

Project community voices on community radio!

A conversation with Dr. R. Sreedhar, community radio pioneer. Dr. Sreedhar has more than forty years of experience in radio and television, specializing in radio production, science communication, and community radio. Hailed as the father of community radio in India, he set up the first community radio station in Anna University, Tamil Nadu. He is an emeritus professor, Apeejay Stya University, and former director, Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA). He has also served as director, Electronic Media Production Centre, IGNOU; held senior positions in Doordarshan and All India Radio; and produced several award-winning documentaries. He is a pioneer expert in conceptualizing and framing the guidelines for community radio in India.



How did community radio happen to you?

I have been working in radio since 1970, for about forty-eight years now. I had the opportunity to work as the first science editor and reporter for the entire country in the '70s. I always thought that science programs had to be unconventional and not traditional. In those days, people came in for writing scripts and recording in studios. They were evaluated for audio sense and subsequent recording. Interviews were well prepared; questions were framed and shared with the person being interviewed. I wanted the science programs to be face to face with the audience. I did not want to broadcast a program without knowing who my audience was, so I ensured that I had a select group of people who represented the audience I wanted to reach. I started rural radio science gatherings during the period when such programs were not controversial. I took a scientist right in the midst of a village who shared information on a few concepts, and villagers' asked questions. That is how I started narrowcasting for a group of people. Later when I had the opportunity to serve All India Radio in Delhi as director of programs for education and science, I broadcast five major serials. I knew a percentage of my audience well, making them expect the program at a particular time and day. This was narrowcasting in a country with 500 million people at the time and broadcasting for 146,000 people with keen interest in listening to the program. At this time, UNESCO and other organizations were pressing for community radio in India. I joined them in those discussions in 1995-96 at Delhi, Bengaluru, etc., but nothing much happened. The government decided to open the airwaves to the private sector in 1999 for community radio, but frequency allocation to the stations was still a dream.

Then the government decided to allot one frequency to the social sector, on education. I was working at IGNOU at that time, which was designated as the nodal agency. The community radio concept was in my mind and discussions with UNESCO people were on. I talked about community radio with my vice chancellor, Dr. E W Khan, who later became the assistant director general of UNESCO. He was always interested in community radio, even as early as 1965 when Mrs. Indira Gandhi was the Information and Broadcasting minister. Dr. Khan was instrumental in applying for a farm radio for G B Pantnagar University. With like-minded people, we asked, why not use the educational radio opportunity for community radio as well—60 percent education and 40 percent community—with the help of non-government organizations (NGOs). We had a beautiful meeting with many activists and allotted 40 percent of the time in IGNOU GyanVaani to civil society. But there was a lack of faith between IGNOU and the civil society organization, which created problems. The idea did not take off. However, it was still there, and in 2002 the government (while watching the functioning of GyanVaani radio station) supported the expansion of radio. Things moved further and the ministry decided to offer community radio to educational institutions. I was there developing the rules and regulations. Fortunately, I was in IGNOU working on radio and television, and the ministry of human resources development used to send cabinet notes for our views, so I played a role in the first formulation of rules for community radio announced in 2002. In 2003, I left IGNOU and went to Anna University, Chennai. The moment I reached

the University, in April 2003, I convinced the Tamil Nadu government and the vice chancellor of Anna University to apply for a radio license. We got the radio station on the air on February 1, 2004. That was how my interest of three decades culminated in starting the first community radio station.

As a pioneer in community radio, how do you see the evolution of community radio in our country?

In 2003, when the government announced the rules and regulations, fifty-three educational institutions applied for licenses. In 2004, with the first prototype in the form of a functional radio station, everyone wanted to visit the station model. With a change in government, the first year was a difficult period for Anna FM. There was a lot of Parliament questioning, ministry people visiting, and instances when they wanted to close down the radio station. All the license holders came to Anna University as part of an international workshop sponsored by the Commonwealth of Learning with support from UNESCO. The two years that followed when I joined Commonwealth of Learning, I took my organization into confidence and talked to ministries to create awareness. By that time the second modifications to the community radio rules were made in 2006, when a group of ministers led by Mr. Sharad Pawar decided that community radios be given to NGOs as well as agricultural institutions. There were only thirteen radio stations in 2007. The intention was to have 4,000 radio stations. The years 2007 to 2012 were a period of growth for community radio. We had gone up to 150 operational stations by 2012 with more than 185 GOPA holders. From 2012 to 2018, we have added only seventy-five stations. Nevertheless, we have evolved, and we have many models. However the growth has not been satisfactory. Originally, there were thirty approvals to get from various departments and ministries, which was reduced to five in 2006. Getting approvals was still not that easy. The main delay happened in frequency allocation from Telecom ministry. We do not know what is going to happen, but digital radio is the answer. Digital devices are booming and everyone has internet connectivity. Community radio stations should evolve themselves into digital radio and solve the problems of frequency and power. The earlier we embrace digital radio, the better it will be for community radio.

Do you think the government is taking enough steps to give a boost to the sector and ease the licensing process?

