

DOES COMMUNITY RADIO FUNCTIONS TRULY AS AN AUTONOMOUS SPHERE?

STUDY ON ITS STATUS IN SOUTH ASIA

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ABSTRACT

Community Radio (CR) in South Asia has been thriving with a unique identity as result of collective activism and lobbying by various stakeholders, including practitioners, civil society activists, academia, media freedom fighters, international agencies and several others. Nepal became the first country, in South Asia, to liberate the airwaves for the use of community with the inception of Radio Sagarmatha. Presently, around 350 CR stations are functioning in various parts of Nepal. The CR agenda in India, was mostly led by a activists and individuals. Around 217 CR stations are functioning in India. The revised CR policy guideline (2006) in India provides scope for both academic and local NGOs to receive CR liscense. However, the ability of Indian CR stations to air news and current affairs programs is legally challenged. The advocacy for CR in Bangladesh was initiated in early 1998, but it took a decade for local organizations to gain legal recognition. Presently, 18 CR stations are functioning in Bangladesh where CR largely facilitate a development goal. . In general, CR in South Asia has been flourishing for the last three decades. However, it is widely believed that CR, in the region has failed to gain its own autonomy despite its long history of existence. This study attempts to understand as to what extent the CR in the region – in Nepal, India and Bangladesh has been functioning as a truly autonomous sector.

COMMUNITY RADIO IN SOUTH ASIA

In Nepal the National Broadcasting Act was enacted in 1993, but due to a failure in formulating the adequate regulations, the Act remained idle for two years (Dahal and Aram, 2011). However, with this development, the CR activists, led by Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists (NEFEJ) managed to mobilize a strong support base to promote independent broadcasting. NEFEJ, for the first time, applied for a license on 23, October 1992. Five days later the government announced the new communication policy declaring allowance of independent broadcasting in the country (Bhattarai & Ojha, 2010). Radio Sagarmatha, was licensed on 18 May 1997. In 1995 the National Broadcasting Regulation was issued. However, the regulation has provisions to impose special conditions over Radio but that was not clearly explained by the government. However, In Nepal, sector is growing without a specific policy.

The Indian Supreme Court ruling in 1995 provided space for the CR activists to challenge the state monopoly over public airwaves (Bath, 2011; Pavarala and Kanchan 2007). However, despite the Supreme Court rulings and activism by stakeholders, the then Indian government was apathetic, and no policy announcement was made. Subsequent events, such as Bangalore Declaration in 1996, Pastapur Declaration in 2000, and formation of the Community Radio Forum – India (CRF-India) in 2007 paved the way to push CR advocacy toward legal recognition. The Indian CR community networked for almost two decades in order to set up CR (Parthasarathi & Chotani, 2010). Ramakrishnan et al. (2017) quoted the official website of the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB) as of November 2016, there were 200 operational CR stations across the country, of which more than 150 were over two years old, and approximately one-third were over five years old. Ansari (2017) noted in the publication of Young India the growth of community media has been marginal all these years as the promoters have been struggling with low resources, inadequate patronage and technical issues.

In 2000, the discussion on the CR, in Bangladesh was started (Ganilo et al. 2016). The early discussions were led by Mass-line Media Center (MMC) and several other organizations and individuals. The Dhaka declaration 2006 further emphasized need for CR. Finally, the agenda of CR was acknowledged in the election manifesto

of the Bangladesh by the Awami League party in the 2008 General Election. Organizations such as BNNRC then extended CR advocacy and maintained high-level collaboration between the state and non-governmental sectors. In 2008 the government of Bangladesh passed the 'Community Radio Installation, Broadcast and Operation Policy (Bangladesh Gazette, 12 March 2008).

UNDERSTANDING AUTONOMY

While autonomy is a broader term, it is expressed in various forms- CR should be independent (Rajaseharan and Nafala, 2009); it should work through multiple funding sources (Janowski, 2003; Lewis, 2002); it must be owned and controlled by the community (Jallov, 2012); it must be independent from commercial interests (Pavarala and Malik 2007) and shouldn't be influenced by anybody of central or local government or face undue influence by such bodies through ownership or funding (Buckley, 2008). Autonomy works better when a CR is truly owned by community and managed by the community and recognized by the legal system.

