of community radios as being different from commercial Radio—declaring them as national trusts and ensuring that the concerned governments would create enabling environments for them
- Setting up an independent regulatory body to monitor the functioning of CRs
- Setting up a regional fund for CRs in South Asia
- Decentralised Support & Resource Centres free of any political interference
- Regular community audits of CRs for them to retain credibility

The seminar ended on a hopeful note that with the participation and initiative of activists and media professionals community radio will become a much more efficient means of communication. The seminar concluded with Ratnabali Mitra’s vote of thanks. She expressed her gratitude to IAWRT India’s partners—India International Centre, ActionAid, Sangat South Asia, Goethe Institut, and UNESCO, New Delhi—for their support, and to all the panelists and the audience for their active participation.
The seminar was conceptualised by veteran radio practitioner, Ratnabali Mitra and jointly coordinated by senior journalist, Nupur Basu.

Ratnabali Mitra has been producing short News Features on Science, Technology and Environment for All India Radio, the public service broadcaster. She has been a science broadcaster and a trainer and has been associated with curriculum production for the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU).

She has been active in establishing the IAWRT Asian Women’s Film Festival on the cultural map of Delhi during the first three years. In addition to the Akashvani Annual Award for her docudrama on the Digital Divide in the year 1996, she has been awarded for three children's books by the Children’s Book Trust.

Nupur Basu is an independent journalist, award winning documentary filmmaker and media educator from India. For the last three decades, she has worked in both print and television journalism and reported and filmed extensively from different regions in the world (India, UK, Uganda, Switzerland, South Africa, Spain, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh and Afghanistan). She reported extensively on politics, development, gender, child rights, issues of livelihood, hunger, health and environment in print, television and documentary films.

Nupur’s longest stint in print media was with India’s leading national daily Indian Express (1982-1991) and in television with NDTV (1994-2006) where she was Senior Editor. In 2010 Nupur was visiting faculty for the spring term at the Graduate School of Journalism at UC Berkeley teaching a course on ‘International Reporting: India’. She is an Associate Fellow at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) at Bangalore and also on the executive committee of the Delhi based Media Foundation. She is also on the Board of Panos, London. She has also made five independent documentary films between 1995 and 2008.
List of Observer Participants who attended the seminar:

- Ms Bhagyamma
  Board Member, Namma Dhwani, Budikote, Karnataka

- Ms Elavarasi
  Broadcaster, Namma Dhwani, Budikote, Karnataka

- Mr Sushant Kumar Jena
  Station Manager, Radio Sanskar, Odisha

- Mr Yuvaraj Jadhav
  Vasundhara Vahini Community Radio Centre, Baramati, Maharashtra

- Mr Sanjay Chandekar
  In charge, Radio FTII, Pune

- Prof Radha Misra
  Head, Dept of Communication Media for Children
  SNDT Women’s University, Pune

- Ms Pooja Murada
  In charge, Alfaaz-e-Mewat CR Station, Haryana

- Ms Barsha Chabaria
  Station Manager, Salaam Namaste CR Station, Noida

- Ms Swati Bhatia
  Anchor, Rajya Sabha Television, New Delhi

- Dr Shakeel Akhter
  Producer, Radio Jamia, New Delhi

- Mr G R Syed
  Station Manager, Radio Jamia, New Delhi

- Ms Sevanti Ninan
  Editor, The Hoot, New Delhi

- Ms Moina Khan
  Assistant Professor, MCRC, Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi