

# The Role of Community Media in Social Change and Development in India

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**Abstract:** *In the age of capitalism and media conglomerates, the mainstream media is focusing on earning money and influencing the socio-cultural life of the people. With the expansion of global media networks, we are witnessing the deeper and inimical impact of corporate media on different communities across the world. Given the nature of market driven media, it would be fair to say that they have very limited role in community mobilisation and social change. It is the community media which talks about community empowerment, social change and development. Community media give the voice to those who are voiceless and marginalised. Various forms of community media address local issues and concerns in local languages and ensure community participation. Needless to mention that different forms of community media are seen as important tools of development communication. Various studies have shown in the past that community media can play a significant role in the process of community mobilisation through their effective messages. Keeping in the light of development communication, this paper discusses the role of community media in the processes of community empowerment, social change and development in India.*

**Key Words:** *Community Media, Alternative Voices, Development Communication, Community Empowerment, Social Change, Development.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

There has been a long discussion on community media all over the world including India in past few years. India has seen an increase in the number of studies on community media in recent years. However, significant scholarly works on this subject are still limited in India. In recent years, the term 'community media' has become very popular among media practitioners, communication researchers, social science scholars and civil society organisations. Community media give voice to those people whose interests and perspectives are marginalised and ignored by the mainstream media organisations (Howley, 2013). In the era of globalized and urban-oriented corporate media, it is the community media which cares about local concerns. It has been observed in the past that corporate driven media organisations have very limited role in community mobilisation and development but they have affected a lot to local culture. Community media have a significant role in shaping community life and its development. They may support the diversified views and provide a platform to those who are excluded and oppressed (Paranjape, 2007).

We live in such a vast developing country like India where several communities are struggling for community mobilisation and development. There are also some communities in today's time who are on the verge of losing their cultural identity and traditions. It would be correct to mention that every community wants to preserve its cultural traditions. Needless to mention that India is one of the oldest civilisations in the world. It has a rich and varied cultural traditions that vary from one geographic location to another. As a culturally diverse nation, it is our collective responsibility to preserve such unique cultural traditions for future generations. In this situation, community media as a public sphere institution may be a helpful platform from where members of any community can raise the issues of cultural discourse, community empowerment and local development. Community media are seen as a strategic response to the homogenous world culture which are distributed by multinational corporations with the help of dominant media. It is the community media which supports and encourages local cultural production (Howley, 2002). Different forms of community media are viewed as tools of development communication. Keeping in the light of development communication, this paper talks about the importance of community media in India. The paper also discusses the role of community media in the processes of community empowerment, social change and development in India.

### 1.1 Understanding Community Media

The term 'community media' is a widespread term and there is no single worldwide accepted definition of this term. Several media scholars, social science researchers, community media related organisations, working journalists, etc. have tried to define this term in their own ways. Sinha and Malik (2020) write "community media mean different things to different people - they could have varied practices, and they may also take various forms such as audio, video, online, and print" (p.1). Other scholars (Coyer, 2011; Dutta & Ray, 2017; Jankowski, 2003; Milan, 2009) also mention that community media may take different forms such as print, video, television, radio, film, and online. In simple words, community media may be defined as any form of media that is created, managed and controlled by members of a community or any social group (Dutta & Ray 2017). In community media, community participants plan, produce and present their own programmes. They themselves play the role of planners, producers and performers (Berrigan, 1979 cited in Carpentier et al., 2010, p.55). Sometimes this term is also referred as alternative, participatory, citizens, tactical media, radical or grassroots media (Downing, 2001; Howley, 2013; Sinha & Malik, 2020). Community media are created for the upliftment of backward community or disadvantaged groups. While discussing about community media, several scholars mention about various key aspects but two words 'accessibility' and 'participation' are considered as important features of any form of community media (Carpentier et al., 2010; Milan, 2009; Sinha & Malik, 2020).

### 1.2 Community Media: Different Theoretical Approaches

There are several scholars who discussed about diverse theoretical approaches of community media in the last few decades (Carpentier et al., 2010; Howley, 2013; Jankowski, 2003; Milan, 2009). Different approaches of community media make this term academically interesting and very broad. Carpentier et al. (2010) mention that there are various theoretical approaches through which we can understand this term profoundly. The authors discuss about four theoretical approaches; each approach has its own importance. The first theoretical approach of community media talks about the serving of community. It tells us that such forms of media are community-oriented in their nature. In the first approach, community media allow community members to play different key roles as planners, producers and performers. Various forms of community media also ensure access to community members when they want to access. In first approach, accessibility and participation these are two important aspects which are regarded as defining factors. The second defining approach of community media is connected with the concept of alternative media. This standpoint clearly states that community media are seen as an alternative to mainstream media. This approach highlights that despite the dominance presence of mainstream and state media, community media can also exist as a third sector and can run independently. This approach clearly considers that community media cater marginalised discourses while mainstream media and state-owned media are carriers of dominant discussions. The third theoretical approach of community media defines them as part of civil society. This view considers societal groups as a very important segment for healthy democracy. The authors write "the explicit positioning of community media as independent from state and market supports the articulation of community media" (pp.57-58). The fourth and very important approach of community media is rhizome. Discussing about Deluzian metaphor of community media as rhizome Carpentier et al. (2010) write "this approach allows (even more) the incorporation of aspects of contingency, fluidity and elusiveness in the analysis of community media" (p.52). The authors further mention that this rhizomatic approach develops horizontal connections with several organisations that are important to civil society and democracy. Sinha and Malik (2020) discuss about the rhizomatic approach and mention that community media are diverse in their character where different people from different societal backgrounds come together and participate as different roles. Today, several theoretical debates related to community media are almost moving around these four different approaches. These all approaches are clearly visible in different parts of the world in community media practices; however, it is the matter of deep research and broad observations that which particular theoretical approach is more dominant or prevalent in different regions of the world. Given the importance of community media in today's time, several community media researchers and social science scholars those who are working on this subject should explore some new theoretical perspectives or paradigms.