Ownership and Autonomy

CR should be owned, managed and controlled by the Community (Rajaseharan and Nafala, 2009). CR can be owned by non-governmental organizations working in communities (Mtinde et al. 1998), or by civil society organizations or the local governments operating in the area (Rennie, 2006). The ownership and control aspects of CR are often shared between community members i.e. local residents, members of the community and community-based organizations. It uses participatory relationship and provides open access to its community (Rennie, 2006). Kruger et al. (2013) in its assessment toolkit titled 'The Healthy Community Radio Station', emphasized that the people must take control and stakes in decision making. Therefore, to what extent Community members and community organizations are given legitimate ownership to make their own decision is a key determinant of autonomy. The Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) indicates that a CR station is owned and controlled by a not-for-profit organization, the structure of which provides for membership, management, operation and programming, primarily by members of the community at large (CRTC 2010-499, section 13). In Ireland, the policy is defined as:

A community radio station is characterized by its ownership, programming and the community it is authorized to serve. It is owned and controlled by a not-for-profit organization whose structure provides for membership, management, operation and programming, primarily by members of the community at large. Its programming should be based on community access and should reflect the special interests and needs of the listenership, it is licensed to serve (BCI, 1996, p.3).

Da Costa (2012) was of the view that in order for the people to take control and lead in CR, it has to be fully owned by the groups of people not an NGO. He argued that NGOs are often run by groups of individuals in the name of a community. In practice, since not everyone in a community can participate, ownership and control of community radio stations is often undertaken by an association, trust or foundation (Fraser and Estrada, 2001).

Self-Management and Autonomy

Self-Management is one of the core factors that contribute to the strong autonomous and independent status of CR. If people in the community are given exclusive space to have a stake in all aspects of organizational and policy development of the CR, it can have a structure of self-management (O'Connor, 2004; Berrigan, 1981). CR is not only owned and controlled by the people but also managed and administered by the people (Mainali et al. 2009). What distinguishes CR from other media is the high level of people's participation, both in management and programme production (Tabing, 2002). According to Tabing (2002) the management aspect of CR can be handled by one group, by combined groups, or of people such as women, children, farmers, fisher folk, ethnic groups, or senior citizens. The essence of his idea is that people should lead the radio; people should have the maximum freedom to make decisions on administrative and policy affairs of the CR that is a major source of community communication. People participate not only in running and managing the radio station but also sustaining and managing the programme production process too (Howley, 2010).

Legal recognition and Autonomy

When it comes to broadcast media, be it community, commercial or public service, they must use airwaves (broadcast spectrum), which is limited and considered public property. Therefore, it is owned by all the

sections in the community, not merely the one who are in power and business. Due to the limited nature of airwaves, it is vital that broadcast owners represent a plurality of voices and include different viewpoints. (Weerasinghe, 2018). Legal recognition for CR has increasingly becoming an important aspect discussed by academics and practitioners. It is the responsibility of governments to regulate the airwaves more accountably and transparently, giving fair ownership to the people. Coyer et al. (2007) see CR as an alternative sphere that should be protected, as a way of safeguarding democracy. CR policy helps the survival of the CR sector, ensures its autonomy and independence, including a convenient licensing process. Having a policy is a global commitment for governments (UNESCO, 2011).

Study Design

This study is an attempt to understand as to what extent the CR in South Asian region – Nepal, India and Bangladesh have been functioning as a truly autonomous sphere. In order to reach at this objective, 45 in-depth interviews with CR experts from the region was conducted. The respondents include CR experts, practitioners, CR advocates, academics and practitioners who have a wealth of knowledge and experience on the development of CR, in their respective countries. In Addition, the researchers visited two CRs in Bangladesh and four respectively in India and Nepal. The researchers visited India and Nepal twice and Bangladesh once for the study. As discussed above, autonomy is largely achieved through community ownership, self-management and the legal recognition. However, status of legal autonomy in the region hasn't been taken into account for this paper.

