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## IMAGINED COMMUNITY OF RADIO

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### ABSTRACT

The research paper problematises the very idea of community Radio' as 'participatory communicative tool.' It uses Michel Certeau's concept of 'Strategy' to understand the very evolution of Community Media in India since the setting of communicative strategy by state body polity to ameliorate the socio-economic conditions of the society. This theoretical perspective posits 'participatory communication' as linear, hierarchic and sedentary which is self-aggregating and creates a community of spectacle. The paper focuses on the tripartite division of community in the mediated realm. The first division exists in the relationship between ordinary life and a specialist (Mainly civil society and NGOs). The second division looks at community as a hoodwinked entity in the wake of proxy ownership (often by politicians, bureaucrats and Armed Forces) of CR stations. The third division exists in the semantics of the programme production and its receptivity by the 'community.' Through different case studies Community Radio Stations, the paper argues that 'strategy' is self-referential and poses a serious threat to everyday practice of life. However, it recommends that strategy as a statist tool should be replaced with tactics (Opposition of Strategy) which is in contradistinction with the idea of strategy.

**Keywords:** Hegemony; Political Economy; Tactics; Strategy.

*'As for the radio's object, I don't think it can consist simply in prettifying public life. Nor is radio in my view an adequate means of bringing back cosiness to the home and making family life bearable again. But quite apart from the dubiousness of its functions, radio is one-sided when it should be two. It is purely an apparatus for distribution, for mere sharing out. So here is a positive suggestion: change this apparatus over from distribution to communication. The radio would be the finest possible communication apparatus in public life, a vast network of pipes. That is to say, it would be if it knew how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him. On this principle, the radio should step out of the supply business and organize its listeners as suppliers. Any attempt by the radio to give a truly public character to public occasions is a step in the right direction.'* Bertolt Brecht (Thomas, 2011).

Much before modern scholarship on community media could branch out itself to transmission cultures, German playwright Bertolt Brecht had critiqued radio for the singularity of its purpose. To him, radio was a profit-oriented vehicle for delivering entertainment rather than as a medium of a two-way exchange. He also gave suggestion for the maturity of radio into a broad-based community-centric medium as humans map themselves with progression within the scheme of history.

As technologies have migrated from tribalised era to retribalised era (McLuhan, 1967) in McLuhansque sense, the humans have also migrated as a naturalised community to technologised community. It is in this context that the 'community' has totally 'diminished' in a 'retribalised' era. As an unspoken consensus suggests, the first phase of 'loss of community' transpired due to an electronic ennui triggered by 'monopoly capitalism' in the historical categorisation of Fredric Jameson. The second phase of 'loss' occurred due to the advent of consumer capitalism. Whether monopoly or consumer, both kinds of capitalism have played crucial roles in marginalising

alternative spaces of the community (Atton, 2002). In monopoly capitalism, the community diminished because it chose to insert itself into its own meagre past and started to appropriate nature. The second phase saw the community getting appropriated by consumer culture. As monopoly ushered into consumer, the meagre past also turned into [in]famous Chomskian peering into the abyss of future or in a simpler way-- 'constructed promise of future' (Chomsky, 2001).

Today radio lives on the margins so does the community. The reciprocal marginalisation of community and radio are often seen as the emergence of a radical community media that goes by the generic name-- 'Community Radio.' As per the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC, 1994:4), Community Radio has various nomenclatures in different geo-spatial settings. In Latin America, it is termed as miners' radio or peasants' radio. Africans call it local rural radio. In Europe, it is also known as associative radio, free radio or neighbourhood radio. In Australia, it is called aboriginal radio or public radio (Rennie, 2006). By shifting her focus from macro-transformation to micro-change, Clemencia Rodriguez (2001) in her celebrated work- 'Fissures in the Mediascape' attempts a three-pointer non-prescriptive definition of Community Media,

Citizen's media implies first that a collectivity is enacting its citizenship by actively intervening and transforming the established mediascape; second, that these media are contesting social codes, legitimised identities, and institutionalised social relations; and third, that these communication practices are empowering the community involved, to the point where these transformations and changes are possible.

Since the very idea of community media is rooted in critiquing communication bias of capitalist structure, such definition, in turn, gives a human face to capitalism by invoking multiple identities based struggles wedded to mediation, cultural hybridity and multiplicity of struggles (Martin-Barbero, 1993).

