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Knocking the air out of a community's lungs

Last month, the Ministry of Communications of Information and Technology hiked the annual spectrum fee for radio by over 300 per cent without any formal consultation with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. How will a two month-old community radio in the country's remote hills continue its radical work and still pay up? Kareena N Gianani listens in and finds smothered voices that fear wipeout

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All appears calm high up in Chamba, a village in the Tehri Garhwal district in Uttarakhand. But 34 year-old Rajendra Negi, director of the region's community radio, Henvalvani, is bracing himself against brutal expletives by locals at his recording studio — which, he says, is just a fancy term for the cramped room with a single, large table holding recording equipment.



Bharti Kakkad interviews activists at the city's community radio, Jago Mumbai at Khar Pic/ Pradeep Dhivar

Word has spread in the valley that their two-month old community radio might shut down soon. In March, the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MOCIT) hiked the annual spectrum usage charge from Rs 19,700 to Rs 91,000, an amount humble set ups like Henvalvani cannot possibly gather, says a defeated Negi.

"We just found our voice, after a five year-long battle with the government to get a licence for community radio," says Negi. Henvalvani is yet to officially get the licence and all transmission is "test prasaran". N Ramakrishnan, director at Ideosync Media Combine, a media and development NGO, helped set up Henvalvani. Locals from 500 villages around Chamba, who tune in to Henvalvani for four hours every day, however, don't care about these technicalities. The antenna — slung on a welded pipe outside the recording studio — and the man slouching over the answering machine have changed their lives.

Giving the Garhwali a voice

In 2001, when Negi studied in Class 12, he started a youth group that had "had enough of what the media called news but which had no place for what was really relevant to their people." "We could hear the politicians' voices, but could

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they ever hear ours? We don't even get national papers up here and there is no Garhwali channel on Doordarshan either," he says. That's when, armed with tape recorders, he, along with a group of five went into people's homes and recorded their songs and folktales and sat in with the panchayats to record issues in Garhwali — a language under threat of extinction, according to the UNESCO — which were then broadcast at local gatherings.



Villagers listen to Radio Sangham in Zaheerabad in Andhra Pradesh. The community radio is run by Dalit women

And it changed their lives. Since its inception, the hour-long live calling slot at Henvalvani has received more than 4,953 calls from locals from villages Negi didn't even know existed in Uttarakhand. Recently, one Banali called Negi to complain about how the local school was run by only one teacher for 25 years. A few days later, the school got a new teacher. Last month, someone called to complain about the sweepers' strike. "People in this region are very particular about hygiene and the local had just sighted one polythene bag on the road when he called us.

Before I could even approach the authorities, I got another call from him 15 minutes later, telling me that the area was being cleaned." From home remedies (which are not synonymous with "tantra-mantra", says Negi) to organic farming techniques, the channel gives everyone a voice. Talented Garhwali singers have made their first recordings on Henvalvani and migrated to cities after bagging plum singing offers. A woman named Godambari Devi, who was beaten up by the Patwari police (local policemen) for exposing her brother-in-law's illegal alcohol trade, spoke on Henvalvani and got justice, says Negi. "It takes exactly one day to reach the closest village here, but Henvalvani has travelled where no local has yet."

Today, 16 reporters work with Henvalvani, which just about manages to make Rs 20,000 through local advertisements. Some local women who work in farms and do odd jobs and make Rs 150 a day themselves, unflinchingly donate Rs 1 to their beloved community radio. "Should I now ask them to raise almost Rs 1 lakh every year like this?" demands Negi.



Reporter cum producer Algole Narsamma at the Radio Sangham studio

Last week, locals in Chamba started a signature campaign to oppose the hike and plan to involve listeners from all the 500 villages who tune in to Hervalvani. It will take weeks, even months, but the locals are livid..." says Negi. "Yeh toh government ne ek dande se hamare haath hi kaat diye (the government has cut off our hands with one blow)."

Different wavelengths

Meanwhile, on Wednesday, Supriya Sahu, joint secretary, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, was busy in meetings with the MOCIT and community radio directors from across the nation. "This move will adversely impact the community radio and kill the voices of those who are already marginalised," she says.

"I have written to the MOCIT, who had apparently put up some consultation papers about the hike on their website. No one checked the website during that period, and because they saw no comments, they went ahead and announced it." The backlash, however, is too strong and Sahu says she is positive that the ministry will consider a rollback. The MOCIT was unavailable for comment.

Radio is home

"They better", says Algore Narsamma in halting Hindi over a telephone call from Zaheerabad. The remote village in Andhra Pradesh "did not even exist for the state" until a group of Dalit women started their community radio, Radio Sangham in 2009. The 26 year-old reporter at the community radio changes two buses and travels for three hours every day to reach the studio and generate over 60 hours of content every month that costs the station under Rs 10,000. An NGO called Deccan Development Society (DDS) in AP helped set up Radio Sangham, which broadcasts in the little-known Telugu dialect locals lightly refer to as 'Zaheerabadi'.



