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## The role of community radio stations in combating covid-19 in India

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### ABSTRACT

*This article focuses on how Community Radio Stations (CRSs) had helped the underprivileged communities during the amid COVID-19 pandemic. By citing various news articles published during the time of COVID- 19 by various newspapers, magazines and journals, this article tries to explore the problems of people particularly of those people who belong to the lower- income strata of the society. Also, it is shown that, how community radios from different parts of India have helped them to get through the tough phase of the lockdown. Community Radio Stations from different parts of India had helped to spread awareness amongst masses and also have addressed various issues of society. This article tries to explore, how those CRSs have managed to do address those issues during COVID-19 pandemic.*

**Keywords:** Community Radio, Community Radio Stations, COVID-19, Lockdown, Awareness, Domestic Violence, Education

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Community Radio is a tool for development as well as a mouthpiece of the oppressed [1]. In a massive country like India, where there are so many languages and dialects, it is impossible for a centralised media set up to pay attention to all the problems and demands of different parts of the country. Community Radios form a bridge between policymakers and the common people. In 2020, people around the globe had witnessed the curse of a disease named COVID-19. Globally millions of people have lost their lives. For this contagious disease, like many other countries of the world, India had to go through a prolonged lockdown period. In such crisis situation, Community Radios of have stepped up to spread awareness in their communities especially among the people who belong to socio- economically weaker section of the society. But their activities were not restricted within the domain of spreading awareness; through their programmes, they had addressed issues of society like increase of domestic violence, spreading education among underprivileged kids during lockdown etc. Vinod Pavarala and Aniruddha Jena have stated that, with only 40% people having the access of Internet, Community Radios play an important role in the dissemination of information particularly to those who are left out from the dreams of digital India [2].

### 2. COMMUNITY RADIO IN SPREADING AWARENESS AGAINST COVID-19 AND COMBATING AGAINST MISINFORMATION

Nuh, formerly known as Mewat is one of the most backward districts of India. In here, radio stations like 'Radio Mewat', 'Alfaz-e – Mewat' are constantly working to build a bridge of trust between the people of the community and the administration as well as spreading the message of social distancing and necessity to wash their hands with soap or alcohol based sanitizers which are essentials to fight COVID-19. During the time, when COVID-19 cases have surged in India, amid that crisis, nine presenters of Radio Mewat which includes who women went to different villages to in visit government offices and hospitals in order to create awareness and inform properly about the actual condition of COVID- 19 infection in the district of Nuh. They also interviewed doctors and government officials. Their programme ' Corona se jung, Radio Mewat ke Sung' had not only helped to grow mass consciousness about Covid19 but also had given psychological support to the people of their community in the pandemic. Imran Khan, one of the presenters of Radio Mewat as mentioned in an interview with Hindustan Times that, they had been working at the forefront of COVID- 19 in the Mewat region. [3]

Pashumi FM of Dindigul district of Tamil Nadu, Radio Henvalvani of Tehri district of Uttarakhand, Alfaz-e Mewat of Nuh district of Uttar Pradesh are some of the numerous examples of Community Radios in India who had been constantly fighting against all the odds to create some awareness and spread their helping hands to their communities. All these CRSs had come up with innovative formats in order to create awareness as well as dealing with the hysteria caused by COVID-19 amongst people. As for example: Radio Henvalvani of Uttarakhand had conducted a programme named, 'Corona se darna nahi, ladna hain' where they invited doctors

to answer the questions of the people of the community about COVID- 19 which had not only helped to create awareness but also prevented from creating unnecessary panic.[4]

There are a lot of Community Radio stations under educational institutes in India. They are not stepping back from taking initiatives to help their community either. Amity University's CRS broadcasts a programme in their channel 'Panchatantra ka Corona Mantra' in which they had remodeled the popular stories of Panchatantra to spread awareness about the disease. Even they have broadcasted various programmes on social distancing, avoiding rumours and measures that need to be taken at home beyond handwashing and sanitising. [5]

On the other hand, 'Radio JU' the Community Radio of Jadavpur University of Kolkata, has taken the path of convergence of Radio and YouTube. They opened a YouTube Channel named 'SHISHU TARANGA Community Radio JU UNICEF Programme' to continue child education which is badly hampered by COVID- 19 as well as some entertainment for them through YouTube ( Source: 'SHISHU TARANGA Community Radio JU UNICEF Programme', YouTube channel. Link: [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCj\\_Jfp3N77SxVxge39GQxg/videos](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCj_Jfp3N77SxVxge39GQxg/videos) ). Apart from building a bridge between policy makers and the people of that community Radio JU has helped the people of their community by providing inputs about where to find medicines and other daily essential commodities during the period of lockdown. [5]

Radio Kisan of Orissa through their also programmes have constantly informed the people of their respective community in Khordha district. Arjun Kaintura of Radio Khusi has rightly pointed out in a byte given to the e-paper 'Live Mint' that, the people in the interior villages would not be able to connect with the health experts of the cities who are often shown up in national media. It is quite difficult for the health experts of the cities to understand the problems of villagers or people living in the sub urban areas. Hence, it is important for these community radios to broadcast the programmes with local doctors, health professionals and administrative personals and address the local issues.

In Uttarakhand, 7 Community Radio Stations came together to formulate 'UMEED' a multi level information network to inform, educate and reassure their respective communities. Mandakini ki Awaaz, Kumaon Vaani, Pantnagar Janvani, Radio Zindagee, Himgiri ki Awaaz, Heval Vani and Radio Khushi were the 7 networks who had joined hands in order to cooperate each other, so that, panic does not creep into the lives of people. [6] They also received phone calls from listeners about the where they would find medical stores and grocery shops open in the time of lockdown, how to get the children engaged in homes, However, this cooperation eventually helped these stations to reach out to the villagers of remote areas.

### **3. CRS IN SPREADING EDUCATION DURING LOCKDOWN**

Education is badly affected by the lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Education sector of a developing nation like India is suffering badly as there was no prior provision of online education. However, in a country like India where a huge part of the population lives in below poverty line income; it would be a daydream to believe that, each and every parent would be able to buy smartphones for their kids, so that, they could attend online classes. According to the faucet theory of Entwisle, (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2001) when students are in school, no matter whether they are poor or rich, they get equal benefit from there. But during holidays or when school is closed for a few days, the performance of students belonging to higher socio-economic class of the society make more progress than the students coming from weaker socio-economic background. [7] In India, income inequality is another big problem. Oxfam International's studies suggest that, only 10% of Indian population has got the hold of 77% of national wealth. (Source- [www.oxfamindia.org/](http://www.oxfamindia.org/) ) So, it is quite easy to imagine the high number of people who live in below poverty line. As it has been mentioned earlier, many people can not afford smart phones to afford online education and even if they afford a mobile phone, the interiors of India often suffers from telephone network problem. In such crisis situation, 'Alfaz- e-Mewat' of Nuh district has brought in the concept of 'Radio School' through their broadcasts. Although they started the concept 7 years ago but it was of great help to the backward communities of Nuh district in Haryana during the pandemic. The teachers of various government schools had helped thousands of students to take tutorials via radio of subjects like Science, Mathematics and English. [8]

Almost same kind of concept was followed by Radio JU of Kolkata. But the target audience for that show was not as inclusive as it was in 'Alfaz- e- Mewat'. Its 'Sahoj Path' was mainly directed to the street children. West Bengal Commission for protection of Child Rights along with Radio JU are broadcasting this show in order to spread education amongst the street children of Jadavpur region. The authorities expect that, this show would generate some interest of education amongst the dropouts and street children. [9]

### **4. CRS IN ADDRESSING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DURING LOCKDOWN**

Increase of domestic violence during lockdown is a global phenomenon. In Cyprus, Greece, the calls to government hotlines to contact to report domestic abuse had increased by 30% since March, 2020. [10] New York Times has referred such abuses, particularly on women as 'Intimate Terrorism. [11]

In India, between 25<sup>th</sup> March 2020 and 31<sup>st</sup> May 2020, complaints of 311477 domestic violence were received which was way more than those received in the period between March and May in last 10 years. The worst part is 86% woman in India had never gone to any police stations to lodge a complaint. [12] To combat with this issue some of the CRSs are stepping forward. One such example is 'Radio Mewat' of Nuh, Haryana. In their programme, 'Hinsa ko No', they address and spread awareness about this issue. More than 700 women are included in this project to report the cases and stories of domestic violence in 30 panchayat areas of Nuh [13] There are plenty of cases where women called the radio station to complain against domestic violence and abuse that they had

to witness [3]. However there are plenty of other examples around the country where it can be seen that, the issue of domestic violence is being addressed.

## **5. ADDRESSING MIGRANT LABOUR CRISIS THROUGH COMMUNITY RADIO**

Due to the lockdown, the migrant labourers had to bear unbelievable sufferings. Even after 15 years of implementing MGNREGA or Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the migration of labours from the village to the urban areas continues. MGNREGA had failed to give meaningful employment to the poor section of the society.[14] The Economic Survey of India in 2016-17 suggests, there are almost 60 million people who work in other states and the most popular transportation for them is railways. [15] When there was lockdown, these people who work in different states came under serious problems. In that scenario, they had nowhere to live, nowhere to income. Hence, they were desperate to come back to their home. But due to lack of transportation options, many of them started to walk back to their own house. Many of them had to breathe their last on their way home. However, in certain cases, CRSs have come forward to help these workers. 'Gurgaon ki Awaaz', CRS from Gurgaon, conducted a mental counselling programme for those migrant workers. They used to connect with those workers who were trapped their away from families and friends via phone and a professional counsellor came twice a week to help those people. [16]

## **6. COMMUNITY RADIOS IN SOUTH INDIA**

Not only the Community Radio Stations of Northern part of India. South India is also not far behind in terms of sending using CRSs to use the backward section of the society. Bangalore's Radio Active 90.4 MHz is updating their community about various government notices and other official updates regarding COVID-19. Their broadcasts help the people of the community to deal with misinformation and hoax. Radio Mattoli of Wayanad, Kerala had stopped their regular programmes and had started to announce public service announcements as well as broadcasting COVID-19 related programmes for 7 hours a day. [16] Radio Mattoli had decided to suspend their 80 regular programmes and broadcasted more than 40 interviews and discussions with police officers, DSP, collectors and health professionals in order to spread awareness about the disease and to stop spreading misinformation. [17] Apart from, spreading awareness about COVID- 19, these radio stations and others like Radio Benziger and Radio Media village of Kerala are doing amazing jobs in terms of helping children with education- related programmes and addressing other social and economic issues of their respective communities.

## **7. INNOVATIVE IDEA OF SAIDINGLIANA SAILO**

Understanding the importance of community radio in the times of COVID- 19, a person named Saidingliana Sailo had taken a unique step. Salio, a resident of Behliangchhip village in Jampui Hills of Assam started his own radio channel 'Radio Behliangchhip' to spread awareness about COVID-19 in his community. As he had no licence to set up his own radio station, hence, by using the platform 'YouTube', he disseminated his messages. Although it is not an example of a traditional Community Radio but it did the same job that a community is supposed to do. [18]

## **8. PROBLEMS OF CRS**

In 2013, a PIL was filed to seek permission for CRSs to broadcast news. In 2017, Supreme Court has said, broadcasting news by CRSs can endanger national security and public order. It is important to note in this connection, According to the verdict, in the case between Ministry of Information and Broadcasting vs Cricket Association of Bengal in 1995, Supreme Court, community and private radio stations can not broadcast news. In a way, the terrific job of myth-busting that various CRSs are doing, is technically illegal. In the battle of fighting against fake news; they have to deal with actual news. According to Archana Kapoor, director of Radio Mewat, by doing this, they are probably breaking the law.[19]

Hence, to deal with the fake news and misinformation campaign, it is important to legalise the right for community radios to broadcast local news to some degree.

However, apart from that, CRSs have to face several challenges. One of the most important challenges is economic challenges. Thanks to the lockdown and COVID-19, the financial problems that already existed in various community radio stations has only intensified. All the industries and businesses in our country are still suffering from some sort of financial crisis. So, in lots of cases, the parent organisations who provide funds to the CRSs are backing away from funding. In Assam, a CRS named, Jnan Taranga 90.4 FM's broadcasting has to stop during COVID- 19. Its parent institute, Multimedia dept. of KK Handiqui State Open University of Dispur. In the official statement, the institute has said, the production has to stop now as they decided to shift their campus. [20] Apart from that, CRSs have several other problems to deal with. R. Sreedhar and Pooja O. Murada have stated that, there is hardly any concession of tax for the equipment of Community Radios. Also, they have mentioned that, the scheme of providing powerful transmitters in needy areas was not executed either. [21]

The price for the advertisement for Community Radio has not been increased either. Sunil Palaskar, in-charge of the community radio station of the Neotech Technical and Management College station based in Ambikapur, Chattisgarh, in a byte given to 'The Hindu Business Line' magazine in 2017, despite increasing ad rates in other media, Government had not increased the ad rate of community radio. He further points out that, CRSs are not allowed to run advertisements more than 5 minutes per hour.[22]

## **9. CONCLUSION**

Despite all the odds, Community Radios are still battling hard to give their communities some kind of service. During the time when infections of COVID- 19 had reached its peak, even at that time, CRSs' employees by keeping their lives at stake, have given their services as much as they could. In certain places of Odisha, the newspaper service was halted due to lockdown. But CRSs like 'Radio Namaskar' of Konark, Radio Swayamshakti, Radio Bulbul and many others have stepped up to serve their respective communities to combat against the deadly pandemic. [23] Denis McQuail has rightly suggested that, the idea of media use is dependent on the fact that whether the media content helps to satisfy the needs, wishes or motives of the 'prospective audience



number'. [24] CRSs, all over India, have helped its underprivileged target audience to gratify their media needs in the dark times of COVID-19.

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