The aim of this research paper is not to undermine preceding corpus of literature on the subject, it only alludes to the purported void of definitional discourses when community radio is characterised as having an antagonistic relationship with the power and hegemony.

It's often called 'Resistance Media' (Thomas, 2010) as a small scale and independent entity carrying non-dominant discourses and representations. Jan Serves (2008) has put forth following characteristics of Community Radio:

- Rejection of commercial motives
- The assertion of human, cultural, educational ends
- Rejection of state or municipal grants
- Rejection of advertising revenue
- Independent/'free' and Horizontal
- Democratization of communication
- Supplementing or contradicting dominant discourses or representations
- Diversity and multiplicity
- Local rather than regional or national

Most community media theorists ignore questions of financial and organizational stability of such entity. Secondly, the context of competition vis-a-vis hegemonic market is largely missing in their analysis. Thirdly, they hardly focus on the dependence of community media on the state since they also believe that states often abdicate their responsibilities. These questions are tantamount to a larger vortex- where is the community?

#### **PROBLEMATISING COMMUNITY**

In a spatio-temporal setting, the definitional problem of 'community' is always contested. They have been described in both linear and nonlinear ways. In capitalist structure, this definitional problem acquires a new dimension since capitalism and community don't go together. Capitalism stresses more on individual acquisition and consumption whereas community is more about connecting to others. To situate community radio in such paradoxical milieu can be a Herculean task. One definition suggests that community can't be promoted; it either arises spontaneously or it doesn't (Gumucio, 2001). Another definition takes us to different public spheres, farmers' markets, charitable institutions and holds that community can be strengthened through such meagre activities (Lewis, 1993). The proponents of the latter view strongly believe that community can be built into an economic operating system. Similarly, sociological construction distinguishes between community and society where 'community' is understood in terms of tangible human ties and collective identity. In order to define community, Morris and Morten (1998) bring in the concepts of 'communion' and 'association.'

Such definitions, at a broader level, constitute community as a hallowed entity shorn of internal conflicts and inherent prejudices. They also mean community in the sense of communities. Plurality takes the form of one singular enterprise. For example, when a distinct caste is referred to as 'community,' what is its relationship with other castes or sub-castes?

Such problems take us to the post-structuralist definition of community where it is seen as the absence of identifying group relations (Martin-Barbero, 1993). On the other hand, Leunissen (1986) conceptualizes community as geographic-ethnic structuration of the collective identity or group relations. Such structuring creates a 'community of interest.' Similarly, Wenger (1999) defines it in the pluralistic sense as 'communities of practices.'

While these definitions tend to be objective in constructing community, other definitions offer subjective interpretations of community. Lindlof (1988) draws on the concept of 'interpretative community.' Cohen (1989) looks at the community semantically and calls it 'community of meaning.' All these definitions either give primacy to structure or culture. When a community is seen as structure then it is more like an economic entity that undermines cultural mores of a distinct community. If it acquires a cultural motif, it subsumes transactional activities into it.

The definition of 'community' is further problematised in the wake of the society ushering into the era of new media. 'Virtual' or 'on-line' communities have tottered away from the fixed idea of geographical propinquity. New technologies have been constructing 'community identity' differently in communication structure. Further on, Hobsbawm (2007, 93) argues that globalization is gradually turning the entire planet into an increasingly remote kind of society, therefore, the community is also re-forging group bonds and identities by steering away from the fictitious definition of yesteryears. Similarly, Fredric Jameson (2000) exemplifies that communities will inevitably wear away their own existence in the era of pastiche.

Since the control of a monopolistic organization is centralized in the national capital, the community something as a fixed entity cannot hold its own ground. It shall always be away from local feelings and local needs, and also from local talent and personality. Community radio essentially is rooted in the nationalist paradigm. The claim of it being 'participatory

communicative tool' is often characterised as 'hoax.' This can be reasoned out in much subtle way by pitting local ownership against corporate ownership, local independence against state dependence, local responsibility against global liability, community of meaning against markets, networks and flows of information; and particularism against universalism.

The community often faces the problem of identity revival. Along with new technologies, fundamentalism and intolerance also germinate in the same communication structure. With each passing day of globalization, communities are also collapsing into resurgent identity groups of ethnicities, regions and gender. Cultures are getting extirpated from local space-time and conducing to the logic of global power. In this backdrop, a renewed intervention is what academia must strive for.