Status of Autonomy in South Asia

After close inquiry, it was revealed that CR in the region has been thriving as a promising sector but with several challenges. It was learned that the sphere is largely owned by NGOs, CSO's, community cooperatives, academic and educational institutions. Nepal has a different ownership model. In Nepal, NGOs, people's cooperatives, academic entities and some local authorities are given licenses as community radio stations. It was evident that people who apply for licenses on behalf of NGO's, local clubs, corporations that have registered under the CSO Act and pay due amounts, will get the licenses and frequencies. If someone can prove they are members of a NGO, local club, corporates, there is high likelihood that they will become eligible to get the license. According to Ministry of Information and Broadcasting website presently, 251 Community Radio Stations have become operational in India. According to Young India (2017) out of 20176 are operated by NGOs, 110 by the Educational Institutions and 15 by State Agriculture Universities / Krishi Vigyan Kendras. ACORAB (2018) claims that at present nearly 350 Community Radio stations (CRS) function in Nepal. Out of 350 CR, few are academic radio and rest are owned by local NGO and Corporative. BNNRC (2018) claims presently nearly 18 Community radio stations are functional in Bangladesh of which 17 are owned by local NGOs at varying capacity. And these entities do not entirely represent their communities at large. In the region, the broadcasting policy enables NGO's to own CR stations. Nepal doesn't have CR specific law, but the larger broadcasting policy and the CSO act enable local NGOs and corporative to own CR. Indian CR policy guideline (2006) allows local NGOs with minimum three years' experience to have their own license and frequency. The revised CR policy (2018) in Bangladesh make it very convenient for local NGO's with 5 years' experience to own the CR station. It became highly obvious such ownership nature in the region has largely challenged the real autonomy of the CR.

Primarily these local entities have their own limitations to represent the larger community and cross-section. On the other hand, community has its own limitations to share the legal ownership and make vital decisions with their own interest. While the host organizations claims that they have some representative arrangements – Board of Director, Advisory Committee, Program Committee, and Lister Clubs, community reporters etc to share the ownership and to include people in the larger operation of the CR, its was observed that these bodies doesn't always represent their community and are empowered to overrule the interest of the local host organizations. Local NGOs in all the three countries holds high level of control and decision-making power they can simply overrule community interest. It is learned that in majority of the CR, the community members cannot make autonomous decision on non-programmatic aspects of CR. In India, most of the respondents firmly hold that local license holders were expected to transform the ownership to the real people in the community.

One of the common responses observed was that under the current ownership structure in South Asia, the actual community is often not given autonomous space to own the radio - stations are legally and socially owned and controlled by their host institution; in some stations people do not feel any shared ownership, some respondents firmly believe that the host institutions are not fully accountable to their target audience. A majority of respondents noted involving community members through an advisory committee, Board of Director, Program committee etc., is an ineffective arrangement that does not truly safeguard community interest in vital moments. Often the advisors neither make decisions nor oppose directives of the host institutions. The ultimate decision-maker, in the case of most Indian community radio stations, is the host institution.

Status of Community Ownership

CR in South Asia has its own ownership models with clear differences. Looking at the aspect of community ownership in India, CR ownership has historically been limited to academic institutions. As Dutta and Ray (2018) and UNESCO (2011) observed, the amended policies announced in 2006 had gone beyond educational institutions to include community-based organizations (CBOs), State Agriculture Universities (SAUs), and Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs) under its ambit. This makes the ownership plurality to be further widened. For example, Sangam Radio is legally owned by Deccan Development Society (DDS). Nammath Dwani (Our voice) is legally owned by the Voices. In Odisha, Radio Namaskar is owned by a local organization called Young India.

In Nepal, CR stations are largely owned by NGOs and people's Cooperatives. Radio Namu Buddha, for example, is owned by a local NGO called Joogle Association of Nepal. Radio Sagarmatha is owned by a local network of environmental journalists called NEFEJ. Radio Krishi FM is owned by an NGO named the Dhunibhesi Community Agricultural Communication Center. Radio Rajmarga functions as a community communication center formed by a local cooperative. A Radio station called Metro FM is owned by traffic police and this CR is specialized in traffic issues. Staff members of ACROB say the Municipality has been planning a CR for all the local authorities.

