India in a Box: Community Radio

Several years ago, if a woman in the poor Indian village of Mansoopur wanted to hear her favorite Bollywood song, she simply needed to write down her request and get the message to Raghav Mahato. He would be sure to play the song on his radio station ("Good Morning," 2010). Raghav FM Mansoopur 1 worked like any other station, broadcasting news and popular music. What made it different was the fact that Mansoopur 1 had been built by a young, illiterate electrician. With a bamboo pole, some wire and a cassette player, Mahato launched the first local FM station in the northern state of Bihar (Sahay, 2006). The transmission equipment cost him about $1. The station gained an audience of hundreds, if not thousands of listeners. It was also illegal (Tewary, 2006).

A BBC reporter discovered Mahato's story, and he soon became a national hero for those who valued the benefits of local radio and who admired Mahato's success. Radio in the state of Bihar is a key source of entertainment and news for villagers who cannot afford more than battery-powered transistors (Tewary, 2006). In addition to music, Mahato provided information about local crime and the opening and closing hours of shops in the area ("Good Morning," 2010). When authorities discovered that a young man was running a radio station from a small shack in Mansoopur, they confiscated Mahato's equipment and shut the station down ("Radio to Sweep the Nation," 2007). Bihar's innovative Mansoopur 1 fell silent.

Despite the government's reaction to Mahato's station, there is a recent history of support for community radio in India. After policy changes and government-sponsored community radio consortiums and workshops, India announced that it expected to see 4,000 new community stations by 2008 ("Radio to Sweep the Nation," 2007). As of March 2011, there were 108 stations in operation (Facts and Figures, 2011). India's bureaucratic beast and its broadcasting policy limitations have undermined the government's apparent enthusiasm for community radio, curbing radio's potential for enhancing the country's media landscape.

History of Support

Community radio could thrive in a developing country like India. One village woman told the Hindustan Times, "We have to have programs that are useful - we want to know how to save our apples. We are not interested in hearing just parliamentary news and so on" (Y.K.H, 2005). Historically, broadcasting in India was under the government's thumb. All India Radio has been the dominant radio force, setting the programming agenda. Since 1997, Prasar Bharati Corporation (PBC) controlled broadcast media. News programming has become more autonomous, but radio remains tied to the government. Music, dramas, discussions and news make up the majority of programming. All India Radio provides 250 news bulletins in a variety of languages, but local stations focused on local needs have been missing. (Vilanilam, 2005)

In Bihar, Mahato's famous FM Mansoopur was found to be in violation of the Indian Telegraph Act, a law established in 1885 that regulates means of communication in India (Ninan, 2006). Outdated policies like the Telegraph Act, combined with All India Radio's broadcasting monopoly, blocked stations like Mahato's (Y.K.H., 2005). But like other developing countries, India began to move toward liberalization and privatization. In 1995, it declared that "airwaves

are a public property" (Pavarala & Malik, 2007). This seemed to be the first step toward breaking broadcasting barriers, yet the closure of Mahato's station took place years later.

In 1996, a conference of policymakers, radio broadcasters, media professionals and community radio supporters met to discuss the future of radio in India. Participants signed the Bangalore Declaration on Radio, which called for the development and government support of community broadcasting. The declaration stated that participants believed community radio to be "public service broadcasting in its most decentralized and democratic form" (Pavarala & Malik, 2007). In 2000, UNESCO sponsored a workshop in Hyderabad, which issued a similar declaration urging the government to open airwaves to communities.

By 2002, India had established a radio policy that enabled educational institutions to create their own radio stations. In theory this meant that village schools could broadcast, but the reality of high licensing fees and lack of resources meant that only universities could afford to run stations (Syndication, 2005). Locals like Mahato were left out completely. These university stations were allowed to provide programming on "social, cultural and local issues" (Syndication, 2005). In 2004, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting organized the Enabling Framework for Community Radio workshop. Later that year, the ministry outlined a draft policy based on the workshop, which suggested that other non-governmental organizations besides universities be able to apply for licenses. In 2006, the Union Cabinet passed the policy. After years of discussing the benefits of open airwaves, this marked the beginning of government-enabled community radio in India (Pavarala & Malik, 2007).

