

## Radio Companion: The Role of Sri Lankan Community Radio in the Sphere of Empowering Marginalized in the Society

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### ABSTRACT

Community broadcasting involves radio by and for the community. In developing countries, community radio has a developmental mission and sees itself as uniting either geographical communities or communities of interest around common economic, cultural, or linguistic interests and themes. The role of the community radio is to respond to the priorities set by the community, to facilitate their discussion, to reinforce them, and to challenge them. Being the pioneer in the community radio broadcasting in South Asia, it is important to identify the potentials of CR in empowering marginalized in the society for a sustainable lifestyle. In order to identify the role of CR in Sri Lanka in the sphere of empowering marginalized, 8 leading community radio activists of Sri Lanka were interviewed by using semi structured in depth interviews. Reinforcing and facilitating the livelihood of resettled people under Mahaweli Development Scheme, Empowering the proper representation and participation of people in development (decentralized decision making), Fulfilling the need for information, Enhancing educational level of the community with the help of Information and Communication technology, Pertaining to job opportunities and vocational training, Empowering youth with language skills, identifying the day to day challenges the marginalized communities faced and assists them to overcome them (addresses the unmet needs of communities) and Resolving the conflicts and disputes within the village (facilitate in having responsible and accountable citizens) were identified as the main roles that were played by CR in Sri Lanka to empower the marginalized in the society for a sustainable lifestyle.

**Keywords:** Community Radio, Gandhi, empower, Information and Communication technology, marginalized

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Radio is one of the most popular and widely used means of mass communication. In Sri Lanka, radio broadcasting was started in 1923 and it was only about broadcasting recorded music. The regular broadcasting was begun in 1924. Earlier, it was named as Radio SEAC and later renamed as Radio Ceylon in 1949 and it was immensely popular not only in Sri Lanka but also other parts of the Asia too. But, later it was realized that there are many media dark areas in the country and educating and empowering grassroots of the society may not be achieved through existing mainstream media structures in view of their mode of operations. They

may not necessarily stand for all the segments of a country's population. In this context, Community radio can be considered important, because its function cannot be substituted by the national, regional or the commercial broadcaster. "The rural mass should be reached effectively and the communication gap between the urban elite oriented mass media and the rural sector has to be bridge – if not eliminated" (David and Valbuena, 1991).

In Gandhian teaching, the village is the basic unit of the ideal social order. He always believed that, if the village perishes, India will perish too.

The same can be applied to any country. The best mean of communication to bridge the gap between the educated, self dependent society is using community radio, as a mean of development support communication. "A radio for the whole country is not the need of the hour. A radio is an institution belonging to people; social radios must emerge from village to village" (David, 2012).

When studying the role and the functions of community radio, what Gandhi ji expected from the rural communities to become, it is apparent that the objectives of the community radio too similar in that sense.

According to Gandhi ji, Panchayat's responsibility was to protect and uplift 'untouchables' and other poor people. When it comes to Community radio, the target group was the marginalized people and the ultimate goal was to serve the society to empower the common man. Reaching the marginalized people in the society, finding out the sufferings they have, bringing up the solutions for those problems and opening new paths to the villagers to enhance the quality of their lives by creating self sufficient/self dependent people were the main objectives of establishing community radio.

Gandhi ji's preferred village habitats to megalopolises and Swadeshi craft to imported technology for the economic well being of the common man. He realized the need for integrated rural development and believed that education, health and vocation should be properly integrated. In fine, Gandhian approach to rural development strives to reconstruct village republics which would be non-violent, self-governed and self-sufficient so far as the basic necessities of rural people are concerned.

According to the community radio handbook by Fraser & Estrada (2001), "Community broadcasting is a non-profit service that is owned and managed by a particular community, usually through a trust, foundation, or association". And they further mention that "community radio addresses specific needs of community's that are not covered by other public or private media" (Fraser & Estrada, 2001).

Orusolvasagan *et al.* (2017) give a definition which is similar to UNESCO definition on community radio

that, "it serves the public interest of a particular geographic group or community. It is a medium that can give the marginalized a voice, appeal to societal calm and order, and spread credible, useful information".