Bangladesh it makes it possible for NGOs to own licenses. Well-established involved in local politics own CRs. Some of these NGOs are considered rural elites. Radio Pollikontho is initiated and hosted by BRAC, one of the largest NGOs. Radio Nalta is owned by Nalta Hospital and Community Health Foundation. and was founded by a physician and a local politician. Radio Jhenuk was initiated by Srizony Bangladesh, a well-established local NGO. It was evident that local NGOs shared development values with the government of Bangladesh (GoB). The problem raised here is to what extent the host NGOs promote their strategic development priorities through radio. The staff members of the Radio Sarabela confirmed the radio station is deeply informed by the development agenda of the host NGO, SK Foundation. NGOs are often funded by International aid organizations and the target audiences, beneficiaries, objectives and scope of the programmes are often determined by the host and the funding organizations. This trend is absolutely contradictory to Mtinde et al. (1998) that CRs should be governed by locally based organizations. Some of the organizations, SK Foundation, BRAC are huge national originations. Strategically, it is challenging for them to pay much concentration into small social settings. Such heavy NGO domination in Bangladesh has limited the scope real community ownership.

A majority of respondents in Nepal indicated an internal democracy and process of accountability exists in Nepal. They claimed that policy decisions are made democratically, very often at the AGM. The respondents who are practitioners in Nepal noted that when radio licenses are given to these kinds of local organizations they clearly need to adhere to some form of institutional and local accountability. Members, boards of directors, working committees and Executive committees are elected democratically. The governance body -board of directors will oversee policy matters of the CRS, while the radio station manager and the radio staff run the radio station operation, providing an element of an internal accountability. However, an analysis of responses makes it clear that people do not actively participate in internal policy development of CR. The so-called NGO and cooperatives owned radio stations find it challenging to maintain higher level engagement with their communities. The elite nature of some NGOs does not provide a sense of social ownership. The radio stations owned by cooperatives can make profits and such profits can be shared among the shareholders. The Radio staff and management is accountable to the shareholders. One can argue that ownership in this context is rooted in the system. However, Ragu, Mainali, a Nepali CR expert and advocate disapprove the way the ownership is being established. His expert view on this is presented in following Vignette I.

VIGNETTE I: EXPERTS VIEW ON COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP

True ownership cannot be achieved just because a few community members own a radio station and a few people from the community participate in community radio programmes; share their opinion and feedback; visit radio stations; and are consulted in determining programme formats and other related issues. Real ownership should be based on the extent to which the community radio is sharing values with its larger audience. CR should establish a moral connection and bond between the medium and the people. CR should be morally and emotionally connected to the people with a focus on shared, mutual goals. People need to feel they are part of the management and that CR enables them to make changes in their lives. All the administrative affairs should be kept open for people. There should be an openness. The community members should have access to financial and administrative information.

Ragu Mainali, CR Expert, Nepal, Personal Communication 27, July 2017

Mainali makes a valid argument that there should be a shared values and goals between the radio station and the community, and such discourses are not visible on a larger level in the region. Indian respondents made it clear that in most of the CR stations, either the aspect of radio is missing, or prominence of community is missing. The heavy development orientation of local NGO's tends to use radio as an outreach arm. There, the principles discussed by Mainali are fully compromised. In some cases, heavy focus is placed on the production process while community engagement is found to be missing.

CRs in most instances are forced to compete with commercial radio stations, earn money, sustain audiences and facilitate social change. Respondents noted that this is a huge challenge for CR stations. Respondents from Radio Namu Budhda noted that their radio station needs to fight with 40 similar stations. Due to this competitive environment, community radio is unable to maintain social accountability and engage community members in a real CR production.

Status of Self-Management

Self-management in community radio exists with challenges. From the very outset the majority of the CR stations in the region have some form of internal governance in which community representatives “claimed to be” involved in self-management at various degrees.

All three countries allow self-management mechanisms to exist in CR stations. In addition to the license holder most stations in the region are governed by a station manager, staff members, BoDs, other governance bodies, paid members and sometimes by community members. In general, most of the CR stations have established some form of local accountability and governance system. Day to day operations are often managed by the station manager, staff members and volunteers. However, it was revealed that in majority of the CR stations, the ‘community’ is not involved in managerial and administrative decision-making. The higher-level decisions remain in the hands of the host organization. A majority of the respondents noted that self-management is not entirely open for the real community groups. There is a higher possibility that the representatives of the license holders can easily manipulate and influence managerial decisions reached in consultation with community members. The other observed issue is that, prime representatives of the license holders don't fully represent the target community. There is also a higher possibility that the license holder can easily influence the station manager and the rest of the staff. Most of the respondents, in the respective countries, claim that local hosting entities are representatives of the local communities. They claim that the radio governance body is representing the community. However, through serious questioning and observations it was discovered that the claim, made by respondents who are predominantly from the host entities, – is not entirely true.