## 2. IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY MEDIA:

Generally, it is regarded that mainstream media institutions function at large scale to deliver varied contents for their diverse but inactive media consumers. Mainstream news media such as television news channels, newspapers, magazines and radios are considered as important sources of information and knowledge but these media platforms usually carry a dominant or elite discourse but community media work at small scale and their programmes and contents are community-oriented due to their structure. Community media are independent from the state and market and they are carriers of non-dominant discourses. Sinha and Malik (2020) write "a community media operates with a vision to give voice to the unheard and aims to provide a platform for the issues and concerns of community (p.10). In the age of corporate media world, the importance of community media is gradually increasing across the world. Many successful early initiatives across the world indicate that different forms of community media (community radio, community video,

community print media, etc.) can play a vital role in community empowerment, social change and development. It does not only focus on local issues but also gives importance to community culture. Needless to mention that globalization has affected to local culture of several communities across the world. Due to its impact, there are many communities who have started adopting consumer lifestyles and gradually being dependent on external sources. In this case, different forms of community media can save the local culture. Through participatory media we can record local cultural practices and local knowledge (Harris, 2013). In today's globalized world, community media focus on local concerns. It provides opportunities to community members to connect with inner and outer worlds (Paranjape, 2007).

### 3. COMMUNITY MEDIA FOR SOCIAL CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT:

The role of communication in the processes of social change and development has been the subject of a much discussion (Johnson, 2001). Numerous eminent media scholars and social science researchers consider that communication, social change and development these terms are closely related with each other. It is a general notion among scholars that every vibrant community needs a good communication system for development. Such system becomes very essential when the members of a community want to address their important concerns. The need for communication tools significantly increases when some members of community try to identify and develop relationships with their community (Hansen & Hansen, 2011). Several forms of community media such as community radio, community video, community print media, online platforms, etc. provide a strong platform to community members from where they can raise about their different developmental issues. Community media have power to mobilize local people in positive direction where they can create an effective community. Paranjape (2007) mentions that local forms of media have an important role in shaping community life and its development. By focusing on several local discourses and grassroots governance, they can provide strength to community empowerment, social change and development. Discussing about the role of community media in development, Milan (2009) states that community media contribute to development at two levels. The first is at the process level, community media as a channel of participation give voice to voiceless people and they enable community members to raise their issues. They are considered as solid instruments at local levels for the exercise of democracy. The second is at the symbolic level, community media as a means of empowerment encourages community members to take positive initiative at local levels. By voicing their common concerns, such forms of community media stimulate the process of social change. In the past few years, a variety of significant research studies related to community media have been conducted in different parts of the India. These prior studies have concluded that different forms of community media play a significant role in the processes of community empowerment, social change and local development (Dutta & Ray, 2017; Nirmala, 2015; Pavarala, 2003; Sinha & Malik, 2016; Paranjape, 2007; Raghunath, 2020; Sen, 2005). Some of these studies also inform us that community media can play an important role in women empowerment and rural development. In the current scenario, one cannot deny the fact that media literacy is increasing through the active participation of community members in community media activities.

Among different forms of community media, community radio is regarded as an effective medium. Malik (2015) highlights that community radio is globally regarded as an important tool for social change and provides a podium for community voices, narratives and expression. Nirmala (2015) mentions about several community radios such as *Sangham Radio* (now in Telangana), *Namma Dhwani* (Karnataka), *Mannadeshi Tarang* (Maharashtra), *Radio Namaskar* (Orissa), etc. and states these radio stations have played an important role in women empowerment and community development. Through several programmes, these community radio stations sensitised the women listeners towards education, health, sanitation, food habits and family systems related issues. Several awareness making programmes made by community radio stations stimulate certain degree of change in their daily lives. In addition, such form of community media also enhanced the leadership skills among women audiences. The author clearly highlights that several community radio stations empowered women socially, politically and economically in different parts of the country. They just not informed to women listeners about their rights and duties but also gave them self-confidence to move forward with strong will in their lives. In today's time, many community radio stations are functioning under *Krishi Vigyan Kendras* where they are making useful programmes on different aspects of agriculture and rural development for the benefit of farmers and rural people.

