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# **Evolution of community radio in India and its application with respect to information & communication technology in education**

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**Abstract**--The COVID-19 pandemic has revolutionized the way we work, communicate, and impart knowledge. Due to the need to maintain physical distancing, education in India has been greatly hindered in the last two years. The education of around 250 million children in India was gravely impacted due to school closures which were caused by strict lockdown. To counter this crisis, governments all over the world collaborated with industry stakeholders and managed to create an education ecosystem which relied on Information & Communication Technology. But due to uneven broadband connectivity in rural areas and prohibitive costs associated with high-speed internet, most students are not able to fully exploit this new online education ecosystem. This research paper seeks to outline an alternative method of remote learning which employs community radio as the medium. Community Radio is one of the most cost-efficient modes of communication and has a distinctive edge when it comes to accessibility in villages and other far-flung regions of the country. Hence the integration of community radio in the overall Information & Communication Technology ecosystem will go a long way in solving the present education crisis. This integration can be carried out by the collaboration between the volunteers from the education community, schools, local administration and parents who will supervise the community radio networks. Additionally, this community will provide the teachers with the relevant information they need to keep students actively engaged in learning activities during extended periods of lock downs. Hence feasible learning methods established over the community radio network can felicitate effective learning. The paper also sheds light on the evolution of the

community radio in India and some of the successful community radio programme in India.

**Keywords**---Cost-efficient, Far-flung regions, Collaboration, Community Radio Networks.

## 1. Introduction

Radio facilitates the participation of citizens in the national discourse and defends their interests. But in this era of hyper commercialization of radio broadcasting, the true objectives of radio are being forgotten. That is where a community radio service comes in the picture. The fundamental character of a community radio is its independence and responsibility in serving the community rather than its own commercial interests.

Any particular community may run a radio service to improve its social conditions and the generic quality of life. The community itself decides what its priorities and needs are in terms of the programming. Community radio is basically a low power FM broadcasting service which is owned and run by a particular community with a non-profit motive. The service is primarily used for providing and sharing information, education, and entertainment. This helps in reducing the digital divide and socio-economic issues. The service also effectively promotes local culture resulting in the overall development of a community. Affordability and portability are the key pillars of any community radio service.

Community Radio is an appropriate medium to reach remote communities and disadvantaged groups of people — the illiterate, women, and the poor because of its cost-effective nature. It offers a platform to participate in the public discourse, irrespective of one's educational level.

For the past two years, the corona-virus pandemic has severely hampered the education of children in India. It was already a daunting task to provide education to the underprivileged students of rural India. But the COVID crisis has exponentially increased the challenges involved in imparting education in the far-flung regions of the country. This paper proposes community radio as an alternative medium of imparting education in the country. As a participatory communication medium, community radio also faces many challenges for it to realize its full potential. The paper will also shed light on those challenges so that every needy person can avail the community radio services.

## 2. Methodology

Analytical research was conducted for the purposes of this paper. Facts, studies, and expert opinions that are already in public domain were relied upon for the primary objective of this research. For the secondary data, the websites of UNICEF, UNESCO, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and some prominent community radio stations were referred. Critical evaluation of relevant material was carried out to ascertain the role of community radio in the education sphere.

### **3. Evolution Of Community Radio In India**

The community radio movement in India was born after the Supreme Court judgement in the case of Union of India vs. Cricket Association of Bengal. In that landmark case, apex court adjudged that the radio waves or frequencies are public property and therefore should be regulated by a public authority in the larger interests of the public. The judgement, delivered by Justice P.B. Sawant and Justice S. Mohan, was a milestone in the emergence of community radio stations across India. Following this judgement, it took a decade for not-for-profit radio stations to emerge in rural areas. In December 2002, the Government of India approved a policy for the grant of licenses for setting up of Community Radio Stations to well established educational institutions including IITs/IIMs.<sup>1</sup>

In 2006, the Government tweaked the policy by bringing in non-profit organisations like civil society and voluntary organization under its ambit. This was done to foster greater participation by the civil society on issues relating to development & social change. The community radio station guidelines issued in 2006, were silent on licence renewal and extension. The community radio stations were also not able to broadcast news or current affairs. Consequently in 2014, Telecom Regulatory Authority of India proposed that licenced permission for community radio stations should be extended for five years at a time and the community radio stations should be allowed to air news sourced from All India Radio in its original form or translated into the local language/ dialect.