Even though we have been talking about single window clearance since 2011, and we tried to suggest the government to have a facilitation center, at present the government is not doing any facilitation. There is a need to reduce complexities in the licensing process.

How important is capacity building for community radio professionals, who are mostly grassroots reporters?

I am amazed to see how community radio stations are working. There is no community radio training. National/international agencies and other training organizations are doing capacity-building programs, including civil society, but those are not fulfilling all the capacity-building needs. These programs may talk about aims and ethics, participation and interaction with the communities, but radio as a professional medium is not offered to them. Moreover, unless UN agencies come forward to support such trainings, a station cannot afford these trainings. There was a certificate course on community radio at IGNOU, but that does not attract students anymore. Professionals who come to community radio are either retired from All India Radio, Doordarshan, or are from the media—journalists, or people from advertising field or activists/NGOs who are experts conversant in a particular field and not the entire field of broadcasting. Most community radio staff are working “blind”; they follow their own style without any formal broadcasting training. Some are successful and some are not. The need is for a formal year-long or six-month-long training for people who will be working as grassroots reporters at community radio stations. Community radio practitioners should have their own style of broadcasting and not just follow the traditional All India Radio broadcasting or the

traditional radio jockey-oriented commercial broadcasting. Capacity building is essential, and nothing much is being done at this stage.

You have traveled to many radio stations in India and abroad. What kind of similarities did you notice?

I have been to Thailand; every mobile tower there has a radio transmitter. DTAC was the service provider and they can do any program, criticize anybody except the DTAC owner. I have seen many, so I can say that Indian rules are the best rules so far, which the Bangladesh government modified a bit and have given them a better shape. I have not seen any other government giving community radio regulations in a clear manner. Some stations in Africa are doing well, but Africa also has examples of community radio creating civil disobedience and entering into politics, etc. In Western countries, things are different; in Australia and Canada, community radio is for a community. In America, the nearest example I can give is National Public Radio (NPR), which is a conglomerate of all campus radio stations, civil society radio stations, etc. All radio stations depend on the national stream of news and relay the programs and music. If they want some local programs, each can delink and do the programs. The NPR concept is very good because it depends on voluntary contributions from listeners. NPR announces that they will do a certain number of talk shows, concerts, and music programs, and they will promise that they will be unbiased and open about the budget. Any sponsoring organization or individual just gets a mention, no advertisements are broadcast. It is a good example of crowd-funding. Wish community radio stations in India follow such an example. The Nepal example is much quoted, but their rules do not make a distinction between community radio and commercial radio. In Nepal, the people who run the radio decide whether they want to operate it commercially or for the community's sake. Sri Lanka started community radio, but they have closed it down. Many South Asian countries are not interested in opening up the skies. I believe that one-fifth of the world's population lives in India and our movement should become strong. We should be an example to the world. We have the potential. If there is mindshare and political will, I think we can do that.

Do you think sustainability is achievable? Are there sustainable community radio models anywhere? Please share insights.

Yes, if a community radio really belongs to the community, not to a campus or an NGO. Some activists in civil society organizations dream of having a community radio station, they dream of serving the society through the radio station, but ultimately that NGO holds the responsibility and does not offer it to other NGOs in that area. Similarly, on campuses, journalism and mass communication departments hold responsibility and only the journalism students participate. The rest of the campus with thousands of students does not participate. In these cases, community radio is not going to be sustainable. I made Anna FM in 100 days. The vice chancellor was very good and offered some money, and every Saturday the doors were open for anyone to come to the station and contribute voluntarily. One day was given to the police department, one to minorities, another to doctors, and yet another to all the NGOs working in that area. They had free slots, and they knew they had to produce the programs for one to two hours in a week. This made programs sustainable. Community radio sustainability is not only about getting money and paying full time staff. It is also about having as many people as possible to contribute content and participate in the programs. That way the technology is used very effectively. It is achievable; many stations have achieved it in India. We should share those experiences. Technology adoption, large-scale participation, and delegation of content creation to several like-minded people should solve the sustainability problem.

Recently your biography was released in Tamil, do you have plans to translate it in other languages too?

My biography in English is almost ready. In Tamil, a professional writer, who has authored sixty biographies, wrote it. My former students at Anna University, who themselves have achieved greater heights in broadcasting and radio, are doing the English translations. We have not finalized the publisher yet, but I myself am interested in publishing it through ecommerce sites. The book should be out by the year-end.

What would be your message to radio reporters who are doing such a wonderful job of giving a platform to voices in their respective communities?

My message to all reporters in community radio is to try not to project *yourself*; project the voices of the community and *their* views. Our job is to identify and encourage new talent, train such identified talent into broadcasters, identify problems and possible solutions, and make it public through the voices of the community. If one is able to increase the confidence and the productivity of the people, you meet, it is a good job done, and you all are doing a wonderful job.

(Compiled by Arti Manchanda Grover, program leader, Communications. The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the expert and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of S M Sehgal Foundation)