

Bangalore Declaration on Radio, 1996

September 1996:

The present decade is significant for the country's development in a number of ways. Decentralization of governance, professed emphasis on social service, impact of the communications revolution and increased general awareness of human rights has opened up opportunities and challenges on an unprecedented scale. Information is a key element in socio-economic development. The capacity to communicate and have access to media greatly influences information use and its impact, and if these far reaching changes in the economic, technological and social spheres can be harnessed to generate new and vital information with a media that is democratized, it could empower the impoverished and disadvantaged millions, and the process of development can be given a fresh impetus and a more purposive orientation.

From September 11–14, 1996, during a four day Consultation on Community Radio and Media Policy, more than sixty people representing All India Radio, universities, non government organizations involved in development activities, journalists, and members of the broadcasting establishment, met in Bangalore to discuss the problems and prospects of evolving a sectoral broadcasting. The discussions focused on the means and modalities of establishing, at the earliest, a democratic, dynamic and people-oriented system of public service broadcasting in the country. A variety of factors peculiar to the Indian situation today which tend to suggest that a liberal policy in respect of radio broadcasting with emphasis on community participation and local control, will be appropriate to the current development strategy were discussed, along with the prospects of formulating a broadcast policy in respect to radio which ensures the optimum utilisation of airwaves in public interest, facilitating community management of information exchange and participatory modes of decision making. The institutionalisation and expansion of the concept of community broadcasting was proposed, with the involvement of people at all levels across the length and breadth of this vast country. Democracy and good governance make such a change imperative, and it is an essential pre-requisite for better enjoyment of human rights. The Consultation resulted in a consensus, called the Bangalore Declaration on Radio, which outlines the basic elements of a desirable media policy on radio broadcasting.

Given the set of current policies aimed at decentralization, liberalization and people's participation in various areas, it is hoped that the Bangalore Declaration on Radio will receive the timely and earnest attention of relevant authorities, and that the concept of community radio will soon become a reality. Meanwhile, it is important that universities, public bodies, women's organizations, dalit associations—to name a few—prepare themselves for the task of establishment and participatory management of community radio stations with an agenda appropriate to, and determined by their communities: this is the near term challenge and unique opportunity.

Community radio will bring fresh validity and meaning to the concept of decentralized governance envisaged by 73rd and 74th Amendments of the Constitution, and catalyze the process of people's empowerment through information and education. It is with this hope and reasonable expectation that the Bangalore Declaration is being presented to the public for a wider discussion, support and follow up action.

National Broadcasting Policy: Towards Public Service Broadcasting through Community Radio

Preamble

Whereas the right to receive and impart information is recognised as a guaranteed basic right under the Constitution; and whereas the Supreme Court of India has declared airwaves as public property to be utilised for promoting public good and ventilating plurality and diversity of views, opinions and ideas, and that towards this end, the broadcasting media should be under the control of the public as distinct from the government; whereas it is necessary to promote local broadcasting through community based radio stations for the successful implementation of decentralised governance envisaged under the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments; and whereas successive committees appointed by the government to examine the issue have recommended the adoption of a comprehensive national broadcasting policy with participation of the private sector, NGOs, local self government institutions and other community

groups providing a framework for media development in the context of technological progress and national needs.

It is now proposed to present the elements of a National Broadcasting Policy on the basis of which Parliament could enact legislation for regulating the airwaves as a public property, whose utilisation in the context of electronic media—TV and Radio—is intended to promote public good.

Since the Bangalore Consultation was specifically focused on radio broadcasting, the statement of policy contained herein is limited only to the radio broadcasting sector, and in particular, it's community broadcasting application. It is our hope that this statement would be included appropriately in the National Media Policy which would cover all media—Television, Radio, Cinema and Print.

Statement

The Legislative Imperative

1. Airwaves are public property and must be used for public good. Public good isn't served optimally when there is a monopoly by the government over this public resource or when liberalization of broadcasting is confined to commercial use of airwaves. Access to the airwaves by everyone who acts in the public interest is the *sine qua non* of public good in this context. This is also part of the right to information, a guaranteed constitutional right.

Need for Community Radio

2. Centralised one-way broadcasting at various levels of aggregation has limited scope to serve the goals of development, especially in the context of pluralism and diversity which is a singular characteristic of Indian society. As such, the regulatory framework should promote a decentralised system of radio broadcasting.

3. Community broadcasting, is a concept relevant to social cohesion, development for conviviality and national integration. Community radio is public service broadcasting in its most decentralised and democratic form. A community radio station serves a defined geographical area of a village or a group of villages, and is owned and managed by organisations serving a given community.

