

The Impact of FM Channels in Rural Assam: A Case Study on Adjoining Areas of Guwahati

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Abstract

The rise of broadcasting media in different parts of the country also helped in opening up radio station in Assam, the heartland of North-East India. It all started in Guwahati, in 1948, with the effort of first Chief Minister Gopinath Bordoloi. Since then there were quite a few radio station that were established in various towns and cities. But the beginning of the FM revolution in the country was something path breaking. Easy access to cheap radio receivers saw a resurgence of the radio in the public domain. Instead of being swept away by the cable revolution radio made its own rules and survived well despite many apprehensions from government quarters about its ability to sway people. From rickshaws to mobiles to cars blaring out hits after hits the FM revolution changed the way the urban landscape redefined its media habits. FM was in the pockets of everybody. But in the mad rush of the city dwellers craze for FM there always existed the silent listeners in the blind spot. Rural audiences became the consumer of such an urban phenomenon although based in rural areas by their existence nearer to cities. FM waves reaching out to these rural masses were never intended but only fallout of the geographic proximity. Instead of community radios FM was what they got. The present study was conducted in the rural villages in the vicinity of Guwahati. The empirical data was collected on the impact of FM radio on the lives of people of these villages. Instead of receiving messages that were nearer to their social situation they were bombarded with messages mainly meant for a far more urban audience. Social reality of both the sets of audience differs widely. But radio seems to be a great leveler of sorts in their case as it makes messages without keeping this fact in mind in the present case. And the rural audiences do not seem to mind the dose of entertainment that blares from their radio sets, of course with a few exceptions. The study throws up some important findings on the evolving listening habits of such people and also finds potential means of passing socially relevant messages that could be useful for the targeted audience otherwise not accessible.

Keywords: Radio, FM, Media habits, Rural media

One of the most important needs of a rural society is clearly development. Catering to the interests of the rural societies in a country like India needs interventions from every possible field. Media has been one such important tool that has been used for such purposes. With the democratization of the air waves by the landmark ruling passed by Supreme Court in 1995 broadcasting in India took a new turn. The colonial legacy of centralized broadcasting and rigid programming does not make national radio broadcasting an effective way of communicating with the diverse population of India (Eapen, 1995). Singhal and Rogers stressed on the futility of the programming of AIR: The programs of AIR consisted mostly news, music talks, discussion, dramas etc. Indian film song and commercials were considered as "low culture". It is very difficult to

understanding that there was no similarity of programs and its time of broadcasting. According to a survey records the talk programs broadcast for nearly 10% of total broadcast time is listen to only by 4% of population, 22% of total broadcasting time take for classical music ,has 10% of listeners. It is evident that film songs having been allowed by 5.4% of total time are more popular among the listeners. Therefore Indian listener turn shortwave radio sets to turn radio Ceylon (broadcasting from neighboring Sri Lanka) and to radio Goa (broadcasted from Goa, then Portuguese) in order to enjoy Indian film music, commercials and others entertainment programs. (2001)

The days of the single broadcaster was outnumbered and saw the rise of the private broadcasters within the country. The direct fallout was the increase in demand for obtaining community broadcasting rights by non-governmental organizations (NGO's) and development agencies, commonly known as Community Radio. The opening up of the airwaves saw also the rise in private participation in the yet virgin FM radio sector.

The privatization of FM radio stations shows that broadcasting is changing from government monopoly to highly commercialized operation (Noronha, 1999).

In today's society, the culture of being connected and informed has enveloped the entire human civilization and has successfully created a niche for itself. It has now become an integral part of our day-to-day life from which neither can one escape nor free itself from the impacts of these intrusions in our daily lives. All kinds of information, communication, entertainment, imagination, life style come via various forms of the media that we know today. They draw and constitute people's inner, private and public life, like fantasies, emotions, identities, thinking, behaviors, feelings, fears, desires, songs, dance, food habits, dress pattern etc.

Radio being a medium of the spoken word uses conversational, simple and direct language which can be easily be understood even by illiterate people. The effectiveness of radio measure from the fact that its rural program has been able to help the farmers in their agricultural works. India lives in village and therefore radio can be effective as an agent for development, especially in the rural areas. Rural areas do not have as many facilities for information and education as the urban areas do. It is one of the advantages of radio in India that as a wireless medium it can easily accessible in rural areas where electricity is scarce.

