

# Community Radio 'Under Progress' Resuming a Paused Revolution

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Community radio produced, controlled and owned by the people can empower the marginalised and address the “voice poverty” which afflicts South Asia. The article details the macro-level institutional environment required for a democratic and sustainable community radio sector and identifies the challenges involved in making the sector vibrant and dynamic in the South Asian region.

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Some years ago I saw a perplexing sign outside a construction site in Chennai, that read, “Construction under Progress;” it was clearly a mix of the ubiquitous South Asian sign, “Under Construction” and a metaphor for a development dream forever deferred. The two-decade old community radio movement in South Asia is something that seems to be perpetually “under progress” in the sense of being under-cooked, a paused revolution that was to alter the media landscape of the region, never fully realising its potential. At the ground level, the hurdles are many, including bureaucratic delays in issuing of licences, prohibitive costs of technology, vanishing spectrum for communities, and declining volunteer support. While these are extremely important, in this article, I seek to address the macro-level institutional environment, what I call the preconditions, for a democratic and sustainable community radio sector in South Asia.

## Diversity and Challenge

The diversity of community radio in South Asia mirrors the political, economic, social and cultural diversity of the region.

Nepal, which boasts of the earliest advent of community radio in the region in 1996, today has about 250 community radio stations with multiple ownership models spread across 74 districts but without a distinct policy on community radio (ACORAB 2015). In India, the earliest policy guidelines for community radio were issued in 2002 (modified in 2006) and have to date spawned over 180 radio stations.<sup>1</sup> Bangladesh, thanks to a decade-long struggle by civil society, announced a policy for community radio in 2008, leading to the setting up of community radio stations across the country, with about 16 stations on air up until now, and almost that many in the pipeline.<sup>2</sup> There have been active conversations in other South Asian countries like Sri Lanka, Maldives and Bhutan about the exciting possibilities that community radio can bring into their respective national mediascapes.<sup>3</sup>

This is the time of unprecedented economic, social and political ferment in the entire South Asian region. Even as some countries are dealing with political uncertainty and constitutional complexities, others are having to contend with the problem of reconstruction after years of conflict have damaged their social fabric and caused untold misery to the economic situation of millions of their citizens. While in some countries, the institutionalisation of democracy is taking much longer than is desired, in the more established democracies such as India’s, elected governments have had to face extraordinary challenges to their

legitimacy from people's movements around issues of livelihoods, corruption, and gender justice. Some countries in the region are struggling to transform the peace dividend into welfare programmes for their citizens, for provision of affordable housing, basic education for both boys and girls, and food security.

It is in this context that community radio, produced, controlled and owned by the people assumes significance. There is an urgent need to address not only poverty, but also "voice poverty." Jo Tacchi (2009), a long-time observer of the South Asian community media scene, defines "voice poverty" as "the inability of people to influence the decisions that affect their lives, and the right to participate in that decision making." Denial of voice comes from systematic efforts to restrict access to modes of self-expression. The policy environment needs to be changed drastically to enable access and, thereby, recognise people's voices. It is this policy environment in the South Asian region that I seek to address through this presentation and identify the challenges that make the emergence and sustainability of a third-tier of community broadcasting (apart from public and commercial sectors) in the region a daunting task.

### Strengthening Democracy

The most significant task is of strengthening the democratic environment in the region that is so essential for sustaining a viable, independent, and dynamic community radio sector. Political scientists have identified six different models of democracy—"electoral," "liberal," "majoritarian," "participatory," "deliberative" and "egalitarian" (Coppedge and Gerring 2011). Using this typology, one can assert that, in spite of some uneven history of democracy in South Asia, the region has not been found lacking in substantive and procedural democracy. Community media find fertile ground to take root and grow in a healthy manner when ruling dispensations promote a concept of democracy that is more participatory, deliberative and egalitarian. It is this domain that needs to be energised and reinvigorated.

Nepal, with the political environment inhibiting, until recently, consensus on a

constitution governing all aspects of life in the country, is still struggling to put in place even a formal democratic structure (Raghunath 2014). Without a wider legal framework and constitutional rights, community radio in Nepal does not have special recognition or a distinct policy governing it.

In Sri Lanka, the putative community radio sector symbolised by the much-celebrated Kothmale Community Radio (an initiative of the state broadcaster, Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation), supported by UNESCO, never moved towards establishing an independent tier of community broadcasting (Raghunath 2013). The long years of civil war in the country and the gradual weakening of civil society have made the emergence of an autonomous community radio space in Sri Lanka quite challenging (Civicus 2015). Recent elections have raised some hopes among civil society organisations that a genuine community radio sector may yet emerge in the country (Rasmin 2015).

In Bangladesh, some of the recent violence directed against independent secular bloggers is being seen by some observers as symptomatic of a polarised political environment that is casting its shadow on freedom of speech and expression, adversely affecting deliberative democracy (Civicus 2015).