4. A community radio station would, besides providing education and entertainment, connect people with people through participatory or circular communication, connect people with organisations and communities, and finally connect people with government and public service agencies. These needs are not met under the current framework.

5. In a number of ways, community or public interest broadcasting can be termed Equal Opportunity Broadcasting, which is essential not only for effective democratisation of a public resource viz. the airwaves, but also in the context of our plural society with a multiplicity of languages, cultures and ethnic groups.

Policy Formulation

6. Radio combines the benefits of low cost and wide reach and access. When used in a community setting with limited area coverage, for example as in FM radio broadcasting, it offers many exciting possibilities for fulfilling the developmental goals and aspirations of the people, and wider choices in accessing information from diverse sources within and outside the community. It's potential for creating social change has been demonstrated in many parts of the world. For these reasons, control of community broadcasting should be vested with the community rather than with the government or private commercial enterprises.

7. The present centralised structure of broadcasting isn't conducive to people-centered, participatory methods of communications. The potential of the medium to promote community development is largely unrealised. The involvement of other public bodies, NGOs, professional associations, etc. in the

utilisation and management of airwaves is essential for realizing this potential to promote the welfare of millions in communities, and therefore the public good. The need for structural change in airwaves in order to accommodate local initiatives is a logical result of this imperative.

8. As recommended by the Paswan Committee (1996), while there can be a single national policy which addresses macrolevel issues common to all media, medium-specific policies are required for each medium, taking into account the coverage, reach, cost-structure, technology, administration and, finally, the social application of the medium.

9. Radio broadcasting, like other media, has developed around power centres and power structures in society, resulting in disparity of access and use among different sections of society.

Changes in media policy which seek to mitigate if not eliminate these disparities require political will and a people-centered, bottom-up approach already contemplated in the 74th Constitutional Amendment. Community radio is an illustration of this evolutionary process; therefore, it needs to be acknowledged and promoted.

10. At the operational level, a regulatory structure which is independent of the government and existing broadcasting organisations, public and private, should be set up in order to facilitate and support all licensed broadcasters in the country and their shared use of the airwaves under a fair and reasonable regime, consonant with national interest and priorities. The structure must address a variety of issues such as licensing criteria for various categories of broadcasting, technical and service standards, technical support and training, social and administrative auditing, funding sources and support, etc.

11. Frequency spectrum resources—particularly in the band allocated for FM radio broadcasting viz. 86-108 MHz must be made available on a shared basis with existing services for community broadcasting applications. Efforts will be made to evolve a national plan for the allocation of frequencies in this band so that the establishment of a large number of community radio stations across the country, based on a high degree of frequency re-use, is facilitated.

Note:

Far-reaching structural and managerial changes in the regulation and administration of the electronic media by the government have been recommended by the various committees appointed to examine the issue. These have been partly reflected in the Prasar Bharati Act (1990). This Act might require changes if the statement of policy contained in the Bangalore Declaration is to be adopted in legislation.

At the Bangalore Consultation on Community Radio and Media Policy, a possible structure for autonomous public service radio broadcasting was discussed, taking into account the appropriate features of such a structure and also the ground realities of the country. The outcomes of these discussions, titled 'Structure of Public Service Radio Broadcasting in India: Some Essential Features.' is appended to this document as Annexure I. Admittedly, some of the features listed therein—particularly those related to the proposed structure provides a basis for discussion, once the important policy decisions on public control of airwaves and the concept of community broadcasting are taken. A list of signatories to the Bangalore Declaration is at Annexure II.

Annexure I

ESSENTIAL FEATURES OF A PUBLIC SERVICE

RADIO BROADCASTING STRUCTURE

Regulatory Authority and Licensing Criteria

1. To regulate and oversee broadcasting activities in the country under a liberalized framework, a National Broadcast Trust (NBT) as outlined by the Verghese Committee (1978) should be established. The NBT will be an autonomous body made up of eminent professionals and other individuals, and would be free from government control.
2. The current framework adopted by national broadcasting agencies is of three-tier broadcasting, viz. national, regional and local. It is proposed here to enable the setting up of a separate and independent tier—at village/community level. The nature of community broadcasting warrants that it should be owned and managed by the community itself. For all other purposes, community broadcasting will be entitled to the same rights and obligations as broadcasting agencies at the other levels.
3. The term 'community' for this purpose shall mean a non-rigid group of people living in a bounded geographical area which is determined by the reach of the radio broadcasting station, and who share a commonality of concerns, interests and aspirations.
4. No monopoly or exclusive control by any interest group within the community will be permitted. The community, in all its diversity, should exercise democratic control over community broadcasting and establish appropriate systems of accountability, within and outside the community, as may be necessary. Equal opportunity to all groups in the community in respect of access to communication will be the distinct feature of a community radio station.
5. Given the complexities of the local communities in India, the regulatory authority may grant licenses to other bodies serving the public interest in a phased manner. In the first phase, universities with extension activities (for example, agricultural universities, medical institutions, adult and legal literacy organisations), registered cooperatives and autonomous public bodies fulfilling minimum criteria for eligibility should be granted licenses to set up community radio stations to serve the public interest.