Ethnography of Listening

Assam had its first brush with radio as early as 1948 with the setting up of a radio station in Guwahati. Consequently several more radio stations came up in other important towns of the region, including other North Eastern states. With the government deciding on

distribution of licenses for setting up of FM stations saw the advent of FM which was a welcome change from the monopoly of the state broadcaster. There are now four FM station in Guwahati, Radio Ooo la la (91.9) was the first FM

station in entire North-East region followed by BIG FM (92.7), SFM which was recently renamed as Red FM (93.5) and Radio Gupshup.

This paper analyses the advent of FM radio in the social sphere of the lives of the people living in the areas adjoining the cities which inadvertently receive the signals of the FM stations. Fieldwork was done in the villages adjacent to Guwahati for a period of two weeks and data collated from a cross section of the population of ten villages. The ten villages included in the field research work, are from lower Assam. It includes the villages of Bagurihati, Gowalpara, Batsor, Baloa, Belsor, Jagara, Bishnupur of Nalbari district, Sarthebari of Barpeta district, and Bahjani, Upahupara of Mongoldoi district. All these villages are inhabited by people from the Assamese community with agriculture being the main occupation, while some of them are also engaged in small business. The need of radio for these societies is really felt. Radio forms an important part of these society, in their whole cycle of need for knowledge and information regarding their livelihood, government schemes, health awareness and the like. Although television was taking precedence over the radio, there are still practical problems like taking the TV to work that makes the radio the preferred mode of infotainment for these people.

The 'Spillover Effect'

The nature of radio programmes that are received by the people of these villages is not just a phenomenon in isolation. Radio signals generally spill over to the neighbouring areas and generally go unnoticed in most occasions. But the nature of the audience profile may vary drastically accordingly with the change in geography. Spillovers have always been used in the case of propaganda perpetuated by the state on a neighbouring country. Such forms of spillover of signals are common near international borders. But FM signals pose a peculiar situation of entering geographical spaces farther away from the intended. As such the situation that transpires is further away from what can be generally explained in terms of social theory. In the context of the present research too it was observed that the spillover of FM to the rural study areas was a welcome addition to the mode of infotainment already available to the masses.

There are many reasons behind the popularity of FM radio in these areas as stated by different people during the fieldwork:

The most important reason is that it plays songs most of the time. At every moment people can listen the song they like, if a listener does not want to listen a song playing in a radio station then he or she can tune it to another station. (20-year-old-youth)

It (FM) gives us disturbance free sound, where music, voices and messages come clearly. Some of us listen to it only for time pass. (25-year-old-man)

TV is not an option always as the electricity plays hide and seek with us. At least FM is reliable. (50-year-old-man)

Everybody had their own reasons to be attached to the FM. What was pretty interesting to note that these FM programmes are made for a city centric audience, the language generally spoken on the shows are a mix of Assamese, English and Hindi keeping in mind the upwardly mobile target audience. But this alien mix of languages even to the rural audience surprisingly was nothing unnatural. The audience had learnt to appropriate themselves and connect with the idea of a language that is not theirs. The breaking down of the notion of language for the purpose of

communication is an important development in a state where every attempt at ethnic assertion of identity is carried out through language and more importantly through the various media outlets:

There is a standard of Assamese language that they use in All India Radio, Guwahati, but never find it in FM radio. (40-year-old-man)

People do not seem to mind the language of the RJ's as long as the programmes are comprehensible.

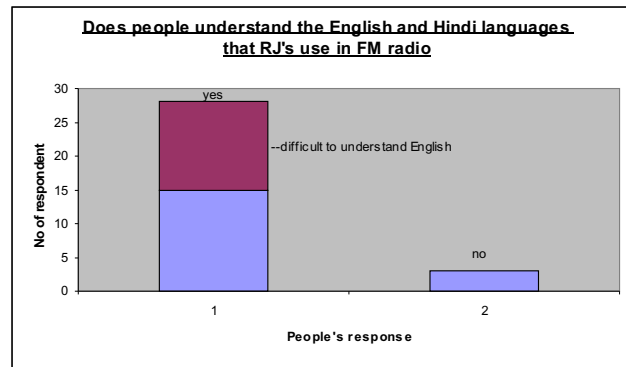


Figure 1: Graph showing people's ability to understand language of RJ's

The spread of the radio in a strange way has lot been attributed to the penetration of mobile phones in recent times. In fact both mobile phones and FM have helped each others cause in a parasitic way. The lack of electricity in these parts is a common phenomenon in every part of the state and mobile phones negate this problem, also bringing in other benefits such as portability. The easy availability of cheap China made FM radio sets available at every street corner sometimes with price tags as low as Rupees twenty five also helped the cause. For the poor farmer who could not afford mobile phones these FM sets were quite handy, and served his purpose well.