In Bhutan, the democratic transition from an absolute monarchy and the consequent evolution of electoral democracy has led to recent initiatives to kick-start a community radio sector in the country.

In India, where there has been a long history of a dynamic civil society playing a positive role in social movements and speaking for the marginalised, there are apprehensions that government actions in recent years have resulted in shrinking spaces for civil society. No wonder that, against the original projection of 4,000–5,000 community radio stations, the number of operational stations in India has not even crossed 200. The numbers are not only growing at a slow rate (172 to 184 in the last one year), but also in a particular direction, with fewer than a third of the stations licensed to civil society organisations (a

majority of licences being given to educational institutions).<sup>4</sup>

### NGO-isation and the Development Agenda

However, the heavy involvement of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), among key civil society actors, in the setting up and promotion of community radios in countries where there is an active community radio sector has led to all kinds of anomalies. While "media for development" is a legitimate idea for community radio, the perception of community radio as merely a channel to communicate "development" is very much a legacy of postcolonial nation-building project in which media were mobilised for "national development" (Schramm 1964). In this paradigm, people were seen as passive recipients of information in a top-down pedagogical communication process. People's right to communicate as citizens and as active agents of change rarely got primacy. The funding imperative, the policy specifying NGOs as the eligible applicants, and the overall developmental framework led to the growth of community radio in India largely through the efforts of NGOs.

While some of the best examples of genuine grass-roots community radio in India still come from NGO initiatives, some organisations are beginning to enter the arena solely to further the organisational objectives, and they take to less than participatory methods under pressure from donors to "scale up" operations and to demonstrate "impact" on behaviour change. The implications of this incipient NGO-isation of community radio in India are beginning to be felt across the sector. The programmatic agendas of NGOs tend to dictate the content and compel many stations to "a stultifying adoption of standardised genres and formats" (Pavarala 2013: 4).

The situation may not be much different in Bangladesh where NGOs, supported by international donors, form a crucial part of the social sector, and community radio is seen primarily as a tool for development and disaster management. In the context of NGOs being used increasingly by the government for service delivery, there is a real danger of NGOs becoming

what Geoffrey Wood (1997) termed a “franchise state” and lose their radical political edge and autonomous voice.<sup>5</sup>

In the absence of a regulatory framework guiding the community radio sector in Nepal, there is widespread politicisation of community radio stations with thinly disguised ties to established political parties (Pringle and Subba 2007). If community radio were to contribute to the making of a truly democratic public sphere, with space for the articulation of marginalised voices, the time has come for the movement to go beyond the developmentalist agenda, towards a more radical, communication rights paradigm.

### Restrictions on Communication Rights

If the political anomie in Nepal meant that no specific regulatory framework could emerge to govern community radio, the Sri Lankan government during the protracted internecine conflict had refused to even acknowledge the need for community radio in the country. Bhutan, more recently, has initiated the process for setting up a few community radio stations in the existing legal framework without making any focused policy for community radio. In countries where there is legal recognition, if not legislative sanction, the policy environment continues to be restrictive.

Communication rights, including access to information and freedom of expression, should be at the heart of democratic societies (Coyer and Hintz 2010). A critical part of these rights is the right to report freely on one’s own environment, independent of state or commercial controls. News and current affairs are still on the prohibited list of content on community radio in India, perhaps the only instance of this kind of policy outside of the subcontinent.

The Bangladesh community radio policy, modelled closely after the Indian one, also has a restrictive, “development” function for community radio. At a time when news is permitted to be transmitted through all kinds of media, radio still faces this anachronistic ban. It is ironic that in some African countries, the policy “requires” stations licensed as community

radio to devote some minimal time to broadcasting news and current affairs to its audiences.<sup>6</sup> Genilo et al (2013: 67) have pointed out recently that despite the apparent enthusiasm for the medium, the Bangladeshi authorities continue to be wary of community radio as a “potential source of opposition and dissent.” It perhaps explains, in part, the cautious approach and “planned growth” of community radio in the country, with only a couple of new community radio stations going on air in the last five years despite promises to permit a community radio station at every *upazilla* (488 sub-districts).<sup>7</sup>

### Internal Security Prism

Apprehensions over security arising out of the activities of a variety of non-state actors in South Asia have also contributed to a somewhat tentative opening up of airwaves in certain areas. While internal conflict has completely stalled the development of community radio in Sri Lanka, other countries in the region are also dogged by similar concerns. The Ministry of Home Affairs in India tends to look at everything through the internal security prism, and it is only recently that it has begun, albeit hesitantly, to shed its opposition to licence applications for community radio from certain regions of the country that it characterises as “disturbed areas.” This position militates against evidence from different parts of the world that community media could play a potential peace-building role in conflict-prone or post-conflict societies.