Programming

6. While granting licenses for community radio stations, the NBT will direct All India Radio to provide the required development and technical support to be licensees, including training of technicians and programmers. The licensee shall bear the costs of programming as well as operating and maintenance costs of the community radio station.
7. A local advisory committee, representing varied public interests within the community, shall be appointed, preferably by a local judge, for a fixed tenure. The committee shall guide the programme content of transmissions from the community radio station. The committee shall guide all other collective decisions relating to the operations of the community radio station, as well as guide all other collective decisions relating to the operations of the community radio station, such as hours of transmission, scheduling and so on.
8. The interactive format for programming shall be encouraged to make the programmes truly participatory. A baseline-programming element will relate to environment, health, women's empowerment, education, legal matters and other such public interest issues.
9. Building linkages between private broadcasters, on the one hand, and local self-government institutions, educational and professional bodies, and special interest groups on the other

hand, will be essential. It is important that these groups are provided access to the medium in order to serve the public interest in all its dimensions. Such participation would, of course, be innovative. Community radio stations should also work in concert with government agencies in reaching out to and promoting the economic and social welfare of the marginalised and disadvantaged groups within the community.

10. The NBT may lay down guidelines on programme content promotive of public interest and may monitor community radio stations. It may exercise sanctions to discipline erring stations, again the public interest as elucidated in the policy statement.

11. Community radio stations may be obliged to broadcast during an agreed period, national messages provided by AIR, for which the radio networking receiver facilities may be extended by the latter.

Role of All India Radio

12. All India Radio, with its extensive infrastructure, trained personnel and vast experience, shall play a crucial but supportive role in the development of community radio broadcasting, under the guidance of the NBT. It's new role in this sphere shall be carried out to help carry out its new role effectively.

13. All India Radio shall provide assistance to licensed community broadcasters in the design of their radio stations in respect of intended coverage, technical configuration of transmitter and studio, and standardisation of the service at low investment levels; it shall also provide technical training for operation of the facilities. AIR could also evolve a Handbook/Manual on community broadcasting, based on technical/systems studies, which can be a source book for the NBT in decision making on technical matters and for potential broadcasters.

Checks and Balances

14. To ensure social and public accountability, it is desirable that each community radio station evolves its own code of conduct and strictly abide by it in its programming, transmissions and management. A local Ombudsman consisting of three persons who are widely respected for their experience and integrity shall be attached to each radio station. The Ombudsman will entertain complaints from individuals and institutions and can decide on the culpability or otherwise of the radio station concerned. Once indicted by the Ombudsman, the radio station will have to make amends and strictly abide by the directions. More than three such violations may entail withdrawal of the license, or other privileges of the station or its officers.

15. The station can also be brought under the Consumer Protection Act as a provider of services in a limited number of cases.

16. If the regulatory authority directs a radio station to close down or if the station can't for other reasons, including emergencies, AIR shall have the authority to keep the assets in trust till the problem is resolved and the station resumes broadcasting. If AIR is to finally and irrevocably take over the station along with the assets, the owner shall receive due compensation in respect of the assets taken over by AIR.

Funding and Management

17. All community radio stations will work on the principle of nonprofit, no-loss. Initial capital expenditure shall be met largely by a grant through the National Broadcast Trust, contributions from member institutions, donations from the public, fees from listeners for the broadcast of local messages and advertisements, sponsorship charges, radio club subscriptions, etc.

18. The appropriate legal form for a community radio station could be either a Society registered under the Societies Registration Act, or a Trust under the Trusts Act. The regulatory authority could also examine other options for management of community radio stations and a final organisational format can be arrived at.

Interim Measures by the Government

19. In order to promote community broadcasting and the development of necessary skills in programming and other areas in the interim period when the legislative framework of the community radio and follow up action are pending, the Government could provide for the following:

- (a) Airtime in AIR Local Radio Stations for programmes developed by different community and special interest groups to provide regular community interaction with audiences within the coverage areas.
- (b) Airtime in Private Radio Stations licensed by the Government for institutions and public bodies within the community to provide regular community programming to audiences within the coverage areas.
- (c) Mandatory setting up of Community Broadcasting Stations by licensed broadcasters—government and private—as a fraction of the total number of local radio stations licensed by the NBT e.g. for every five Local radio Stations licenses granted, the licensee is obliged to set up one community radio station.