Supporters of community radio rejoiced when the 2006 policy arrived. An article in India Together, titled "Community Radio Gets its Day," opened with the line, "Finally, it feels the way it must feel. Relief, that community radio stations will be a reality soon, and excitement, that there is much to look forward to" (Vincent, 2006). But the new policy did not fulfill the expectation of rapid growth and success. Years later, the full potential of community radio in India remains buried beneath bureaucratic and logistical obstacles.

Community Radio: The Benefits

With a constitution that protects freedom of expression, the Indian media scene is far from muted. India has the second-largest newspaper market in the world. Yet with only a 61% literacy rate and with 27% of the population living below the poverty line, many people in India cannot access Internet, televisions or newspapers (CIA World Factbook, 2011). This leaves a major portion of the population reliant on radio for information. As stated in the International Encyclopedia of Communication, "radio is an inexpensive medium for its audience, and therefore enjoys a wide range of diffusion even among rural people with scant resources for material not directly related to their basic needs" (Huesca, 2008). Radio is not only affordable, but it can also become a way for India's marginalized populations to gain representation and empowerment. Mahato's station in Bihar was an example of the medium's potential to unite and inform villagers. Mahato's station fulfilled a basic human need for connection and involvement while adding an extra bit of color to the lives of Bihar's villagers.

A major need for community stations comes from the fact that mainstream media in India devotes little coverage to the daily issues faced by the poor. In one essay, Professor Arul Aram of Anna University in Chennai writes, "Indian media traditionally focused attention on politicians and not the people. Of late, lifestyle coverage has been replacing even political coverage" (Kumar, 2008). Community stations can provide a solution by focusing on the specific needs of rural groups, like the Korku tribe in Harda. Here, the Madhya Pradesh Tribal Welfare Department organization recently launched a station with the single purpose of informing the Korku about their rights. With a history of being exploited, the Korku can now tune in to programs that provide them with the means to demand fair treatment ("FM Radio for Harda," 2011).

Community radio also makes people happy. At least, that's what a study by Stefania Milan of the European University Institute found. Milan surveyed a variety of community radio participants from different countries, asking them why they had become involved in their stations and what they liked best about radio. Those surveyed responded that being a part of their community stations was fun, enjoyable as a space for free expression, and empowering. One radio participant said, "Giving space to all these little experiences that a local radio like ours could give, people of very different social conditions who in turn had never thought they could speak over the radio, 'till we told them they could do it…this made me happy" (Milan, 2008).

In addition to providing locals with a voice and creative space of their own, radio programs can create change. For one thing, radio has the highest penetration percentage of any mass medium in many rural areas. In eastern Uttar Pradesh, for example, radio reaches 20% of the population, while TV reaches 16% and print reaches 10% (Ganju, et al., 2010). This means that new ideas and ways of thinking that have the potential to create social change are much more likely to succeed if expressed through radio. Entertainment can be mixed with education in programs like *Taru*, a Hindi drama that featured topics such as infanticide. In one episode, villagers stop a man from killing his newborn daughter. One villager cries out, "Don't be mad. Why do you want to kill your own child? Even the wild animals don't behave like this" (Sposato, Smith & Haider, 2005). A similar program called *Tinka Tinka Sukh* addressed various health and social concerns. A study interviewed listeners in an effort to determine the effects of the program. One listener said, "I have learned that young girls should study. Their parents should not be in a hurry to get them married. I was inspired by Champa. If she could realize her potential, why can't I?" One village voted to end the practice of giving and receiving dowry after listening to the program (Papa et al., 2000).

Tangled up in Policy

India's government recognized these potential benefits of community radio and expressed its support through the 2006 licensing policy, so it would seem that local stations should exist in most Indian villages by now. A closer look at the licensing procedure reveals why community radio remains in its infancy in India. Step One: submit a community radio station application. Actually, seven copies of the application need to be completed, and a processing fee of 2,500 Rupees ($56) will be required. This step takes two weeks. Various ministries will review the application, a process that will take around two months. The applicant must provide a PowerPoint presentation to a panel of government representatives. An additional month should

be allowed for the signing of the grant of permission. Next, an application needs to be completed for a wireless operating license, with an indefinite amount of time needed before the license can be granted. Equipment should be purchased early in the process to allow time for its arrival and setup ("CR: Step by Step").

