

# COMMUNITY RADIO IN INDIA: UNSUNG HEROES IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

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# FOREWORD

Community radios in India, with their presence in the media landscape for over 15 years, have indeed come of age. Over 300 community radio stations during this period might seem insignificant given the country's vast population characterised by geographic and cultural diversity, but their contribution to fostering multiple conversations across the national public sphere cannot be underestimated. Despite the rather lethargic movement of the regulatory bureaucracy and continued challenges of financial sustainability, community radios in India have managed to firmly establish an alternative media culture with its diverse ownership structure, community participation in programme production and station management, promotion of local issues and identities, and articulation of the country's linguistic diversity.

It is at times of crises, such as natural disasters and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, that the general public and the media notice the value of community radio stations. These crises, of course, bring out the best in community radios, with their ears to the ground and programming that is sensitive to the needs of the most vulnerable sections of the community, including women and children, the disabled, and Dalits and tribal groups. The pandemic has shown in sharp relief the deep socioeconomic inequalities and the precarious existence of the poor and marginalized all over the world. While the mainstream media have their limitations in terms of their largely urban middle-class outlook, alternative media such as community radios have reached out to rural communities and to the deprived sections of urban India most effectively to ensure that they receive locally relevant information in local languages and dialects.

This booklet is a valuable effort in documenting the work of community radio stations in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic and the devastation it has caused to the economic and social dimensions of people's lives in India. Methodologically, the interviews with

community radio practitioners and managers as well as case studies of some of the significant contributions across the country add, more generally, to our understanding of the critical role of community radios during crises and, more specifically, to what these people's media outlets have been able to do in tackling the spread of the novel coronavirus during the past nine months.

While this publication mentions the initiatives of the government as well as multilateral agencies, such as UNICEF, to work with community radios in the country to disseminate information and create awareness, it would be a mistake to not acknowledge the independent and autonomous service rendered by them to their respective listening communities. The metaphor of 'last-mile connectivity' often reduces the role of community radios to being merely faithful transmitters of information provided by state agencies and other national/international organisations. Enabling and empowering community radios to function independently and facilitating their regular communication with their communities through public funding and periodic capacity-building measures are the most effective ways of ensuring that this third-sector media sector (outside of the government and the market) gets its pride of place in a pluralistic media landscape.

I hope this booklet serves to not only inform and educate the government and multilateral agencies about the critical contributions of community radio in mobilizing far-flung communities in the national effort to deal with the ongoing pandemic crisis, but also as a source of reinforcement and means of horizontal solidarity among the community radio stations.

*Prof. Vinod Davarala*  
**UNESCO Chair on Community Media**  
**University of Hyderabad**  
**January 17, 2021**



# Community Radio's



# Rural Areas



# Development





# INTRODUCTION

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The coronavirus pandemic is not only a public health crisis, but also an economic and humanitarian crisis for South Asian countries. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the wider society across South Asia, especially those already facing existing structural discrimination and social and economic exclusion, and are thus particularly vulnerable to the pandemic's most devastating impact in the short and longer-term. With 1.94 billion people, South Asia is home to nearly one quarter of the world's population. As of September 15th 2020, South Asia contributed to 19 percent of the global reported cases and 10 percent to the global reported deaths, skewed due to India's contribution of 87 percent of South Asia's cases and 86 percent to South Asia's deaths<sup>1</sup>. Despite the increasing penetration of mobile phone networks, many people in South Asia have limited awareness of

public health issues or the resources to access public health facilities.

It is here that Community Radio plays a critical role. Community Radios (CRs), the low-tech information dissemination tool, act as the voice of rural and marginalised communities. In times of the COVID-19 pandemic, community radio stations 'CRs' have become the most popular and effective medium for information dissemination to a larger audience, specifically in marginalised and rural regions. The Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, announced the nationwide lockdown through the programme, 'Mann ki Baat' on March 29, 2020<sup>2</sup>. While Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio and Communication (BNNRC) mobilized CRs for developing and broadcasting the COVID-19 related awareness-building programmes.

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<sup>1</sup>The ORF; COVID19: The New 'South Asian Enigma'?

<https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/covid19-the-new-south-asian-enigma-73553/>

<sup>2</sup>Hindustan Times; PM Modi addressing nation on Mann Ki Baat, focus on Covid-19 situation; <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/pm-modi-to-address-mann-ki-baat-at-11am-today-focus-likely-on-covid-19-situation/story-28Do83sK2TtrRSQ4ZM-dTQK.html>; accessed on July 29, 2020

Since April 2020, community radio stations have seen a spike in their listenership. According to a study by the Association of Radio Operators for India (AROI), the radio industry witnessed a listenership of 51 million people which is close to the reach of television with 56 million and social media's reach of 57 million<sup>3</sup>. One of the reasons for this is that CR stations are primarily managed by local people and they provide credible and informed news in the local language. Moreover, CR stations have also complemented the work of the district authorities in busting myths and disseminating updated and relevant information regarding the pandemic in their regions. They have regularly broadcast the bulletins and briefings of the Government of India as well as of the states and district collectors, chief medical officers and the police department.

This publication aims to compile the experiences of community radio stations from India that stepped forward to help local communities living in loneliness in the farthest regions, to build awareness, demolish fake news and bring awareness about social distancing during the ongoing pandemic, in the form of case stories. This publication attempts to understand the commonalities, differences and uniqueness of the programmes broadcast by CR stations.