#### **COMMUNITY RADIO AS STRATEGY**

Scholars have munificently ruminated over the present and future of Community Radio by employing various theoretical perspectives. In the 1990s, Sarves conceived of the 'participatory communication model' which community radio is part of. This model focused on cultural identity and participation of people within the media institutions.

Another thesis is based on the concept of Rhizome developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their critique of capitalism. In this framework, 'multiplicities' make up most of media actions rather than a singular purpose. Sarves (2008) argues:

*Civil society approach towards Community Media is radicalized building on Deleuze and Guattari's model of the rhizome and combined with the relationist approach of community media as alternative media. The theory of the rhizome is based on the juxtaposition of rhizomatic and arborescent thinking. The arborescent is linear, hierarchic and sedentary, and could be represented as 'the tree-like structure of genealogy, branches that continue to subdivide into smaller and lesser categories'. It is, according to Deleuze and Guattari, the philosophy of the state. On the other hand, the rhizomatic is non-linear, anarchic and nomadic. 'Unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point ...*

In Deleuze and Guattari, a community can only be possible when it goes beyond the rigidities and certainties of mainstream media organizations and de-territorializes itself. Here, 'de-territorialisation' not only means going beyond geographical locations, but it also means shifting away from spatiotemporal locations. This problem was negotiated by Bertolt Brecht, in a poem 'questions from a worker who reads.'<sup>i</sup>

The young Alexander conquered India.

Was he alone?

Caesar defeated the Gauls.

Did he not even have a cook with him?

Philip of Spain wept when his armada went down.

Was he the only one to weep?

Frederick the Second won the Seven Years War.

Who else won it?

Every page a victory.

Who cooked the feast for the victors?

Every 10 years a great man.

Who paid the bill?

So many reports.

So many questions.

The problem with the concept of Rhizome lies in its impossibility of being ascertained and cognised since its roots are multidirectional. This sort of 'anarchic multidirectionality' can't easily be negotiated by subaltern communities. In the sense of community radio, a voice-consciousness has no ground to proliferate. Hegemonic forces have enough resources to spring up again.

While Rhizomatic thinking may represent Community Radio to an extent, I set to put forth Michel Certeau's concept of 'Strategy' to understand the very evolution of Community Media in India since the setting of communicative strategy by state body-polity to 'ameliorate' the socio-economic conditions of the society has always been the purview of power. This theoretical perspective posits 'participatory communication' as linear, hierarchic and sedentary which is self-aggregating and creates a community of spectacle.

Michel Certeau's concept of 'Strategy' is a critical investigation into the realm of routine practices which are used by those within organizational power structures to institute a set of relations for the subjects. Certeau (1984) argues:

*I call a "strategy" the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an "environment." A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as proper (propre) and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, "clienteles," "targets," or "objects" of research). Political, economic, and scientific rationality has been constructed on this strategic model.*

This theoretical consideration takes us to understand what constitutes a community in the mediated realm. As previously argued, this paper focuses on the tripartite division of community in the mediated realm.

- The first division exists in the relationship between ordinary life and a specialist (Mainly civil society and NGOs).
- The second division looks at community as a hoodwinked entity in the wake of proxy ownership (often by politicians, bureaucrats and Armed Forces) of CR stations.
- The third division exists in the semantics of the programme production and its receptivity by the 'community.'

#### **IS THERE ANY RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORDINARY LIFE AND A SPECIALIST?**

Here the specialist is a suggestive connotation for the government, civil society and NGOs. According to Thomas (2010), the key player in community radio remains the state broadcaster, All India Radio. The history of community radio in India dates back to 2002 when the first policy for Community Radio was approved. Only Educational Institutions were allowed to set up Community Radio Stations in this policy. This policy was expanded in 2006 when NGOs and non-profit organizations were also assimilated. Stringent guidelines, heavy initial investment & cumbersome process defined process for obtaining a licence to run a station. Grant of licenses to run a Community radio station became the sole basis of regulation and centralized control. Dr Sreedher Ramamurthy<sup>ii</sup> who launched India's first licensed Community Radio Station has spelt out his displeasure in response to an article published in *TheHoot*.