While the 2006 policy allowed more organizations to qualify for a license, strict eligibility criteria remain in place. Anyone wishing to launch a new station must be a nonprofit organization with at least three years of service in the local community ("Grant of Permission," 2006). The organization must be a registered legal entity. Each organization may only hold one grant of permission, and individuals are not allowed to qualify for a license ("Policy Guidelines," 2006). Ram, former media head of the communication campaign group Voices, wrote a blog post about the limitations of the licensing process. Deadlines often are ignored, he writes, so that obtaining a license can take six months to over a year. Having to send applications to Delhi, and then having to travel to present to the panel, can be costly and impractical for the kinds of grassroots organizations attempting to start a station. The panel does not outline the types of questions they will ask applicants, nor does it provide information on how best to prepare for the presentation. The lack of transparency and painfully slow bureaucratic process can discourage would-be radio initiatives, Ram said (Ram, 2009).

Other Limitations:

When Mahato's homemade radio station story made international news, some community radio lobbyists were not pleased with his new fame. One article by Sevanti Ninan in The Hindu complained that the story had been exaggerated and sensationalized, drawing attention away from the deeply-rooted obstacles faced by other community stations. Ninan wrote, "For more than a decade some of us have been pleading the cause of community radio… the government has dragged its feet, coming up with a policy only designed to hamstring the whole effort" (Ninan, 2006). According to Ninan, Mahato's story romanticized the movement for community radio, but did little to effect change. In a way, Ninan is right. Despite winning an award for innovation, having a chapter dedicated to his station in a prominent textbook, and being featured at broadcasting conventions, the fact remains that Mahato can still only dream of the days of running his own station (KM, 2006) (Gupta, 2010). Mahato gained the support of the international community, and still was unsuccessful in restarting his station (Noronha, 2007). So those organizations whose efforts have not garnered media attention may find that they also have formidable obstacles to overcome.

Besides the challenge of navigating the 2006 licensing policy, community radio stations face sustainability difficulties and programming concerns. Technical elements such as spectrum management, bandwidth usage and receiver technologies can pose a problem (Syndication, 2005). Community stations have to fight for the airwaves used by larger stations. Limited reach caused by this competition for airwaves can hinder a station's growth and impact. Transmitters may be inexpensive, but they often lack quality and provide weak signals (Malaviya, 2010). Lack of funding also threatens a small station's survival. Only universities or very large NGOs have successfully initiated and maintained community stations, simply because other groups cannot afford the costs of broadcasting ("On the Radio, a New Song," 2007). While the government allows stations to use advertising to generate revenue, success at finding interested

advertisers has been limited. Government policy also limits possible funding by prohibiting community radio stations from receiving support from multinational corporations or large companies (Malaviya, 2010).

For the millions of India's rural citizens who live in poverty, staying informed about local and national news can be virtually impossible. Community stations could serve the vital function of sharing news with those members of the world's largest democracy who don't receive the benefits of the mainstream media. There's one problem: The government banned the broadcasting of news or political information from community stations. A history of political instability in India, from the dreaded socialist movement to tensions with Pakistan, has made the government wary of broadcasters' motives ("Mobile Phones Circumvent," 2010). The danger lies in the fact that the government's policy vaguely declares that programs with news or current affairs will not be tolerated. Without a more specific definition of "news or current affairs," the government has the ability to shut down any programming that makes it nervous. (Ram, 2009).

The Success List

The "doom and gloom" list of community radio limitations does not mean that success stories don't exist. Just check on Facebook, where Radio Sarang maintains a fan page. As the only community radio station in Mangalore, Radio Sarang offers 14 hours of daily broadcasting to student, agricultural and fishing communities ("Radio Sarang"). One Facebook post announced "Students of Sudana Residential School participated in a radio science play." The most successful stations are those affiliated with established NGOs and universities ("India's Stations to Increase," 2010). Tamil Nadu Agricultural University sponsors an FM station geared toward local farmers. Programs explain the latest farm technologies and include weather forecasts, personal farmer stories and ideas from "progressive" farmers ("TNAU's Radio Station," 2011).