Needless to mention that community radio may serve as an important source of information during a natural disaster and some other difficult situations. Recently, it has been noticed that during noble coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, community radio stations again proved to be an important source of information. They have shown that they can play an important role in very difficult situations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw a massive flow of fake news and misinformation on social media so in this case many of us wanted a genuine and local information in local language. It has been observed during the pandemic, a number of community radio stations in different parts of the country gave timely updates and shared important information to local communities about the real situation of pandemic and the status of lockdowns. It would be fair to say that community radio stations served as information tools for

spreading awareness about symptoms and testing of COVID-19 and related guidelines. They sensitized to local and marginalized people through their frequent useful messages (Bhatnagar, 2020; Pavrala & Jena, 2020). Laskar & Bhattacharyya (2021) mention in their recent study that community radios during COVID-19 crisis focused not only on different aspects of health behavior but also on mental issues. *Alfaz-e-Mewat*, a community radio station based in Nuh district of Haryana, started a new programme titled *21 Din, 21 Baatein* (21 Days, 21 Things) based on health and yoga. A community newspaper is regarded a form of community media. Different community newspapers such as *Khabar Laharia* (Uttar Pradesh), *Namaskar* (Orissa), *Bahini Darbar* (Madhya Pradesh), *Navodayam* (Andhra Pradesh) and *Balaknama* (Delhi-NCR) have shown in the past that they can play an important role in the processes of community empowerment, social change and development. Community newspapers not only promote literacy among community members but also give them a platform from where they can share about their developmental issues and concerns. They bring out the unheard voices in public sphere in local languages (Sinha & Malik, 2016).

Community videos are also considered a form of community media. It is regarded a development communication tool with added advantage of audio - visual impact. Some NGOs like Drishti, SEWA, Digital Green, Deccan Development Society, etc. have been involved in video making initiatives in different parts of the country. Community video producers of such organisations have made many videos on different problems of community members and used those videos as empowerment tools. They have produced numerous videos for farming and rural marginalised communities for their empowerment. As a participatory form of communication, community videos play an effective role in community empowerment and social change (Dutta & Ray, 2017).

In today's time, there are several online portals, websites and digital channels which are dedicated to different communities. *CGNet Swara* (Chhattisgarh) is a voice-based platform where several issues related to Central Gondwana region are discussed. This platform is giving voice to the villagers of Chhattisgarh and it has helped in resolving many grievances of rural people from different social groups, especially Dalits and Adivasis (Garg, 2015). *People's Archive of Rural India* (PARI) is a website which is dedicated to several important issues of rural India. This archive-based website gives much emphasis to cover the issues related to farming, landless labourers and woodcutters. Apart from that, it also covers several issues related to rural education and healthcare, livestock, wildlife, climate change, natural disasters, caste oppression, gender discrimination, etc. (Sainath, n.d.). *Khabar Laharia* was earlier only a community newspaper which was mostly dedicated to different rural issues of Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh but now it has also become a digital rural news network which is entirely run by women journalists. Now it works as a multi-media agency and disseminate news through different platforms (Sinha & Malik, 2020).

#### 4. CONCLUSION:

Several media researchers and social science scholars through their research studies have shown that community media have played a significant role in the processes of community empowerment, social change and development in different parts of the India. Various forms of community media such as community radios, community newspapers, community videos and online platforms have proved to be important tools of development communication at the grassroots level. Mainstream news media usually carry a dominant or elite discourse but community media work at small scale and their programmes and contents are community- oriented due to their structure. They give voice to those marginalised sections of society who are voiceless. The best thing about community media is that community participants plan, produce and present their programmes according to their needs. Several studies in the past have proved that different forms of community media have empowered to disadvantaged groups by voicing their issues and concerns in their own languages. They are supporters and preservers of local cultures. In the present scenario, one cannot deny the fact that media literacy is increasing through the active participation of community members in the functions of community media. Among different forms of community media in India, community radio is considered as an effective medium. This medium in India has proved its importance in critical times like natural disasters and COVID-19 pandemic. In today's time, the importance of community radio is rising but its number is still less in a vast developing country like India. Previous studies have proved that community newspapers in the past have mobilised community members in the processes of social and behavioural change. They have talked on problems of literacy, nutrition, sanitation and other developmental issues at village levels. Studies have shown in the past that community videos can play a significant role in community empowerment and social change. Several NGOs in India have produced many useful videos for farming and rural marginalised communities for their upliftment. As an audio-visual medium, the messages of community videos have deeper impact on target communities. In today's time, some online portals, websites and digital channels in India are covering diverse issues and concerns of different communities. Various online platforms are publishing many unheard real stories of rural India these days which is really a wonderful thing. We would like to conclude by stating that different forms of community media can change the lives of community members through their effective messages. Community media can sensitise the marginalised communities towards several issues like illiteracy, health, sanitation, gender discrimination, sexual violence, caste oppression, child marriage, dowry system, etc. If we use

different forms of community media wisely, they can empower several communities and change their socio-cultural lives.

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