As an independent researcher, the adopted methodology was twofold – firstly to conduct in-depth interviews of CR stations, and secondly, monitoring of media reports in the last six months that are publicly available. These in-depth interviews were conducted with CR

station heads and staff members. The structure of this publication is divided into two sections. The first section reflects on different awareness programmes around COVID-19 across South Asia. The later section covers region-wise case stories of CR stations in India deep-diving the quality of programmes and efforts by CRs to reach out to the masses.

This publication is dedicated to all CR stations and to the countless unknown faces behind the CR stations who have worked tirelessly to bring relevant information timely to the people who are deprived of information, in the local language and dialect.

“ According to a study by the Association of Radio Operators for India (AROI), the radio industry witnessed a listenership of 51 million during the lockdown, which is close to the reach of television with 56 million and social media's reach of 57 million. ”

<sup>3</sup>Money control; Coronavirus lockdown: Radio listenership increases by 23% : Study; <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/india/coronavirus-lockdown-radio-listenership-increases-by-23-study-5129011.html>; accessed on 20 October 2020



## ALFAZ-E-MEWAT

**Frequency:** FM 107.8 MHz

**Establishment date:** February 2012

**Total hours of transmission in a day:** 13 hours

**Coverage area:** Over 225 villages in Nuh district

**State:** Haryana

**Name of the promoter organization:** S M Sehgal Foundation

**Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/alfaze.mewat/>

**Broadcasting hours:** 3 hours

**Programme name:** 'Savdhaan'; '21 Din 21 Baatein' (21 Days, 21 Messages); programme '19 Din Aur Sambhalke' (Be Careful for Another 19 Days); 'Gaon Ki Chaupal'; 'Aaj Ka Hero', Radio School, Mission Corona

**Programme category:** Fight against COVID-19 related fake news; adopting Covid-19 preventive practices; education

Community radio, Alfaz-e-Mewat FM 107.8, an initiative of S.M Sehgal Foundation, a rural development NGO located in Nuh, Mewat district of Haryana, aired its first awareness programme at the beginning of February 2020 before the outbreak of COVID-19 in India. Alfaz-e-Mewat uses local folk songs to discuss contemporary issues, including the coronavirus outbreak and social distancing. Each day, the station presenter broadcasts the information shared by the concerned departments over WhatsApp

and emails, and conducts interviews with district officials, including the district collector, chief medical officer, and other government authorities to bring awareness.

The radio station has initiated a variety of programmes related to COVID-19, covering issues from fighting against fake news, adopting preventive measures, education and practices, and also played an instrumental role in broadcasting information received from the district collector, chief medical officer and



government authorities. These programmes include 'Savdhaan', '21 Din 21 Baatein' (21 Days, 21 Messages), programme '19 Din Aur Sambhalke' (Be Careful for Another 19 Days), 'Gaon Ki Chaupal', 'Aaj Ka Hero' (Today's hero) and 'Radio School'.

**Fakat Hussain, a Radio Jockey at the CR says,**

“ We do different programmes on information received from the district collector, chief medical officer and other government authorities, including entitlements of extended schemes. We also did a series called '21 din 21 baatein' with a message by an expert along with a thematic poem on frequent hand washing, access to healthcare services, physical distancing, the importance of yoga, and time for self-learning daily to spread positivity in people. Discussions on contemporary issues, including the coronavirus outbreak, and local folk songs on social isolation are presented to listeners. Some are live and interactive sessions, with listeners asking questions. Officials cannot possibly go to every village, but through this medium, they can communicate to the maximum number of people. ”

To combat anxiety and lessen the confusion among people about staying indoors and not venture outdoors due to the nationwide lockdown, the CR station partnered with Rajbala Foundation, a national NGO working in the area of healthcare and education, and initiated a programme, '21 Din 21 Baatein' during the first phase of the lockdown, from a mental health perspective. In the second phase, the programme continued with '19 Din Aur Sambhalke'. As the lockdown got extended, the format of the programme changed, inviting experts to share their opinion and information on how to deal with the 'new normal'.

A special programme, 'Savdhaan' focused on battling fake news, myths and rumours that were spreading in the region. Through the programme, they requested listeners to verify the information with the authorities. Short audio capsules were broadcast on how to protect oneself. These short capsules were broadcast in collaboration with GramVani.

Another programme, 'Aaj ka Hero', featured positive stories of how people were following the lockdown. This half-an-hour live-in programme featured over 10,000 people from the community. With the pandemic and lockdown affecting students' education, the CR started helping students to continue their studies through its 'Radio School' programme. The programme has episodes on the subjects of Maths, English and Science from primary and secondary classes. Station Principal Lead, Ms. Pooja O. Murada says, they used the existing pre-recorded programmes of the government school teachers

<sup>1</sup>The Statesman, Rural schoolchildren in Nuh tune in to radio for education amid the pandemic; Accessed on 10 October 2020.

as part of the 'Dastake-taaleem' campaign facilitated by the State Education Department. Pooja O. Murada is a representative of Alfaz-e-Mewat FM 107.8 and S.M. Sehgal Foundation director. "With changing time and needs, the programme has adopted different methodology to share knowledge, but our aim has remained the same — to spread education to all those who seek it in our broadcast area."<sup>1</sup>. A variety of educational programmes are being broadcast regularly during the pandemic to make up for the educational loss of schoolchildren.

Besides these programmes, Alfaz-e-Mewat CR with support from UNICEF and Community Radio Association started broadcasting a radio series 'Mission Corona' from June 18, 2020. The 10-episode radio series is focused on coronavirus symptoms, self-care, home quarantine, food and nutrition during COVID, and others.

Alfaz-e-Mewat reaches 225 villages, serving the vulnerable sections of the population who need credible information in their local language on how they can protect themselves against coronavirus.