In India, it was discovered that Radio Sangam, managed by the DDS, used to consult village level voluntary listener groups, voluntary producers and paid producers regarding the programmes. During the field survey, it was discovered that management staff at the DDS seek inputs from community members on management affairs of the CR. ‘General’ Narsamma and Algole Narsamma, two dynamic CR workers, very popular among Indian academics who study about CR, confirmed that the DDS used to consult them not only on the management issues, but also about the programmes. Similarly, it was discovered that that Radio Namaskar, In Odisha, maintains an active engagement with community members, consulting them primarily on the

programmes. The administrative process of this radio is kept accountable to people. It was learned that Radio Namaskar sends radio reporters/producers to the community to collect community grievances, request feedbacks and comments about the programmes. However, the academic and other respondents who are non-practitioners hold completely different views about the status of self-management in Indian CR. They claim that the practice of self-management does not exist and does not work-well when CR stations are predominantly controlled by academic institution, government organizations and well-established developmental NGOs. They hold that few people associate with CR. Even if they do, they do not hold any authority to make administrative and managerial decisions. In most cases people are not concerned about these matters. Majority of the respondents mentioned Radio Active, based in Bangalore, and Radio Mewat, Haryana as two exemplary CR for highest people participation self-management.

In Nepal, community representatives are involved in radio management. Krishi FM for example is run by 13 staff members. They are supervised by a Radio Manager. They are accountable to 200 paid members. The paid members share in the profit. Radio Rajmarga is managed by a station manager and six staff members. They are answerable to 40 shareholders who are paid members. Radio Namobudha is run by 10 staff members, one Executive Director and one Director and a Manager. This Radio has 15 patron members (who pay Rs. 50,000), lifetime members (who pay 15,000), general members (who pay 5000) and 50 community members. Radio Sagarmatha is managed by NEFEJ. The respondents from this radio station, during the field survey, indicated that the chairperson, station manager and the radio Board are answerable to the General Assembly with 125 fully-fledged members. A higher number of respondents claimed that even though management affairs are often carried out by the paid staff and volunteers, they are part of a wider community.

However, as discussed in the previous section, these representatives do not always represent a good cross section of the larger community. The data does not address whether these representatives truly act as community representatives. It was observed that these limited representatives are involved in policy formulation, administration, human resource development and decision making. However, this space is very protective and there is clearly less freedom for representatives of the larger community to participate. In the case of cooperative-owned radio stations in Nepal, the shareholders and NGO representatives are often friends, likeminded people and people with the same affiliation and livelihood characteristics. Sometimes it was evident that people become friends and part of a network, just because they wanted to apply for a license and run a radio station. This notion has been considered a challenge for inclusive management.

In Bangladesh, as mentioned previously, CRs are predominantly owned by local NGOs. As in Nepal, clear internal management systems also exist in Bangladesh. Radio Sarabela (RS) - 99.2FM, is equipped with 10 full time staff members and 40 volunteers. Records at RS noted that it reaches nearly five lakh listeners. It was observed that the programme decisions are usually taken by the management staff and are mostly beyond the control of the SK Foundation. The Programme manager has the greatest decision-making responsibility. He/she works with an assistant programme manager, two Full-time producers, two assistant producers and other Interns, a total of eleven staff. Radio Borendra (RB), initiated by Naogaon Human Rights Development Association (NHRDA), a local NGO, is run by nine staff members and 20 volunteers and covers a 17 km area and reaches nearly five Lakh listeners. RB has 22 listener clubs and two children's clubs including the Dalit community club. A total of 34 youth work for RB, including 22 boys and 12 girls.