Sri Lanka was the first South Asian country to do community broadcasting, starting with Mahaweli community radio (MCR) in 1981. Following Mahaweli community radio, later on Girandurukotte Community radio station (1986), Mahailuppallama Community Radio (1987), Kothmale Community Radio (1989), Pulathisi Rawayaya Community Radio (1995), Uva Community Radio (2003), SARU Community Radio (2005), Dambadeniya Community Radio (2007), and Dambana Community Radio (2012) were established respectively.

But, unfortunately, there is no well functioning pure community radio in Sri Lanka today and it has been locked away as a memory. Still it is worthwhile to find out the potential that community radio had with respect to uplift the rural people who lived in media dark areas in Sri Lanka. The way they facilitate proper representation and participation of people in development, addresses the unmet needs of communities, pertaining to job opportunities and vocational training, facilitate in having responsible and accountable citizens, and new ways of entertainment. This is where community radio has a great potential, particularly because it helps bottom up decision making from each and every community in the decentralized administration. Therefore, community radio facilitates the process of democratic and true nation building.

## Methodology

Both the primary and secondary methods were used to collect the needed information for the study. Primary data were collected by conducting In-Depth Interviews (semi structured) and the secondary data were collected through books, magazines, newspapers, dissertations and electronic sources. For an informal research, it is accepted that 20 respondents are often enough ([www.audiencedialogue.net](http://www.audiencedialogue.net)) for In Depth Interviews. The main reason to select in-depth interviews as

the primary data collection method for this study was, it required to deeply investigate the role of CR in Sri Lanka which is not properly functioning today but has become only a memory. Hence, in this study, the researchers purposively selected eight respondents depending on the two community radio eras in Sri Lanka, four each from the first phase of community radio broadcasting and from the second phase community radio broadcasting who has first hand experiences on CR in SL. Those prominent community radio activists shared their experiences, opinions and suggestions in order to fulfill the objectives of the study.

Data analysis was done by using Glaser's Constant Comparative Method. Respondents' responses were compared to each other (using what have been written down in transcripts) & categorized them under different topics (such as proper representation and participation of people in development, addresses the unmet needs of communities, pertaining to job opportunities and vocational training) by using constant Comparative method, in order to find the role of Community radio in Sri Lanka to empower the grassroots.

## Findings

To fulfill the objectives of the study, the respondents were interviewed and according to the answers they provided, the researcher was able to identify following major factors and incidents as the evidences to understand the role of CR played in empowering marginalized in Sri Lanka during the golden era of CR in Sri Lanka.

### ***1. Reinforcing and facilitating the livelihood of resettled people under Mahaweli Development Scheme***

Mahaweli Community Radio was established in 1981 as a result of a large development scheme initiated by the government of Sri Lanka to divert the country's longest river Mahaweli and build a number of dams. "People uprooted from their lands and settled in a totally different geographical area needed development communication to rebuild their lives and that is where MCR came

in to existence with the support of UNESCO and DANIDA, the Danish Development Aid Agency" (Seneviratne, 2012). That was the time Mahaweli Development scheme was gearing up to settle the families in Mahaweli areas. Even the officers engaged with Mahaweli Development project was searching for possible solutions to make settled people feel comfortable, and facilitate their livelihood in new lands. Then, they found out that starting a community radio that can address the issues of the newly settled people and find out the solution with the corporative support of the particular community too.

Once, David (2001) mentions in his article that, "Within the period of 1981 -1989, MCR's mobile teams visited 1,500 villages. Survey and studies have revealed the extent of MCR's impact in the region. Girandurukotte community radio and the MCR broadcasts on Anuradhapura regional service are listened to about 90 percent of the local population and are the second most important source of agriculture and health- related information". "There is a very clear agreement amongst the experts that, Mahaweli community radio was used as a potential participatory tool to keep the settlers informed, share experiences, and facilitate the socio economic development for the settlers" (Rasmin, 2017).

### ***2. Empowering proper representation and participation of people in development (the decentralized decision making)***

Raghunath (2012) explains that "the community radio is the radio of, for and by the community". In simple terms, the community drives the radio in every sense, be it production, management or ownership and communication for development was the core of community radio.

Community radio in Sri Lanka became a forum where the community and the development workers can have two way dialogues about the issues related to the particular community. Local languages and dialects were used when broadcasting programmes. Frequent workshops and events were held to encourage local participation. The station also facilitated discussions on local issues in which

opinions and information are exchanged. In this way, the station acted like a meeting point for the community.

