

# An Analysis of the Role of Community Radio in Social Development in India

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## Abstract

In many countries, including India, community radio is yet to be fully realized as a growth driver. Community radio stations can act as catalysts for positive change at the local level. This study covers the knowledge gap on how community radio fosters an environment conducive to Social and cultural development. This examination emphasizes how top-down communication techniques undermine the participatory nature of community radio in India. This study follows a qualitative methodology to examine the role of community radio in achieving community developments locally and to what extent it has been successful.

**Keywords:** Community Radio, India, Community development, Communication, Knowledge gap

## Introduction

According to World Population Prospects (WPP) 2022 [1], India's population is projected to surpass that of China on July 1, 2023, with 1.428 billion people. This population assessment demonstrates India's contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); however, this can only be achieved by using a communication channel that effectively engages with the public on a social and emotional level rather than providing access. Community radio is a form of media with a close relationship with its listeners. Those who participate in the programs of a community radio station develop an emotional connection with it [2]. According to UNESCO, community radio is a grassroots form of communication that enables vulnerable people to participate in decision-making, which will improve their lives. However, sanctions prevented this from happening [3]. Community radio's unique relationship with its listeners is based on the participatory nature of the format.

Social media as a tool has the potential to address information inaccessibility and provide a platform for self-representation. It helps to democratize knowledge and information flows, where social agency decides to distribute, share, and read content. Most indigenous journalism activities allow communities to maintain the integrity of their knowledge through newsletters, radio, audio-visual documentation, and Wi-Fi mesh radios. Media will enable us to broaden the concept of society, analyze social issues, and encourage reflection and critical thinking. Social media content provides perspectives on climate change and resilience, sociocultural histories, and community access to forest resources and rights.

A study concluded that community radio is essential for maintaining regional languages and traditions [4]. The impact of programs increases when the local language is used. Non-radio professionals run a community radio station, which local people manage. A community can be geographic or interest-based. Community radio is truly a people's medium. According to [5], community radio is a non-profit organization controlled by the community that relies on local funding for operation. Fraser & Restrepo-Estrada pointed out that the programming of community radio stations reflects the unique needs and interests of the neighborhood. People who engage in community radio develop their own and their community's skills [6]. They improve themselves and society in this way.

Early in 2003, India's first community radio regulations were enacted, and only educational institutions qualified. The government permitted the entry of civil society and community-based organizations in the second set of community radio guidelines from 2006. Community radio stations can only be operated by NGOs, educational institutions, and agricultural scientific centers in India [7].

This study tries to comprehend how community radio in India helps the country attain its sustainable development objectives. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), usually called global goals, are a group of seventeen dreams. These objectives were set by the UN in 2015. The purpose is to make people and the world peaceful and prosperous (United Nations, 2022). Radio Kotagiri station, an online community radio station, was selected for this study. Radio Kotagiri was launched by the Keystone Foundation [8] in 2013. The Community Radio Station (CSR) is located in Kotagiri, a town in the Nilgiris District of the Western Ghats - A UNESCO world heritage renowned for its biodiversity. The content aired focuses on filling up information gaps in critical areas to address the issues of the communities. Thus, it would directly contribute to improving the capacity of the communities to address the problems themselves. Through conscious, collective & continuous efforts, we can save the forests on which the hill communities, flora & fauna thrive [9].

## **Review of Literature**

Community radio serves as the voice of the voiceless and is centered on the individual due to its horizontal communication methods. The same system is used in the mainstream media to capture the principles with which this medium was founded. In 2016, Odunlami carried out some research on Nigerian community radio. It was discovered that the management of the University had set up a board to make decisions about the day-to-day operations of campus radio. University communities are now passively receiving the messages, seriously endangering community radio.

Every group in society that is disadvantaged and marginalized can benefit from community radio. If employed wisely, it can transform society for the better. In a study on the function of community radio in empowering women in India [10], it was discovered that women listeners improved leadership skills. Community radio can be used to strengthen every segment of society that is more vulnerable. Community radio ownership affects how much a station provides the voiceless a voice and how the community is represented in management [11]. This is one of the reasons that only NGOs, academic institutions, and agricultural science centers are allowed to run community radio stations in India.