*Absolute community ownership of a radio station is ideal, and something one would wish for. I am afraid that nowhere in the world you can pinpoint one such station. At the most, you can highlight some of the community mobilisation efforts and interactions on matters of public interest. A Radio station have to be owned by a legal entity as long as the licensing system exists. India's community Radio policy is one of the best in the world which allows allotment of free frequencies for educational, agricultural and civil society organisations.*

'Here is the community' was the title of his write-up. One can easily trace his extolling of governmental endeavours in promoting community radio in India. On the other hand, the previous article by Anushi Agarwal and Devi Leena<sup>iii</sup> that appeared on *The Hoot* primarily explicated three emerging ownership trends in Community Radio:

- Co-option of radio stations by government and politicians
- Indirect corporate control
- Religiosity

This article was part of a research on community radio supported by UNDP. The main arguments of this article focused on how state governments, politicians, and indirect corporate interests have wormed their way into community radio stations and have violated the spirit of the original intention. Reflecting upon the original intention for setting up community radio stations as the media run by the community, of the community and for the community, the authors have succinctly expressed their views:

*The government is not mentioned in the list of eligible applicants, but it is not barred either. This leaves a grey area. Vanya, which is an NGO initiated and managed by the Madhya Pradesh Tribal Department, owned CR stations in eight districts of the state. The ownership was either directly in Vanya's name, or in the name of other state-owned entities such as Ucchar Madhyamik Vidyalayas.*

The government dictates are tied to broadcast policy. The recent order<sup>iv</sup> of the Information & Broadcasting Ministry to permit the broadcast of news bulletins of All India Radio on Community Radio has further exaggerated the problems. By issuing such dictates, the

government is making community radio stations as mouthpieces of the government, not of the community!

#### **THE ROLE OF NGOs**

Coming back to the concept of strategy, Certeau notes that it is always the purview of power. It envisions control. This control can even be marshalled by a barricaded insider. In the case of community radio, this insider is none other than civil society. Here, civil society is used in a narrower sense which is attached to associational meaning. NGOs make the bulk of this civil society. While community radio can play a very significant role as a third broadcasting sector along with private and state broadcasting services, it faces challenges from dictating agencies. One dictating agency is government and the other is NGO. Thomas (2010) further probes:

*Where does the imperative for community radio come from? Who has been involved in the articulation of this need? Who, in other words, is the interpretative community backing the community radio movement? To what extent are NGOs that are involved in setting up community radio truly participatory and involve local people in the setting of agendas?*

These are not merely questions. They address the very nature of global capital that makes headway into resistance politics. NGOs often depoliticize discourses and practices of social movements. All over the world, there are more than 40,000 international NGOs. Alone in India, there are around 1.5 million NGOs. Some big NGOs run a chain of ownership even if they mean the business of development. At the political level, NGOs are created to balance the power of the state. With the promise of enabling "bottom-up democracy" and promoting pluralism, they themselves become the state. Associational meaning of civil society and civil society as ideological structures are two different categorisations. In the sense of hegemony civil society diffuses information through various cultural institutions and in this sense, community radio becomes a networked institution of the hegemonic force.

#### **COMMUNITY AND PROXY OWNERSHIP**

Along with NGOs, there are organisations which often shape up the discourse of community radio in India. They are the second division in Certeau's concept of strategy. They, in fact, become strategic locus in terms of

proxy ownership. Powerful politicians, bureaucrats and military personnel have a huge stake in running community radio stations. Anushi Agarwal and Devi Leena explain:

*In our sample of 18 stations, we found emerging trends of 'proxy ownership' by 'parent organisations' where the actual ownership was not with the community representatives but controlled by powerful and vested interests including state ministries, central departments, and even various security forces. Politicians, their family members and close allies also seem to be interested in CR. There are even clear indications of corporate control in the CR sector.*

On a similar note, security agencies in cahoots with the government are on the go in setting up community radio stations in insurgency areas to counter the influence of insurgents. Vinod Pavarala, a community radio expert, sees a looming danger in the ownership of community radio stations by security agencies. He opines:

If these entities (BSF and Jharkhand Police) can legitimately get licences as government organizations, it is definitely a violation of the spirit of community ownership. However, if the BSF is given licences as BSF itself, then one should definitely ask how that has happened and under which provisions of the policy. Of course, unless there is a roundabout manner in which it has got licences (the agency's) welfare societies.