Decentralization and power sharing plans have been recognized as essential reforms to support development efforts. But, decentralized administration alone would not bring the desired results unless there are possibilities for each and every community to influence and to take part in the decentralized decision making process. This is where community radio has a great potential, particularly because it helps bottom up decision making from each and every community in the decentralized administration. Therefore, community radio facilitates the process of democratic and true nation building.

### ***3. Fulfilling the need for information, Enhancing educational level of the community with the help of Information and Communication technology***

Kothmale Community Radio (1989) was one of the most successful community radio stations in Sri Lanka. They could achieve more miles when comparing with MCR and served its community even with the help of Information and Communication Technology.

A US\$ 50,000 grant by UNESCO helped Kothmale Community Radio to become a part of the World Wide Web in 1998. An internet hub, which includes a local server and five computer terminals, was established in KCR. A web page had been established based on information provided by listeners. Hence, thousands of people have been exposed to the internet directly and indirectly. This information was used for various purposes, such as education, business, livelihood, and recreation.

The Kothmale community radio Internet project was an attempt to extend the benefits of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to some of the remote areas of Sri Lanka through the innovative convergence of two media - the radio and the internet. Most of the radio broadcast used information collected by browsing the internet and then this information was discussed with listeners on

the air. The internet access points were established in the community enabled direct computer access and respond to the information needs in various groups in the community. An online database of information request was maintained, and a web page in local languages enabled active community participation in the operation of the radio.

The main aim of the e-tuktuk (a trishaw with ICT facilities) was to take new knowledge to the villages, to be able to demonstrate what can be done using new technologies and provided an access point for people who were unable to come to the centre. It was in effect, a mobile Community Multimedia Centre (CMC) which used the radio to give people access to the benefits of newer technologies in the form of the information available via internet.

Sunil Wijesinghe was working as the Station Manager in Kothmale Community radio from 1989 to 2009. In 2004, he started a 'listeners' club' there which consists of teachers, doctors, students, venders, farmers, house makers, etc almost more than 250 listeners. They issued a magazine also with the fund received from 'Heegos' company.

The community radio station broadcasted a daily 'Radio browsing the internet' programme, and in this programme, the broadcasters supported by resource personnel browsed the internet on air together with their listeners, contextualized information in local language discussed the issues related to the community, and answered the listeners' questions. The radio programme thus contributed to raise awareness about the internet in a participatory manner, the listeners requested the broadcasters to surf the WEB on behalf of them and the programme transmitted information in response to their requests. This information was explained and contextualized with the help of the studio guests.

### ***4. Pertaining to job opportunities and vocational training***

Gandhian approaches explain the importance to the generation of maximum possible employment opportunities in rural areas, especially for the weaker sections of the community so as to enable



them to improve their standard of living. In that sense, Kothmale community radio has done an immense job by opening many doors for grassroots where they can find their means of living. A farmer learned new techniques of growing and storing tomatoes. A village baker tried out new recipes that he found on the internet. Teachers had downloaded the lessons and games for teaching English. The information on the radio browsing programme has enabled tea farmers to improve their tea – drying technique.

Uva Community Radio (2003) was planned as an integral part of the Uva area based growth and equity programme implemented by UNDP, Colombo. Producers and volunteers of Uva community radio established a community network of about 200 knowledge Societies (KS). Through these societies, more than 1500 volunteers were able to undergo training on various aspects of broadcasting. Finally, their service was catered for the development of the radio station.

Dambadeniya is well known area where the majority of local farmers focused on dairy products and development as means of livelihood. Dambadeniya community radio (2007) took the responsibility to enable all interested local dairy farmers who had burning issues regarding the dairy industry. The youth, women and school going children of Dambadeniya export village took the initiative to establish Dambadeniya Community Radio. So, it enabled a broader set of people to benefit and improve their skills in dairy products by giving good enough knowledge to the villagers.

### ***5. Empowering the youth with language skills***

Easy and free access to information has been effectively used by community members for business, educational, recreational and other purposes. More than 30 web pages have been created by community youths under Kothmale Community radio. In addition, an 'internet club' and a 'listeners' club' have been formed. Kothmale community radio station had become an integral part of the community, with people actively participating in interactive programmes, contributing compact disks

with songs to the station, and using the information aired on various programmes to upgrade their businesses or learn more skills.