The programs of community radio stations provide marginalized groups with empowerment and solutions to their challenges. A community will discover that it needs communication when it examines its needs and considers the root causes of the problems. As a result, the community will establish a community radio station. Community radio stations need to give programs that promote community empowerment top priority. Community radio gives the people in the area a voice while fostering their abilities [12].

The community will be more willing to participate in station efforts when they know the reasoning behind them. For recipients to comprehend the project's goals, the mobilization process for developing development radio projects should be participatory [13].

### **Objectives of this study**

- To study the role of community radio as a tool of development.
- To analyze the role of community radio at the local level to bring positive changes.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study uses development media theory as a theoretical framework. Development media theory came into existence due to the limited application of four normative theories of the press in third-world countries. Denis McQuail gave this theory, which sees the media as a tool of national development. According to this theory, the media must be helpful until a nation is well established [14]. Denis McQuail gave some significant principles of the development media theory [15]:

- In the interest of the nation's development, the state has the right to restrict media freedom.
- Journalists and other media professionals have freedom and responsibilities.
- The media should carry out development tasks following nationally established policies.

Community radio also helps national development by operating locally, following the development media theory, which holds that media should work for national development. A nation can see the product only when development projects are launched at the grassroots level. Community radio can be used in a structured way to achieve sustainable development goals, emphasizing the development of countries rather than just their economies. Working for the community's welfare is required under the community radio system. A radio station must provide shows that address the demands of regional community growth. In this study, the programs and their content are the main focus, with an analysis of the contribution community radio stations play in helping the nation develop by meeting the requirements of specific areas.

### **Methodology**

This study uses a qualitative approach to understand how community radio contributes to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The study was conducted as a series of interviews with station managers and women radio broadcasters to understand station management, content, and impact. Station managers were interviewed to understand their areas of focus, the needs of the community, the projects they do, the challenges they face, the impact they have made, and the ways they can sustain radio. Women broadcasters were interviewed to understand why they chose to work in radio, their challenges, how the programs affected society, how their work affected them, and their comfort with technology.

### **Data Analysis**

Community Radio empowers rural people to discuss rights, freedoms, policies, laws, accountability, governance, etc. Community Radio can usher in change at the deepest level. Here's how one organization harnesses the power of community radio nationwide. Radio Kotagiri, the first Community Radio Station in the Nilgiris, running out of the Keystone Campus at Kotagiri, is producing a series of 20 programs on various aspects. The programs aim to spread awareness among the public on the role of Panchayati Raj Institutions and the need for public participation. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj financially supports the initiative.

The aired content focuses on filling up information gaps in key areas to address the issues of the communities. Thus, it directly contributes to improving the capacity of the communities to address the problems themselves. The radio programs utilize resources from within the community (such as village elders, organic farmers, healers, etc.) so that the relevance to and acceptance by the people is maximum. Radio programs can be in any dialect, reaching the full diversity of audiences.

The genre for the programs has been kept on topics such as Conservation of biodiversity and nature, Tribal culture and arts, Community development including government programs/schemes, Climate change awareness, Sustainable development, Sustainable Livelihood options for indigenous people, Youth development including education counseling, Health-related information, Environmental issues, Organic agriculture, market price information, etc. The programs are generated by Government departments, local communities, own production, NGOs/institutions, experts, schools/colleges, hospitals, etc.

Kotagiri is home to five native tribal communities: Irula, Badaga, Toda, Kota and Kurumba. The communities have their own languages and cultures. One of Kotagiri Radio's key agendas is to preserve these indigenous communities' culture and languages. They also produce programs to curb the usage of pesticides and, in turn, impact on the environment.

### **Social aspects**

- Primarily, men from the Toda and Kota communities practice agriculture. In the last few years, they have used pesticides and fertilizers to increase production or given up agriculture for better prospects. Radio Kotagiri produces programs to raise awareness of organic agriculture and its environmental impact in partnership with the local administration and the parent NGO. The programs include interviews with successful farmers on their best practices, scientists, and government officials on the schemes available to promote organic cultivation.
- For better employment prospects, tribal youth relocate to bigger cities and, in the process, lose touch with their indigenous culture and language. Through their programs, Radio Kotagiri has been documenting the cultural practices of these tribal communities and their languages. Their idea is to create a repository of the communities' knowledge and practices.
- In partnership with the Department of Science's "Science for Women" project, Radio Kotagiri created a series of programs to raise awareness of women's health, hygiene, the role of nutrition in prenatal and postnatal care, etc.
- They also produce programs targeted explicitly toward girls to raise awareness of the importance of education, better nutrition, and menstrual health.