In Maharashtra, the Farm Science Center (KVK) initiated a community radio station with the goal of stimulating rural development. Rural youths were trained to develop content and run the broadcasting of the radio. The station provides two kinds of programming, one focused on agricultural innovations, and the other on health, education, rural development and local culture. KVK gathers feedback from its audience to better cater to local interests and needs. The station reaches 214 villages (Gaikwad).

Many of the most successful stations focus on science and agriculture, but not all. Child Radio Reporter, a station launched by Jadavpur University and UNICEF, allows disadvantaged children between 12 and 17 years of age to share their experiences and learn broadcasting skills. The children interview officials and choose topics for discussion. They raise questions about local governance and injustices they have experienced (Community Radio in India). Program director Nilanjana Gupta said in an article in The Telegraph, "We hope that in the course of the programme, the youngsters will learn of the options available to them to redress their problems." The programs air every Sunday (Roy, 2008).

Not all stations involve educational or informative content. Jago Mumbai 90.8 FM, sponsored by the Union Park Residents' Association of Khar, recognizes that entertainment can be just as empowering as information. The station's segment Open Mic allows locals to share their skills

with listeners ("Khar Residents," 2010). The station describes Open Mic as "a platform to nurture homegrown talent. Speakers, writers, poets, musicians all find a place here. This will encourage cultural interchange; open the airwaves to new sounds and new experiences" ("Open Mic").

Community radio stations can focus on any number of purposes, concerns and subjects. In spite of the difficulties of starting a station, Indian social organizations and universities don't seem to struggle to develop ideas for potential stations. The Deccan Development Society, a grassroots organization focused on empowering rural women, aims to create a station for Dalit women. As the lowest caste in Indian society, the Dalits face constant oppression and limited opportunities to break out of poverty. The Society proposes a station owned and operated by Dalit women from 75 villages. The station would be a means of expression and could be used to preserve local culture (Satheesh). Programming could include topics such as education, health, gender justice and the environment, so that the participants would be helping their communities while helping themselves ("Sangham Radio," 2008).

The Future

Since the only community radio stations that have met with any level of success in India are those with the support of recognized nonprofits and universities, there seems to be little hope for Mahato's Bihar station. Despite social media activists who have rallied for fundraising for Mahato, he remains stationless (KM, 2006). One former fan told the BBC, "the boy has intense potential, but he is very poor. If the government lends him some support, he would go far" (Tewary, 2006). Governmental support for Mahato may be unlikely, but the future of community radio in India seems more promising.

In 2010, UNESCO and the Indian Ministry of Information hosted the third Indian National Consultation on Community Radio. Participants discussed the current limitations and challenges faced by community radio stations, and they debated possible policy changes to enable growth ("National Consultation," 2010). Streamlining the application process, providing affordable licenses, the exchange of programming by existing stations, and special pricing for community radio equipment were four of the suggestions made at the Consultation ("Third National Consultation," 2010) ("Community Radio, a Tool," 2010). Also in 2010, the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) convened a conference in Bangalore to analyze the growth of community radio in India. The conference focused on the sustainable development of stations. Participants used the conference to suggest a four-year regional development plan for community radio ("Radio for Sustainable Development," 2010).

Steve Buckley, president of the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters and former pirate radio guru, suggests that community radio in India will break free from current restraints. "The pace of development is a little bit slow to start at the moment, but in other parts of the world much smaller countries have been building 100 or more community radio stations a year," he said in a 2008 interview on Oneworld.net ("Community Radio in India Set to go Global," 2008). "So there's no reason why we shouldn't achieve that target of 4,000 or 5,000 community radio stations across India." Buckley said that as a democracy, India could greatly benefit from the growth of community radio. "Community radio is the voice of the people," he

said. “Community radio is our own radio; it's not somebody else's radio. Community radio is radio that belongs to us.”

Most recently, hope for community radio in India came in the form of the Ministry of Information’s first National Community Radio Sammelan in April 2011. Ministry participants said that the current policy and lack of funding for community stations were “shameful” and “abysmal” (PT, 2011). Information and broadcasting Minister Ambika Soni announced that the government has considered establishing a fund for community radio stations to help alleviate costs that prevent the development and maintenance of more stations (Baruah, 2011).

Perhaps in the future, India’s airwaves will be packed with community radio signals, and creative thinkers like Mahato will be able to use their visions to expand India’s media landscape.