

## Radio Broadcasting in India

ZOHRA CHATTERJI

Radio as a communication medium has played a very important role in the economic, political and cultural development of nations. It has the unique advantage of being receivable through low cost, battery operated, and mobile receiving sets, affordable for almost everyone, even in the rural areas. For the average “Argumentative Indian” who loves “*baatein*” (talking), radio is an easy and effective medium to bond with and hence its continuing popularity in India.

It is interesting to know that Radio broadcasting in India was pioneered in the early 1920s by some young enthusiasts through their amateur radio clubs. The successful growth of radio in Europe and the United States gave impetus to a young group of Indian entrepreneurs, who established the Indian Broadcasting Company on 23rd July, 1927. However, their efforts to launch privately owned radio could not fructify. The colonial government seeing the potential danger of using this medium for the nationalist movement bought this company and renamed it the Indian State Broadcasting Service. In 1935, the British Government invited the BBC to help develop radio. One of the senior BBC producers is credited with the change of the name of the organisation to All India Radio later known as “Akashwani” (voice from the sky) from 1957.

The growth of All India Radio over the years has been phenomenal and today, AIR’s network provides radio coverage to 97.3 per cent of the population and reaches 90 per cent of the total area. Till 1995, the radio sector remained the monopoly of the Public Broadcaster, AIR though the seed was sown by young entrepreneurs. It is after the Supreme Court ruling in 1995 that India’s airwaves became “public property” and the need for utilising this medium for promoting the public good and ventilating plurality of views, opinions and ideas was strongly felt.

The resurgence of Radio actually took place in India in 1995 with the commencement of FM broadcast by AIR, where some slots were given to private producers. FM stations of AIR have also grown over the years. At the start of VIIth Plan, there were only 4 AIR FM stations in the country. At the end of VIIIth Plan, 98 FM stations were in operation which was further increased to 130 at the end of IXth Plan and 161 at the end of the Xth Plan. As on date, there are 170 AIR FM stations all over the country.

In 1999, the Government announced a liberalised policy for Expansion of FM Radio broadcasting through private agencies (Phase I), allowing fully owned Indian companies to set up private FM radio stations on a licence fee basis. The main objectives of the policy were to make quality programmes with a localised flavour in terms of content and relevance and to encourage new talent and generate employment opportunities directly and indirectly. This would supplement the services of AIR and more importantly, promote rapid expansion of the broadcast network in the country for the benefit of the Indian population.

In May 2000, the Government auctioned 108 frequencies in the FM Spectrum across 40 cities in the country to the Private Agencies. However, the results were not very encouraging as only 21 channels (about 20 per cent) could be operationalised. Even those licensees who operationalised reported that their operation was unviable and suggested a system of revenue share regime instead of existing licence regime of upfront licence fee with annual increase of 15 per cent.

Subsequently, a new policy of expansion of FM Radio Broadcasting through private agencies (Phase II) was notified on 13.7.2005. The new policy provides for grant of Permission on the basis of One Time Entry Fee (OTEF) and annual fees as revenue share in contrast with earlier fixed Annual Licence fee regime. Other important provisions included allowing 20 per cent FDI, networking of channels in C&D category cities etc. A total of 337 channels were put on bid under the new scheme and finally permission was granted for operationalisation of 245 channels. Out of this, 184 channels are already operational and the remaining are likely to be operational shortly.

FM Policy Phase II has been well accepted by all stakeholders and has resulted in huge growth not only in the FM Radio Industry but also in employment opportunities. It has also created a demand for FM Radio in category C&D cities and even in rural areas. Keeping this

in mind, and to accelerate the growth of FM Industry, it has been decided by the Government to expand FM Radio broadcasting to other cities through private agencies under FM Policy Phase III. The Telecom Regulatory Authority has submitted its recommendation on Phase III of the Policy, which include allowing additional channels in the same city, allowing broadcasting of news and current affairs taking content from AIR/Doordarshan, authorised news channels etc., allotment of FM channels for a district instead of single city, enhancing FDI limit, relaxation of fee structure for North-East and J&K, allowing networking of FM Radio programmes across entities, auto renewal of permission to district level permission holder etc. The Policy is under finalisation after which about 690 more channels are likely to be put on bid.

Community Radio is the emerging new sector, which has tremendous potential in India. While a commercial radio station is mainly market driven, the public service broadcasting on the other hand concentrates on content for education, information and entertainment. The medium of Community Radio, as distinct from commercial radio or public service broadcasting serves to bring small communities together, focuses on the common man's day-to-day concerns and helps in realising local aspirations. In this sense, it aims to contribute to the lives of the local people of that community. Since Community Radio focuses on issues relating to education, health, environment, agriculture, rural and community development, the advantage of this medium as an effective tool for empowerment of weaker section is enormous.

