

Tuning into Diversity 2: Workshop on Community Radio

A brief report

This workshop on regulations, experiences and debates in community radio saw some 40-odd people from various parts of India, as well as a fair number of Goan participants, engrossed in the intricacies of the subject during 23-25 June, at the International Centre Goa at Dona Paula. The workshop was an outcome of a collaboration between the Comet Media Foundation, Community Radio Forum-India and Media Information and Communication Centre of India in association with Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, UNESCO and The International Centre Goa.

At the inauguration of the workshop, Nandini Sahai, Director - The International Centre Goa and hon. Director - Media Information and Communication Centre of India, Iskra Panevska, Advisor in Communication & Information - UNESCO, Rajeshwar Dayal, Senior Media Advisor - Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Sajan Venniyoor, General Secretary - Community Radio Forum and Chandita Mukherjee, Director - Comet Media Foundation, all spoke on the vital meaning community radio has for democracy and their expectations of the participants in carrying this further, by one day setting up their own stations.

Since 2006, Government of India, has put a community radio policy in place. It gives the guidelines on eligibility for registered bodies and educational institutions to run community radio stations and sets out a process for application in steps, from an initial application form, through various investigations and verifications, until a broadcasting license is granted. However, the fact that this is possible is not widely known among civil society organisations and the number of applications for broadcasting licenses has been disappointingly low.

In the meanwhile, the airwaves continue to be dominated by commercial radio stations, indistinguishable from one another with their bubbly fare and the government's own AIR stations which give the official line. In a democracy it is necessary to hear a plurality of voices and views from many perspectives. Community radio represents an opportunity for the people who do not have access to the mainstream media to express themselves and to engage in discourse with one another. Mobile phones have today opened the way to a wide spectrum of people to participate in phone-in programmes, not just to request songs but to express their concerns and discuss and debate with others. This is a whole new exciting area of communication waiting to take off. Similarly all communities are rich with songs, stories and music enjoyed by the local people and in most cases fast disappearing. Community radio can play a vital role in saving these traditions from oblivion.

Community radio stations are already working in certain parts of the country, largely unreported, and vibrant new broadcasters and enthusiastic audiences are emerging in pockets. Workshops like "Tuning into Diversity" are being held to make more social organisations aware of the possibilities at hand. The organisers have set out to expose community based NGOs to the possibility of setting up radio stations and to think about running them in a participative manner that gives voice to the community. The thinking is that eventually, representatives of the community will become the custodians of the station and the NGO or educational institution that initiates the station becomes less and less important in the set-up.

Running a community radio station involves the intermeshing of three circles: production, technology and management. Understanding the community, the relevant issues, designing of formats and setting up mechanisms for continuous production of radio programming is the first aspect. Technology has to be integrated into this. Setting up of the recording facilities and

transmission technology and training people to maintain it are part of this stream. Holding these together is the training and management of people and raising of finances to keep the whole station running in a sustainable manner. This workshop could only provide a glimpse into this complex mix, with short introductory sessions on this complex range of issues.

The main resource persons at the workshop were all veterans of the community radio movement associated with the Community Radio Forum-India. This body is recognised by government as the representative body of the nascent community radio movement in this country and the agency for grievance redressal. They came together after the landmark Supreme Court judgement of 1996 that declared that the airwaves cannot be the monopoly of the state. Since then they have been campaigning for a policy that makes it possible for civil society groups to run community radio stations. After the first policy was declared in 2003, they worked to remove some of the flaws. Once the current policy came, in 2006, they have been facilitating the groups applying for licenses, providing training and technical know-how to those seeking support and conducting a campaign to get more groups to apply.

Community Radio Forum's resource persons included Sajan Venniyoor of Community Radio Forum-India, N Ramakrishnan of Ideosync Media Combine, Ram Bhat of Maraa, Hemant Babu of Nomad India and Ashish Sen of Voices. These individuals have trained and helped to set up a number of community radio stations all over the country including some in remote and isolated regions in mountains and forests.

Also sharing experiences were operators of community radio stations: Richard Rego of Radio Sarang, Mangalore and Pankaj Athavle of MUST (Mumbai University Student Transmission). They took participants through their experiences– the teething problems, the triumphs and shared the struggles they have with issues like sustainability in the long run. The participants also enjoyed meeting four popular RJs from Goa: Alfie Silveira, Sachin Chatte, Savio Noronha and Bambino Dias who shared their passion for their work and some trade secrets, in live radio broadcasting. A session on free and open source software was also conducted by Lajpat Dhingra of Media Matters.

All the sessions were interactive to the extent possible. The participants were most enthusiastic about a session dedicated to recording and editing a short sound track. This was done just to get a feel for audio production, but the deafening cacophony in the room at the time reflected the child-like excitement of the participants in doing something creative. They also appreciated a film about the Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathana's community radio work, *Voices of Kutch* by Chaitanya Modak, as it brought out the range of possibilities a community radio station represents.

The workshop concluded with participants asking for more. This was just a look at the menu, now they wanted to partake in actual exercises and in depth training to run community radio stations. The organisers were more than willing and asked the participants to come up with their concrete requests and to set out when and where. Once the desire to go further is there, the resources can always be found, as Sajan Venniyoor said.

Chandita Mukherjee
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