

## **“The poor and marginalized find themselves without a voice in that monolithic public sphere”**

Interview of Prof. Vinod Pavarala

by Alexander Vojvoda\*

**Prof. Vinod Pavarala** is UNESCO Chair on Community Media at University of Hyderabad. For over a decade, he has been one of the leading campaigners for democratization of airwaves in India and the South Asian region. As past President of the Community Radio Forum of India, he has been playing an active role in civil society’s engagements with forging alternative media spaces for the marginalized communities. His much-reviewed book, co-authored with Kanchan K. Malik, *Other Voices: the struggle for community radio in India* (Sage, 2007) documents community-based efforts across India to carve out an alternative public sphere. He has addressed international forums such as UNESCO, AMARC (World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters), and CMFE (Community Media Forum of Europe) in the cause of media pluralism and diversity.

*When was the UNESCO Chair on Community Media established and what are the main aims of your work?*

The UNESCO Chair on Community Media was established in 2011 at University of Hyderabad in India to promote the cause of community-owned, managed and controlled media through research, policy advocacy, capacity building, and knowledge dissemination. The overall goal is to use the intellectual space of the Chair to make a case for democra-

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tization of the media landscape and contribute to media pluralism and diversity.

*What are the characteristics of community radios as the third pillar in the media landscape in comparison to the public-service and commercial media?*

Community broadcasting is essentially a non-profit service. Unlike the other two types of broadcasting, community radios are characterised by participation of members of a community in production and management and are typically reliant on community's own material and human resources. They tend to focus on local issues and events and showcase local cultures, identities, and languages. The state and commercial stations are used for propaganda and profit, and are not accessible to ordinary citizens, except as passive listeners.

*Participatory structures, open-access, diversity in opinions, languages, cultures and persons producing the programmes in general are seen to define community radios. These aspects of community radios also constitute a 'community public sphere' in which citizens are able to take part in democratic processes. How would you describe this arena where citizens are interacting with the society via community radios?*

The dominant public sphere constituted by the government, a national market, and the mainstream mass media is exclusionary in nature and privileges the elites. The poor and marginalized find themselves without a voice in that monolithic public sphere and lacking access to it. It is here that community media such as community radios have the potential to forge 'subaltern counter public spheres' (to use Nancy Fraser's concept) where subordinate classes could circulate alternative discourses and articulate their own interests and identities. Such alternative spheres, by shifting control over media technologies to the marginalized, facilitate collective action and offer a realistic potential for emancipation.

***How important is the local context community radios are working in?***

The local context is extremely important. Against the homogenizing influences of globalized media, community radios could offer a local anchor to reassert the primacy of the village and neighbourhood and encourage a healthy respect for local languages (many of which are marginalized as 'dialects') and local identities. This does not mean that participants in community radio (producers, managers, and listeners) need to be confined to the 'local', but engage critically with the 'national' and the 'global' through uniquely context-specific worldviews.

***The term 'community' underwent critical analysis in the recent time and was redefined in new ways. In (post-)conflict situations community radios are regarded as a tool to facilitate reconciliation processes. What are opportunities and limits for community radios during conflicts and in post-conflict situations? How would you see the term 'community' in community radio especially in the context of peace building and conflict resolution?***

The notion of 'community' could sometimes work adversely leading to hardening of attitudes towards the 'other', which in turn could result in inter-ethnic violence and conflict. Without romanticizing 'community' and upholding perverse tendencies among local groups, we can retain the idea of community as a peacekeeper and builder of peace that emphasizes a collective, participatory approach to addressing conflict. A community-based approach to peace building is essential in societies ridden with conflicts; it helps guide people towards more sustainable, peaceful relations between different communities. It has been suggested by those with experience in building bridges in post-conflict societies that participatory processes and community-based forums could be mobilized to build social capital by providing secure spaces for interaction, communication and collective decision-making. Such mechanisms could contribute to dispelling mistrust and set the stage for peaceful and constructive management of communal disputes. Community radio stations broadcasting in local languages could offer a vibrant forum for dialogue and

debate on key issues that could be fuelling conflict. Ideas about peace-ful reconciliation, respect for human rights, and civic education could be systematically and effectively communicated through community radios. As Clemencia Rodriguez has shown so incisively in the context of armed conflict in Colombia, community media can play a role in reconstructing webs of meaning and strengthening the agency of the community through locally situated knowledges, languages, and aesthetics.

*In addition to their local focus community radios are worldwide organised in various interest groups e.g. AMARC (World Association of Community Broadcasters) with regional sub-organisations like AMARC Africa. How important is the exchange between community radios, especially in the context of peace building and conflict resolution?*

Community radio stations must take up opportunities for horizontal networking among similarly placed groups around the world. There is huge learning and sharing of valuable experiences that would emerge from such interactions. Organizations such as AMARC provide important platforms for exchange of ideas and practices among community radio stations globally. I can well imagine critical lessons to be learnt through discussions among community radios, say, in Nepal (which, for decades, dealt with a debilitating Maoist conflict), Colombia (which had been a basket case for a variety of violent conflicts involving drug lords, paramilitary groups, and leftist guerrillas), and Central Africa.