Recognising the huge potential of the medium of Community Radio, the Government of India announced in December 2002 a policy for the grant of permission to well establish educational institutions to set up Community Radio. The Government subsequently, liberalised the policy guidelines on Community Radio in December 2006 by bringing in "Non-Profit" organisations like civil society and voluntary organisations etc. under its ambit in addition to the educational institutions. As per the guidelines, community based organisations, which satisfy the following basic principles are eligible to apply for Community Radio:

- It should be explicitly constituted as a 'non-profit' organisation and should have a proven record of at least three years of service to the local community.

- The CRS to be operated by it should be designed to serve a specific well-defined local community.
- It should have an ownership and management structure that is reflective of the community that the CRS seeks to serve.
- Programmes for broadcast should be relevant to the educational, developmental, social and cultural needs of the community.
- It must be a legal entity.

Annual licence fee is not charged for a Community Radio Station. Only a bank guarantee of Rs. 25,000 is required. However, spectrum fees of approximately Rs. 20,000 is to be paid to Wireless Planning & Coordination (WPC) annually. The cost of setting up a station ranges between Rs. 600,000 to 1.2 million and it can serve an area of 10-15 KM with the maximum permitted ERP (effective radiated power) of 100 watt. Five minutes advertisement time per hour is also permitted on the channel (Details can be seen at [www.mib.nic.in](http://www.mib.nic.in)).

The Policy emphasises the need for involving the community not only in the production of the programmes but also in the overall management of the Community Radio station. As visualised in the Policy, Community Radio is a radio, which is of the community, by the community and for the community. Even so, a trend has been noticed for the CRS to copy the commercial FM channels and to even call themselves “FM Radio”. Accordingly, through a recent advisory issued to all CRS including those allotted to educational institutions, they have been advised to take necessary steps in this regard for involvement of the community and to invariably air the name of the CRS as “Community Radio” or “Samudayik Radio” or equivalent name for community in the local language.

Presently, 34 community Radio stations are operational in the country. The Government has so far received 208 applications under the new guidelines and permission has been granted so far to 36. This includes educational institutions (8), NGOs (18), Agricultural Universities (7) and KVKs (3). The government has decided to give wide publicity to the new policy in order to create awareness about the scheme and its potential for being used as a medium for the upliftment of the masses particularly in the rural areas.

There are many global examples which have demonstrated the viability of Community Radio in the field of social development.

However, even in India, there are examples which show the tremendous benefit to be derived from this medium in transforming the lives of the masses and in particular the rural masses. In one such case, the villagers used to go every year to work in brick kilns in neighbouring States as they did not have any source of earning, especially in the winter months. They were not aware of the self-employment schemes of the Government. One of the organisations working in the area took up this social issue and decided to broadcast in November–December 2006 a series of programmes on labour exploitation and information on government schemes for self-employment in villages. Some villagers contacted the radio team of the organisation, who explained about the various schemes to them. Many such villagers are now gainfully engaged in forest agriculture and have become part of the radio team as well. In 2007, the radio team took a survey and found a significant drop in migration from many villages of Daltangunj in Bihar from where the programmes were broadcast.

In another example, Radio has been effectively used in conjunction with ICT to empower villagers by generating and broadcasting locally relevant information through community-based audio and internet technologies. The multi-media centre has a cable audio station, with an accompanying computer centre. The local community produces and cablecast their radio programmes every day, which has had a marked improvement in the quality of life of the villagers. In April 2000, 28 volunteers were selected by community-based organisations and trained in radio programming and production in collaboration with All India Radio, Indira Gandhi National Open University and a local institute of communication. These programmes were broadcast on All India Radio and were also narrow cast at community meetings. The interest that these programmes generated in the community encouraged further work in the area. Self-help groups of uneducated women formed a management committee who took up local topics and organised daily programme schedules on *panchayats*, agricultural schemes and self-awareness groups.

“We may fall in the ‘suicide belt’ but we have never seen a farmer kill himself” says a 25 year old Dalit woman with pride and a sense of achievement. She researches, scripts, produces and anchors a weekly radio magazine which reaches out to about 5000 fellow (Dalit) village women each week. With the help of UNESCO, an NGO has given the young women in an arid region of Andhra Pradesh, school education and training to plan, produce and ‘narrow cast’ (or talk) to

their fellow sisters about local problems, health issues, social problems, and most importantly, tips on agriculture. It is our radio, and programmes made by us are for our benefit. We talk about seeds, crop diversity, organic farming, health, hygiene, women's problems and sending children to school, virtually everything that touches the community, say the people in the area proudly.

The above examples show that radio is indeed a potential medium in the country particularly in rural areas and can effectively be used for empowerment of the society especially the underprivileged. The new guidelines of the Government provide a great opportunity to effectively use this medium of Community Radio for empowerment of the societies and it is encouraging that a number of good NGOs are coming forward to work in this sector.