The station manager and the secretary of RB claimed that the community ownership is intentionally transferred to their beneficiaries. The community makes decisions about programmes. The community is given full freedom in making content and participating in the programmes. They also claim that RS engages community members to receive their feedback and integrate their input on the regular affairs of the radio station. A respondent who is working for the NGO that runs CR in Bangladesh noted that "when we have an agenda to help people" our agenda by default is not harmful to our people. We do not tell people in the RS what to do and how to do it. Our role sometimes would be to mentor the young people. We do not define who should come and who should not come.

In the case of Radio Borendro, the secretary general, staff members and volunteers confirmed the programmes are sometimes inspired by the operational goal of NHRDA, however, the programmes of RB are not limited to the interest of NHRDA. Programme level decisions are made exclusively by the programme staff and they

noted that youth coming from far-corners have their own space in this radio station. Their interests, abilities, and needs are never disregarded by NHRDA. In an in-depth interview, a staff respondent confirmed that she has full liberty to cover anything that she thinks is newsworthy. It was noted that news agendas are absolutely determined by the radio station staff with the support of, the chief editor. She said they we cover community issues and events, and various local meetings but not politics.

According to respondents who are representatives of host NGOs community members are given membership, the appointed for specific responsibilities, annual general meetings are hosted, separate finance audits are maintained, administrative and programme decisions are taken freely and without influence of the license holder. Respondents expressed the opinion that this creates accountability and assures community ownership. Yet, the level of reliability, accountability, functionality and capability of the above mechanisms is not clear. Further evaluation is needed to determine to what extent the above mechanism ensures the real autonomy of the people in the periphery and to what extent it is representative of the larger community.

In South Asian, true efforts taken by the host entities, in general, inviting people to be involved in broader administrative affairs of CR is very low. People's involvement in organizational policy development should be a part of the self-management although people should not have direct access to control the radio station. Evidence was not adequate to substantiate the existence of such features in the CR stations in South Asia. People's contribution to management is faced with various challenges.

CONCLUSION

In all three countries the broadcasting regulatory system has extended the scope for community broadcasting. Both in India and Bangladesh, the right of the people to own a CR station has been legally acknowledged through respective CR policy guidelines. At the same time, the regulatory system in Nepal, has allowed independent, community-based groups as well as registered NGOs to own radio stations, despite the fact that Nepal does not have any dedicated CR policy. It is also apparent that the sector as a whole does not fully function with absolute autonomy due varying local circumstances. While the idea of autonomy has been very much generalized each country has its own challenges and limitations in growing as a fully autonomous sector. For example, the NGO involvement in Bangladesh is inevitable and unavoidable, but very high. Similarly, in Nepal, the dominance of local NGOs and co-operatives organizations are unavoidable reality. Therefore, the concept of autonomy needs re-construction and each country should be able to establish 'autonomy' within its own context. This study concludes that autonomy can remain a key value, but its parameters may vary according to the unique circumstances of each country. In this study, it has become obvious that policy can ensure the ownership and autonomy to a certain extent, but the sustainability and effectiveness may not be guaranteed by the policy alone. The host entity should play a proactive role in reflecting community interest.

It is in the broader context explained above; it is found that heavy NGO domination of CR in the South Asian region has highly compromised the core feature of CR - autonomy. The ideal community ownership and self-management by the people is immensely compromised by the complex nature of NGO ownership. Despite the claims by the host NGOs that they represent community through advisory committee, BoD, listeners club and shareholders etc, do not always function autonomously in the case of making, strategic, policy and administrative decisions. However, the ability for the communities to make program decisions are not severely compromised. Furthermore, it is found that community in most extent cannot overrule the decisions of host NGOs or the institutions. The advisory committee, BoD and other representative arrangement cannot overrule the host NGO to safeguard the true community spirit

Learning from South Asia, it is obvious that the domination of the local organizations – NGOs, corporatives, educational institutes/universities and any other development organizations over CR, has become an unavoidable reality. Communities can not directly share the ownership of the CR, as the legal ownership for the CR stations remains in the hands of such organizations. Close examination released that representative democracy – involving community members in the advisory committees, BoD's, program committees, listeners clubs doesn't fully help people to feel sense of shared ownership of the CR. It is under such reality, claiming for an absolute community ownership by the community members is utopian. Therefore, a new discourse for a new operational mechanism that could ensure the highest level of shared ownership between the host organizations and community groups is highly needed

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