In KCR, broadcasting didn't limit only to broadcasting in Sinhala Language but also they broadcasted in Tamil and English languages as well. Even foreigners from Australia, Nepal, and America joined KCR and voluntarily contributed their service for English broadcasting programmes. Not only presenting programmes, but also they conducted English classes for those who work there in KCR. "To disseminate information a four stroke auto rickshaw (e - tuktuk) has been converted by local mechanics and out fitted with a mobile radio station, speakers, internet ready lap top computer, a power supply unit, a digital camera, a scanner, a CDMA phone and a battery operated printer, so that the local people can make full use of the mobile studio's capabilities, when it visits their community" (Carter, 2009).

"The biggest success stories have occurred with local youth who have eagerly embraced the new technology. Many through volunteering at the station were able to create their own web sites and to teach others how to use Kothmale computers. Another benefit has been the dissemination of human rights information to local communities through association with human rights activists and professionals at Colombo University whose human rights centre funds the programme, and development of programme which educate women about health and home related issues of concern to them" (Carter, 2009).

With the vision of 'an independent voice devoid of controls, for the voiceless, diverse communities', "SARU" community radio came into existence in 2005 under the Gemidiriya Community Development and Livelihood Improvement Project funded by the World Bank, launched in Polonnaruwa, which later on covered more than 1000 villagers. "During the project implementation in 1036 villages in seven districts, the project observed that, knowledge, attitudinal change, skills, and practice are vital factors for employment of poor communities, specially women and youth. A remote rural

community made a strong and committed effort from 2005 onwards to make the best use of the opportunity accorded to them with the above input to go through the whole learning process and engaged themselves in activities including community awareness creation, fund raising, content development, studio establishment etc.

***6. Identifying the day to day challenges the marginalized communities faced and assist them to overcome those problems (addresses the unmet needs of communities)***

At the time of Mahaweli community radio, “on a visit to a Mahaweli settlement in the North Central region, Sunil Wijesinghe (Station Manager at KCR) discovered that, many children did not have birth certificates. This means that they were not going to be claim their land from their parents when the time come. And also he discovered that many of the couples were not legally married. After discussing with the authorities and village elders, Sunil organized a mass wedding ceremony and surprisingly, even grandfathers and grand mothers came forth to solemnize their marriages. And long after this programme, the Mahaweli authority continued to receive requests from villages to solemnize weddings” (David, 2008).

In many of the regions, banking and loans are critical to the life of the villagers. But many farmers often default on their loans and stop all contacts with the bank. This was non productive for it, also preempts all future loans and banking relations. Harishchandra Perera, was able to convince farmers in Mahaweli system B to revisit banks after having been unable to pay the loans back due to low crop production. With the support of the Mahaweli programmes, a new dialogue was fostered between farmers and bank officials.

Another instance was Kothmale community radio used e –tuktuk to conduct community researches to find out the burning issues the community faced and to find out solutions for them. Once KCR helped to purchase a water tank for a Tamil tea state line houses community who were suffering without having access to enough water.

***7. Resolving the conflicts and disputes within the village (facilitate in having responsible and accountable citizens)***

Community radio is the most accessible and the most suitable medium for a rural community, as it doesn't require literacy to access it like print media require for. Most importantly, community radio is a kind of binding force of the community for much better livelihood.

Pulathisi Rawaya Community radio was established in 1995 under the control of SLBC specially to build peace in the remote North Central and Eastern regions as people of those areas were suffering a lot with the ethnic war.

During a direct interview with Prof. Wanigasundara (2018), he mentions that “There are some people in Jaffna district who live like they are isolated. They do not have a proper knowledge about the socio-cultural aspect of the rest parts of Sri Lanka. Their voices, opinions, likes and dislikes, problems are unheard. For a community like them, community radio is the answer”.

It is obvious that the worth of the presence of Community radio, the radio companion of the marginalized of the Sri Lanka is all time appreciable when considering its capacity to uplift the grassroots' lives, to inform, to educate and to entertain them, show them the path, create the cohesion and community consciousness in order to strengthen the particular community.

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