A reporter from Radio Ujjas interviews a local in Kachchh, Gujarat. The community radio, which got its licence in March, is run by women Pic Courtesy/Radio Ujjas

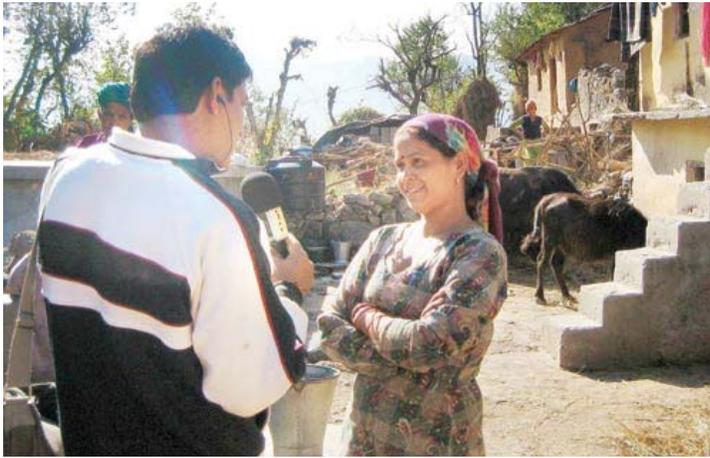
Over the telephone, Narsamma is silent. She is mentally translating her indignation in Zaheerabadi into Hindi, and finally says, "It has been a month but I haven't told the women about the hike, yet. They'll take to the streets because we know we cannot generate the amount." Narsamma has grown up with the community radio. Even before they got their licence, the Dalit women generated content and gave it to the DDS, who paid them for their efforts. The radio has wiped out humiliating memories of Narsamma's childhood — her parents being ridiculed as 'untouchables', the so-called 'high caste' Hindus blocking access to the sole borewell in the area, and constant hunger.

The first time Narsamma held a tape recorder in her hand during training, she pressed the wrong buttons every time, often forgot to hit the record button, and frequently came back with blank tapes. "But it was also the first time I felt free — even if it meant making mistakes," she says. Women's rights, gender violence, agricultural education, legal problems and issues of cultural identity are closest to her heart, and she designs the programmes accordingly. She often takes her two children to the radio station, and if running late, she gets her soiled clothes to wash them outside the station itself. "I call legal experts from nearby towns on the show. This has helped reduce domestic violence-related incidents here. Our listeners don't have to aimlessly go to courts anymore — they know their rights before they file a case."

Vision violated

In 2004, before the policy governing community radio came into effect (in 2006) TRAI had recommended that community radio providers must not be charged any licencing or spectrum fee, since the whole point of the exercise is to make the media accessible to people who don't usually have a say in their own matters. The move also goes against the 1995 Supreme Court judgement, which stated that radio waves must be owned by the people, for the people. K

Stalin, president of the Community Radio Forum says the move is ridiculous.



Reporters at the community radio, Hernalvani, in Chamba in Tehri Garhwal district in Uttarakhand run by Rajendra Negi Pic Courtesy/Hernalvani community radio

"Is the government trying to make money from this spectrum allocation, too? This is commodification of air waves. Will the government now apply the rules of the market to something that belongs to the community in the first place?" Community radio in Mumbai, too, feels stifled and helpless. Nitin Makasare, a 35 year-old who works at Jago Mumbai, a Khar-based community radio service, which received its licence in 2010, says he does not see his station running for more than six-12 months if the hike is not reversed. "The city will lose out on music, civic issue broadcasting, a platform for BMC school kids who don't usually find platforms...but does the government really care?"

How radio changed a region

In Kachchh, two month-old Radio Ujjas is already a name to reckon with. Started by a group of women who worked with the Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan (KMVS), the radio has listeners in 24 villages, and has helped women in matters of property, and agricultural issues. "This is our right. Why should we pay such a ridiculous amount for it?" asks Bharti Ahir, the 36 year-old senior member of the KMVS and reporter at Radio Ujjas.



Villagers listen to the community radio, Hernalvani, in Chamba in Tehri Garhwal district in Uttarakhand. Hernalvani got its licence in March, 2012 Pic Courtesy/Hernalvani community radio

More than a decade ago, when her mother literally pushed the painfully shy girl out of home, asking her to "do something with her life" and write for the KMVS magazine, also called Ujjas, Ahir landed up at a bus stop near the magazine's office. "I was so terrified that I had decided I would return home if the editor of the magazine didn't pick me up from the bus stop."

Ahir didn't have to return, and today, she helps the girls from her community by training them in media and social development. She is the only woman from her village, in at least three decades, who has managed to get a BA degree. Ahir, who never even came out of her room when they had guests over, now confidently "completes paperwork and formalities at airports to travel all across the country," she says. "If we lose Radio Ujjas, all our work will be wiped out in a day. We will be thrown backward by decades."

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Manish Kumar · Indian Institute of Technology Delhi

after reading above story , it seems that community radio is completely democratic way of reaching am adami. it is for the local people , by the local people. of the local people. it can help in decentralisation.If government raises the rent for community radio. it exposes the real faces of agenda of inclusive growth of gov.

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Gurgaon Ki Awaaz · Gurgaon, Haryana

An excellent story. Kudos to Kareena for reaching out to so many community voices and getting them into this story.

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Divya Wesley

Indeed well written, and bravo on getting in so many community voices!

Divya

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