Community Radio guidelines clearly mention that pleas to run community radio stations by big business and big media houses will not be entertained. These stations will be managed by the local communities. But the reality is far from gladdening. There has been indirect corporate ownership. While conducting a survey on corporate linkages with community radio, Anushi Agarwal and Devi Leena found out that many community radio stations had links with corporate houses. These stations followed the guidelines on paper but they violated the intentions of the policy.

#### **STUDENTS AS COMMUNITY**

If the community is redefined as media users rather than as consumers, as active rather than uncritical and as heterogeneous rather than homogenous, then the

commercial motive is flanked. In this process the dividing line between active media users and alternative producers become blurred. But this leads to a major problem in identifying students as a community.

Out of the total numbers of community radio stations in India, a substantial number is dedicated to educational institutions. This poses a question about whether students constitute a distinct community? With big business groups owning most private educational institutes, they have also got Community Radio licences leading to indirect corporate ownership.

A number of educational institutions use community radio stations as a spectacle to get hold of the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) accreditation. This paves the way for corporate motives to flourish. Then, students no longer remain the community of practice.

#### **The semantics of the programme production and its receptivity**

The third division of Certeau's strategy relates to meaning, language and content of community radio. Since mainstream radio stations exist abreast community radio, community radio gives bad radio to its listeners. This happens because it can't compete with the splendour of mainstream media. Mainstream radio sells 'Kitsch' to the communities offering spontaneous pleasures. On the other hand, community radio produces programmes on serious issues. The govt dictates their contents too. Certeau (1984, 25) looks at this as part of the strategy by hegemonic forces which are linked with the acquisition of knowledge by ordinary life,

*To be sure, there remain social, economic, historical differences between the practitioners (peasants, workers, etc.) of these ruses and our-selves as analysts. It is no accident that their culture is elaborated in terms of the conflictual or competitive relations between the stronger and the weaker, leaving no room for a legendary or ritual space that would be merely neutral. This difference can moreover be seen within the study itself, in the gap that separates the time of solidarity.*

It all happened in 1995 when the Supreme Court gave its judgement—airwaves are public goods. Apparently, it rejected the government's monopoly. But it actually opened the door for private broadcasters. Though airwaves are public property, community radio is still in

the hands of the government. It is in this context that we see no community. And if at all radio exists, it exists without community.

By delving into such negativity, I don't intend to undermine the perspective and revolutionary functions of community radio. In fact, most critical scholars see in community radio a kind of liberating and liberated voice. But as long as government regulations come in the way, the community will have to survive this predicament. At an opportune moment, it will look for its prospective community and find voice too. While deliberating upon strategy as hegemonic functions, Certeau stood for progressive partitioning of times and places. Conjunctive rituals of mass communications will not always remain the law of the society where totalizing discourses articulate an ensemble of physical places in which forces are distributed. Certeau envisages a new way to negotiate everyday practice of life. He brings in the concept of tactics that is an oppositional tool and action in a constant state of reassessment and correction, based directly on observations of the actual environment. This is an adaptive loop where communities can orient again, decide again and act again. With this tactical agility, communities can prepare popular uprisings, rupture hegemonic strategies and sing an insignia of wireless age by Park Benjamin.

The messages unnumbered, of fond endearment  
fly,  
At once in all directions, the wireless they out vie.  
A throbbing heart is at the key, the dots and  
dashes sure,  
For love, you are the magnet, and I the armature.  
I dwell within your field of force, in that blest  
region where  
Your strength is to distance, inversely to the  
square,  
No influence external, can me from you allure,  
For love, you are the magnet, and I the armature.  
At last, we'll cling together, apart from no more to  
roam,  
With hearts attuned harmonic, we'll sing ohm  
sweet ohm.  
One circuit never is broken, while life and love  
endure,  
Forever you the magnet, and I the armature<sup>v</sup>.

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## Notesssss

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/literature/brecht/>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.thehoot.org/media-watch/community-media/community-radio-here-is-the-community-9822>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.thehoot.org/media-watch/community-media/community-radio-where-is-the-community-part-ii-9819>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.thehoot.org/media-watch/community-media/new-policy-dismays-community-radio-activists-9935>

<sup>v</sup> [http://www.telegraph-office.com/pages/Poetry\\_Wireless.html](http://www.telegraph-office.com/pages/Poetry_Wireless.html)

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