The Information and Broadcasting ministry following the recommendations of the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, brought in some much-needed reforms to the community radio services. The ministry amended the policy guidelines for community radio stations in India, notifying the rules for licence extension/renewal and allowing the community radio stations to broadcast news and current affairs, sourced exclusively from state-owned All India Radio. At present over 200 community radio stations are being operated across India. Majorly the stations are being run by local communities or non-profit organizations.

### **4. Organizing Community Radio**

The fundamental characteristics of a community radio must be understood before organizing a community radio service. The World Association of Community Radio Broadcaster, AMARC, lays out three distinct aspects of a community radio, namely non-profit objective, control of the community and active participation of the community members.

Traditionally, community radio's objective has been to enable the oppressed and provide a platform to those people who do not have a voice to express themselves. There are some key differences that distinguish community radio from public radio or private radio.

Firstly, there is active community participation in the process of establishing, managing and operating a community radio station. Secondly, the community

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<sup>1</sup> <https://mib.gov.in/sites/default/files/Guidelines%202006.pdf>

radio service must have definite audience who live in a specific area. Thirdly, the community radio service must be cost effective and easily accessible.

## **5. Community Radio As An Alternative Medium To Impart Education**

The COVID-19 pandemic has hindered education in India in an unprecedented way. School closures due to strict lock-downs, has been a major disruptor in imparting education. In rural areas of the country the situation is even grimmer due to economic divide. The infrastructure required to facilitate distant learning is simply not there in rural areas. Smartphones and high-speed internet are still considered as luxuries in most of the rural regions of the country. The 16th Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2021 (Rural) was released by Pratham foundation in November last year. The report stated that the availability of smartphones in rural India had steadily increased in the last three years. It was 36.5% in 2018, 61.8% in 2020 and 67.6% in 2021. But only 19.9 % of children in Classes 1 and 2 have access to the devices whenever they require and complete electrification of all the rural areas is still very far away. This tells us that we need to find alternative mediums by which we can facilitate distance learning in a cost-effective manner. Community radio services can help underprivileged students in this regard, who cannot afford expensive smartphones. There is also the fact that the habit of listening to the radio is still prevalent in the rural areas.

### **5.1 Community Radio Stations In India**

The government runs programmes like Radio Vahini FM 91.2 MHz. This is the community radio station of the National Institute of Open Schooling which is engaged in imparting education. Then there is Radio Brahmaputra of Dibrugarh, which airs a programme called Akanir Parhasali. This is a specially designed educational programme for the Anganwari kids. The objective of the programme is to engage the Anganwari kids in their regular Anganwari centre activities through radio. This programme offsets the closure of the Anganwari centers because of the pandemic. A community radio service named Radio Vishwas (90.8 MHz), run by the Vishwas Dhyani Prabodhini & Research Institute is a great success story of recent times.

This community radio service was launched during the lockdown in June, 2020. Radio Vishwas provided free education, especially to the poor students of Class 3 to Class 10, studying in Zilla Parishad and Nashik Municipal Schools. The community radio service benefitted around 60,000 students by broadcasting lectures in Hindi, Marathi, English and Sanskrit which were recorded by 150 teachers in a studio.

Vishwas Radio started by distributing around 500 FM devices initially. These devices had an USB, Bluetooth and high-end speakers. Radio Vishwas was up and running with an initial investment of just Rs 2.5 lakh rupees. The initiative faced some challenges related due to reach and frequency related issues. But these challenges were overcome by recording lectures on a pen drive which could be played on the FM devices.

Radio Vishwas, bagged two awards at the 8th National Community Radio Awards, held by the Information & Broadcasting Ministry. The community radio service won the prestigious awards for broadcasting its radio programme, "Education For All", during the pandemic. It won the first prize in the 'Sustainability Model Awards' and the second prize in the 'Thematic Awards' category.

Radio Vishwas showed how a community radio service is truly of the people, by the people and for the people. A community radio is primarily meant to create content for the benefit of society as well as upliftment and empowerment of the underprivileged. There are other such community radios across the country. It is worth taking a look at some of them.

### **Radio FTII 90.4 FM, Maharashtra**

Radio FTII, aired on FM 90.4 was launched in 2006 at the Film and Television Institute of India in Pune. It is a prominent community radio station in the state, which is engaged in spreading awareness pertaining to several health-related issues that were ailing the communities. This community radio has also aired programmes on climate change awareness HIV-AIDS. On World Radio Day 2019, Radio FTII organised an artistic programme in Marathi, called 'Saad-Pratisaad'. It was organized by three progressive women writers.

