

THE PASTAPUR INITIATIVE ON COMMUNITY RADIO BROADCASTING

Pastapur, Medak Dist., A.P., July 19, 2000

CR FORUM INDIA

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A group consisting of media practitioners and researchers, educators and trainers, non-governmental organisations involved in development activities, journalists, representatives from All India Radio, and faculty and students of mass communication and law have met from July 17-20 at Hyderabad and Pastapur, A.P. to discuss and evolve a policy for community radio in India. The four-day consultation was organised under the auspices of UNESCO jointly by VOICES, Bangalore, the Sarojini Naidu School of Performing Arts, Fine Arts, and Communication, University of Hyderabad, and the Deccan Development Society, Pastapur (A.P.).

The participants reviewed the status of community radio and the potential of communities to serve as effective tools for development at the local level. The group listened to the voices of the community that are pleading for access to media in order to represent their own realities more effectively. During the consultations, the group was also given demonstrations of low-cost, affordable technologies for radio transmission by organisations and individuals familiar with them.

After carefully deliberating the overall media scenario in the country and in other democratic countries, the role of public service broadcasting, the state-initiated moves toward decentralisation and privatisation, and the role of non-governmental organisations in grassroots development programs:

The group notes that:

Radio broadcasting in India functioned until recently under a state-monopoly public service broadcasting system. This, however, has undergone a change since the opening of the airwaves last year when the government auctioned FM radio frequencies for commercial operation.

The group shares the concerns of various communication experts and policy-makers about:

The increasing commodification of broadcasting by private operators who treat listeners as passive receivers and consumers of media content.

The group resolves that:

A truly people's radio would perceive listeners not only as receivers and consumers, but also as active citizens and creative producers of media content.

Recalling

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which sets forth the freedom of opinion and expression and the right to receive and impart information and ideas;

The People's Communication Charter which endorses that communication and information services should be guided by respect for fundamental human rights, and in the spirit of public interest;

The judgement of the Supreme Court of India (1995) that the airwaves are public property and must be used for public good;

The Bangalore Declaration on Radio (1996) which underlined the need for a vibrant community broadcasting system to enhance pluralism and diversity;

The Government of India's stated policy objectives for local radio, as outlined in All India Radio guidelines and the report of the Prasar Bharat Review Committee; and

The Milan Declaration on Communication and Human Rights (1998) which has asserted that communications media have a responsibility to help sustain the diversity of the world's cultures and languages and that they should be supported through legislative, administrative, and financial measures,

The group strongly urges the Government of India:

To take the current government policy of freeing broadcasting from state monopoly to its logical conclusion by expanding the available media space and permitting communities and organisations representing them to run their own radio stations.

For the purpose of community radio as it is proposed here, the group defines:

Community as a non-sectarian group of individuals who are territorially-bound and share a common socio-economic position/interest; and Community radio as having three key aspects: non-profit making, community ownership and management, and community participation. Community radio is distinguished by its limited local reach, low-power transmission, and programming content that reflects the educational, developmental and cultural needs of the specific community it serves.

Taking into consideration, the experiences, policy precedents, and judicial interpretations from other democratic countries, the group recommends:

The creation of a three-tier system of broadcasting in the country: a state-owned public service network (existing framework), commercial private broadcasting, and non-profit, people-owned and managed community radio stations.

The group pleads with the Government of India:

To dedicate frequencies, specifically, for the creation, maintenance and expansion of community broadcasting in the country.

The group is of the opinion that this measure would help:

Transform broadcasting in India into a system based on principles of universal access, diversity, equitable resource allocation, democratisation of airwaves, and empowerment of historically disadvantaged sections of society.

Considering the socio-economic and communication disparities in the country, the group recommends that:

Priority should be given in issuing of community broadcasting licenses to rural areas and other regions and communities that are least developed in terms of various socio-economic indicators. This is based on the fact that the least developed regions and communities of the country are also least served by media.

The group recognises and appreciates:

The long and sincere efforts of various non-governmental organisations such as the Deccan Development Society, Pastapur (A.P.), VOICES, Bangalore, the Kutch Mahila Vikas Sanghatan and SEWA, Gujarat in using audio-visual technologies for the empowerment of local communities.

The group which has visited the site of the Deccan Development Society's Community Radio Station located in Machnoor Village, Medak District (AR), near its headquarters in Pastapur, and interacted with the poor, rural women, places on record its deep appreciation of:

The eagerness of the women of the area to have a 'radio of their own' and their state of readiness to manage a community radio station.

The group, therefore, urges the Government of India:

To take immediate steps to license various community radio initiatives around the country and usher in an era of vibrant, community broadcasting sector in India.

Finally, the following signatories strongly urge the Government of India:

To formulate progressive and innovative policy that fosters and encourages community radio so that the developmental objectives set forth in the Constitution could be fully realised.