### **Sustaining the radio station**

The radio station is stationed on the premises of the parent NGO, Keystone Foundation. This gives them access to free internet and electricity. They spend approximately USD 667 per month on other expenses. Apart from the funding from the parent NGO, they also get some essential support from organizations like UNICEF, CRA, and SMART for their projects.

### **Impact created**

Increased awareness of the benefits of organic agriculture and millet cultivation. Awareness amongst women of the importance of their well-being and a particular focus on nutrition and hygiene. Openness in the community to seek alternate perspectives to solve their problems. Increased awareness of different tribal languages and their customs.

### **Featured impact story**

One of the critical members of Kotagiri Radio, Ms. Jeyanthi, belongs to the Irula tribe of this region. She says her husband passed away in 2012, leaving a void in her life. She also needed a job to care for herself and her three children. She started with a job at Keystone Foundation as a barefoot journalist and eventually became one of Radio Kotagiri's pillars. She says that she was not a natural broadcaster, and it was only with a lot of practice and training that she learned the fine art of writing for the audience and presenting comfortably in front of the microphone. She says she was overwhelmed by the responsibility of facing life alone. Still, her interactions with the people from the community for her programs allowed her to seek perspectives to solve her problems. One of the perspectives she developed through her interactions was that her problems were much smaller when compared to those she was listening to. She has developed a sense of satisfaction and an identity by being the community's voice and working to solve their problems. When asked what the radio had given her, she replied enthusiastically, "Happiness." She also believes radio has given her the inner strength to solve her problems.

### **Programme on Health and Nutrition for Women**

In a landmark judgment in 1995, the Supreme Court declared airwaves as a public property that could be used to advance public good, and this played an essential role in firmly establishing community radio in India. In an article by the Confederation of Indian Industry, it has been quoted that community radio has been playing a catalytic role in bringing rural India closer to the national mainstream and serving as a vital tool in strengthening the "Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression" in rural India. The first community radio was set up in 2004 in Anna University, Chennai. When writing this report, there were 251 community radio stations in India. Radio has been seen as a woman-friendly medium in terms of the relationship women broadcasters have with the listeners and the technology being easily adaptable. Women have naturally radio-friendly voices that allow them to connect with their listener's easily [16]. Also, in conservative setups where women hesitate to present themselves, radio, with its anonymity to physical appearance, makes it a preferred medium to present themselves. Thus, radio, as a medium, is women-friendly, pertinent, and accessible in terms of learning production skills and techniques, working together to shape program schedules, share stories, and collect information for radio programs. The portability of radio makes it accessible from anywhere and at any time without affecting one's routine. This facilitates the dissemination of information that is educational and relevant for women. With more focused training on both program production and technology, women can use radio to empower

themselves and others. The more decision-making positions women hold in the mass media, the more influential societal changes they can bring about. Radio has given voices to women to fight for their rights, thereby creating awareness about various issues, from women's rights to domestic violence, health, maternity, violence, and nutrition. Women also use community radio stations to create awareness about their political rights, voting, and women representatives in Panchayati Raj institutions and assembly, parliament, etc.

### Conclusion

Each community radio station serves a specific community, a geographic community, or a community of interest. Radio Kotagiri (Community Radio) works for the social, economic, and political development of the disabled community. Community radio empowers the community through education, news, personality development, or reality shows. Community radio activities are based on developmental media theory; as proposed in this study, they also aim to contribute to national development. In India, community radio stations are restricted, and only NGOs, educational institutions, and agricultural science centers can run such stations. These constraints are justified in the theory of development media for national development.

The study's findings suggest that community radio stations bring about positive changes in listeners' lives by addressing their problems. But funding remains a significant challenge, the results suggest, limiting its potential, the study concludes. A lack of listener participation in quizzes, contests, and live shows has also been found. However, when it comes to program development, their role is limited to making recommendations. Listeners need to actively create the content, which has made the community radio station another medium of a top-down approach. This practice raises the question of the relevance of community radio stations.

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