Clemencia Rodriguez (2011), in her brilliant work on community media in Colombia, makes a compelling case that citizens’ media help communities “reconstitute symbolic universes that have been disrupted by violence.” Moreover, many of these places denied are the so-called “media-dark” areas, in the border regions or historically deprived rural areas where it is so vital to have community media.

### Funding Question

While the social sustainability of community radio in South Asia militates against its misuse by communities for undemocratic purposes, much of the sustainability

discussions within the sector are often centred on the financial health of the stations. The formidable setting up and maintenance costs of community radio have made the sector depend heavily on donor funding, NGO initiatives, and state support, all of which have concrete consequences for the independence of the radio stations. Raghu Mainali (2008: 46), leading campaigner for community radio in Nepal, noted with alarm that in the “stampede for resources,” stations make compromises with the “spirit and values” of community radio, leading even to the “death” of the sector.

The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting in India, in a well-intentioned move to address problems of financial sustainability of community radio, started a programme to empanel stations to receive government advertisements publicising state welfare schemes and their achievements. Given the low rates at which these are being offered, they would hardly make a dent in the sustainability problem, while having the strange effect of community radio, the sector that was to contribute to the constitution of an alternative public sphere, lining up to receive government largesse to promote the “achievements” of the party in power. More recently, the ministry also launched a Community Radio Support Scheme mainly to subsidise the acquisition of technology by stations.

While public funding of community radio is welcome, it should have been set up as an autonomous fund as in many other countries instead of a government ministry controlling the purse strings tightly. If the last Community Radio Sannelan, the annual convention of community radio stations organised in Delhi by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting is any indication, it is clear that many government departments and ministries are viewing community radio as an economical, last-mile delivery platform for information on government schemes and programmes. And, under pressure for financial sustainability, many stations seem to be willing partners in taking on this uncritical transmission role. There is a lesson in the setting up and administration of a public fund for

community radio for Bangladesh, where similar proposals are being made.

### Promoting a Culture of Self-assessment

Finally, any efforts to bolster the financial and social sustainability of community radio in South Asia must be accompanied by the institution of rigorous ethical standards and periodic performance assessment of radio stations. Concerned about promoting accountability of community radio stations to the community and to ensure that they adhere to the foundational norms of community radio, the Community Radio Support Centre in Nepal developed the Community Radio-Performance Assessment System (CR-PAS) in 2011. Touted as a tool for “process assessment” rather than “impact assessment,” CR-PAS is intended to allow stations to periodically assess their own strengths and weaknesses (CRSC 2012). Similarly, in India the UNESCO Chair on Community Media (2014) developed, through an elaborate, participatory process, a toolkit for self-assessment and peer review of community radio stations and also trained a cadre of peer reviewers to facilitate its application at the station level.

The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting in India has initiated and supported a sector-wide peer review process in which the toolkit played a prominent role. The toolkit has since been adopted by the community radio sector in Bangladesh and is now being validated for use in East Africa. Aimed at the continuous improvement of community radio and to instil a culture of self-assessment among radio stations, these reflexive exercises not only help in warding off misdirected efforts at external monitoring by the state,<sup>8</sup> but also create conditions for the long-term sustainability of the sector in South Asia.

### Conclusions

To sum up, a conducive environment for a sustainable community radio in South Asia requires strengthening of participatory and deliberative democracy; a vibrant civil society; freeing of community radio from the risks of NGOisation; going beyond the development

paradigm, to that of communication rights; lifting of restrictions on content (while adhering to an acknowledged broadcasting code of practice); prioritising “media-dark” areas and using community radio for conflict resolution and peace-building; setting up autonomously administered public funds to support community radio; and promoting a culture of self-assessment among community radios.

If we can start and sustain this process of strengthening community radio, we would be able to take that “under progress” tag off South Asian community radio. And, the revolution will be well on its way.

### NOTES

- 1 <http://mib.nic.in/ShowDocs.aspx>. Updated list as on 10 June 2015 (accessed on 26 October 2015). For a detailed history of the movement in India, see Pavarala and Malik (2007).
- 2 Source: Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio & Communication, <http://www.bnnrc.net/news/bnnrc-update> (accessed on 4 September 2015).
- 3 See, for example, CR News (2015).
- 4 Source: Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Government of India, <http://mib.nic.in/ShowDocs.aspx>.
- 5 See also Lewis (2011).
- 6 See, for example, the broadcasting content regulations in Tanzania, <http://www.tcra.go.tz/images/documents/regulations/Content%20Services%20Regulations.pdf> (accessed on 4 September 2015).
- 7 “Community Radio Will be Set up in Every Upazilla (Sub District) in Bangladesh,” <http://sancomonline.net/news/community-radio-will-be-set-up-in-every-upazilla-sub-district-in-bangladesh/> (accessed on 26 October 2015).
- 8 See, for example, CR News (2015).

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