The FM concept has gained rapid popularity rapidly in the last few years although the AIR Guwahati channel was always there. The programming style and content indeed was a break from the old. Very interestingly quite a few people opined that FM radio was not serving any real purpose apart from entertainment. While few people opined that FM was not a distraction to their daily work even though they carry their own radio sets to places of work.

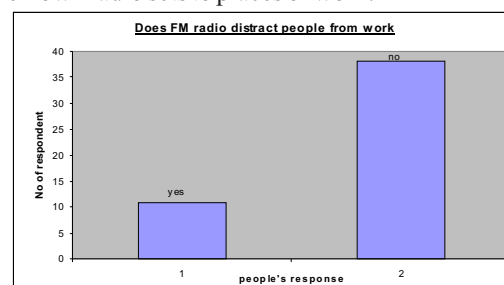


Figure 2: FM as not distracting people from work.

In spite of mass media's effort to promote 'development' through programmes on agriculture, health and population control, the achievement of development has been slow (Yadava, 1996). But in reality FM has hardly catered to themes of development in their programmes. Entertainment takes up most of the air time in their slots. Basic dissemination of ideas which are development related thus suffers in constituencies as fieldwork in the study areas show.

What may be more useful would have been the concept of community radio, which would have made community specific programmes aimed at the developmental aspects. But listening habits as was found had drastically moved on from other avenues to FM. The basic question that arises is how to best pass on messages to the people. FM being city centric is handicapped by its inability to cater to both the population at the same time.



Figure 3: Preferred channel of the people

While at the same time the popularity of FM cannot be overlooked in comparison to AIR. People in the study area seem to be influenced so much by the methods of the FM that AIR has taken a backseat. The problem still remains of spreading of information. AIR might as well take a cue from the FM channels and remodeling their style of programming to suit the demands of the listeners and which might also include information for these societies interspersed with general entertainment fare. The importance of entertainment fare as perceived from the responses is deemed to be an important factor.

Conclusion

Today, FM radio is seen as a medium to entertain and inform people. It is effective in urban areas as well as in rural areas. People in urban areas in private car or city bus or even on their mobiles listen to traffic news, weather news etc. in FM radio. Rural areas do not have the as many facilities of entertainment and information as the urban areas have. FM is just one of a few that they have easy access to. Therefore FM becomes very relevant medium to get entertainment, knowledge and communicate with the people. From the cultural studies perspective, it has changed the way people live their life. More or less it has an impact on society. Audiences have come closer than never before. The interactive nature of the FM programmes where listeners can call up the RJ's and ask questions and request songs makes it an unique experience for the listeners. Rural or urban the gap between the listeners choice has reduced drastically. Even the rural audience is fed with the same fare of songs from films mostly from bollywood, which few years back would have been unheard of in these parts. The homogenization of the rural audience with that of their urban counterparts is thus an ongoing process of change and appropriation with the mainstream.

The deep impact of FM radio on the people of the study area is observed. People apply the advices in their life that is given by the RJ's and expertise invited by them. Bulu Talukdar, a teacher said, "I go out from home after hearing my zodiac prediction, especially I wear dress which the FM radio announces as my lucky colour of the day." The deep impact is just an example of the effectiveness of FM as a means for knowledge and information. In a country where development is what needs to be addressed to in all spheres of society, FM can play a major role it is felt. The sheer popularity of FM even in rural areas makes it responsible to

cater to all its listeners and their demands. Social messages of health, family planning, dissemination of local culture etc. should form an important part of such channels. As alternate means of media is almost absent in the study area such as community radio and the almost negligible influence of AIR, the onus is on FM to cater to the vacuum that exists.

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