### **Radio Udaan, Punjab**

Radio Udaan was started in February 2014 and this community radio caters to the individuals with visual impairment. An online community radio station, its primary objective was to bring together people from all over the world to form an inclusive community which is free from all stereotypes. Its programmes were produced and webcast by a group of 30 visually challenged individuals. Today Radio Udaan has a great reach of more than 20,000 listeners every month in over 100 countries. Its founders believe that the power of listening is far more impactful than the power of seeing. This community radio works on this principle only by airing programmes which are often set according to UNESCO themes.

### **Apno Radio, 90.4 MHz, Rajasthan**

This community radio is based at the Banasthali Vidyapith and operates at the frequency of 90.4 MHz. Launched in 2005 Apno Radio is Rajasthan's first community radio station. Its primary objective is to empower women by promoting their self-reliance. It also focuses on several social issues ailing the rural communities of the state. This community radio airs programmes based on promoting the education of women and importance of health and nutrition. It also broadcasts programmes based on themes including agriculture, environment, and community development. One of its most prominent programmes is focused on eliminating the social evil of child marriage which is extremely prevalent in Rajasthan.

**Vidyavani, 107.4 FM, Maharashtra**

Operating at a frequency of 107.4 FM, this community radio is based at Savitribai Phule Pune University. It was set up in 2005 and has been broadcasting programmes in Marathi, English and Hindi. As Pune's first community radio station, Vidyavani, seeks to broadcast programmes based on the themes of civic issues, education and health. As it is a campus radio station, Vidyavani also caters to the students of 650 colleges that are affiliated to the University.

**Vasundhara Vahini, 90.4 MHz, Maharashtra**

This community radio station is based in Baramati. Vasundhara Vahini is primarily focused on agriculture and therefore the farming community is its primary audience. Vasundhara Vahini broadcasts programmes on farming-related issues. The community radio promotes sustainable farming techniques, organic farming and provides updates on the new varieties of seeds, weather forecast and various pesticides.

**5.2 Community Radio Based Blended Learning Model**

The COVID-19 pandemic poses a big challenge for education in our country because of the fact that it has to be done virtually to stop the transmission of the virus. A high speed internet and a smartphone are necessary for this model of learning. Most of the children in rural areas and even many children in urban areas, do not have access to a high speed internet because of diverse geographical conditions and severe economic distress. The difficulty to connect to the internet is hampering education of millions of children.

This research paper proposes a hybrid community radio-based blended learning model that provides an alternative learning solution in remote areas. Hybrid learning employs effective combination of several learning techniques, technologies, and ways of delivering course materials to meet the academic needs of students.

A community radio-based blended learning model works as a combination of two learning models to achieve the desired learning objectives. In this model, some portion of the lecture is delivered online, while the rest is delivered via pre-recorded lectures through a community radio. The limited role of a high speed internet in this learning model, makes it affordable for every student. Community radio-based blended learning can be interpreted as an educational approach that combines community radio based lectures with Information, Communication, and Technology (ICT) of education. We can also incorporate face-to-face learning with community radio based lectures. This would involve participation of local community teachers while following all the standard operating procedures for COVID-19.

This cost-effective model would be a dependable promising learning model in remote areas during unpredictable situations such as in a pandemic. Community radio has limitations of coverage area, but this should be perceived as a strength, rather than a weakness. By utilizing the teachers of the coverage area, community

radio can design and broadcast educational programmes based on the model of face-to-face learning and community radio based lectures.

This would cover the education of most of the deprived students of the community. Even in this digital era, community radio has lots of advantages and also the credibility among the marginalised communities in our society. Thus, only community radio stations can reach those unreached students with quality learning materials during the pandemic and even after it. There must be willingness on the part of all the stakeholders for the community radio-based blended learning model to succeed.

A collaborative approach is also required from both the local government and community leaders when it comes to community radio-based blended learning model. State governments as well as the union government need to establish more community radio stations through educational institutions and civil society organisations to bridge the digital divide. Help of organisations like UNICEF must be taken to prepare a road-map to increase the use of community radio stations for imparting education.

## **6. Suggestions**

Collaboration between broadcasters, education authorities and educators is the foundation on which the community radio-based learning depends. Hence the government should play the role of a facilitator that facilitates this collaboration. The government can rope in private players and MNCs in this regard. The government needs to establish a pan-India working group for the development of educational content for community radio. This would ensure a uniform standard of quality of the lectures. This dedicated group can include volunteer teachers, departments of primary and secondary education, Ministry of Education and the national broadcaster.

To improve the financing of the community radio, advertising and announcements relating to local events, businesses, services and employment opportunities is already allowed. The maximum duration of such advertising should be increased from the present limit of seven minutes per hour of broadcast.

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