COMMUNITY RADIO IN SOUTH ASIA

RECLAIMING THE AIRWAVES

Edited by
Kanchan K. Malik and Vinod Pavarala

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This book explores the state of community radio, a significant independent media movement that began about two decades ago, in different parts of South Asia.

The volume outlines the socioeconomic and historical contexts for understanding the evolution and functioning of community radio in an increasingly globalised media environment. It provides a ring-side view of how various countries in South Asia have formulated policies that enabled the emergence of this third sector of broadcasting (public and private being the other two) through radio, rendering the media ecology in the region more pluralistic and diverse. The chapters in the volume, interspersed by practitioner perspectives, discuss a range of key issues related to community radio: radio policies, NGOisation of community radio, spectrum management and democratisation of technology, disasters/emergencies, gender issues, sustainability, and conflicts.

One of the first of its kind, this volume will appeal to scholars and researchers of community media and independent media studies, cultural studies, as well as sociology and social anthropology, and South Asian studies.

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When we started our community radio journey in early 2000, it was still a phantom we were chasing across South Asia. Even as private television and radio made their entry into the mediascapes of various countries in the region, radio frequencies were, for the most part, kept out of reach of grassroots communities. While in India the civil society movement for reclaiming the airwaves had just begun at a small village in Telangana, there were a few stations up and running in Nepal, including the much-vaunted Radio Sagarmatha in the Kathmandu Valley, even without a formal community radio policy. In neighbouring Sri Lanka, apart from the experiment conducted against the background of the famed Mahaweli Development Programme, the largest such programme in the country's history, there was only the Kothmale community radio station in the central hill region, celebrated, despite it being an affiliate of the state broadcaster, for its community broadcasting ethos and the Radio Browsing programme.

Twenty years later, we have over 500 community radio stations in India and Nepal altogether and another 25 or so in Bangladesh and Bhutan (which, again, started its community radio adventure without a specific policy). Nepal and Sri Lanka, too, struggling as they are with civil strife and constitutional uncertainties, have yet to forge a policy facilitating the emergence of community radio in their countries, although it has not stopped the former from boasting of a sizable number of community radio stations within the broad ambit of private broadcasting. One can say with certainty that the worldwide deregulation and liberalisation processes in the broadcasting arena have also had a perceptible impact on the South Asian radio scenario, which began moving towards third-tier community broadcasting in fits and starts.

This collection of chapters by academics, activists, and advocates from South Asia addresses a range of issues that have arisen over the last two decades in the community radio domain: the pitfalls of the dominant development orientation, the challenges of ensuring diversity in programming and management, the struggles for further liberalisation of state policies, the conundrum of sustainability, the negotiations over technological choices, and the trials and tribulations over conflicts and natural disasters. We are indeed grateful to all our contributors for sharing their valuable perspectives on community radio and helping us piece together the multi-layered and complex reality of community broadcasting in

Ganesh at the Department of Communication and the UNESCO Chair always provide crucial support for project management and office administration, without which we would be in considerable disarray.

Kanchan K. Malik: A substantial part of the work in bringing together and editing this volume happened during the vacation time I spent at home in Lucknow, as my father, the late Mr. K.R. Kumar, and my mother, Mrs. Kiran Kumar, provided me with the same privileges I got back when I was preparing for the board examinations. Without all the good food, the complete freedom of working hours, and the lack of demands placed on me by them, the book would not have been possible. Also, for any task I take up, I draw positive energy from my sister, Kavita Mohindra, who has the knack of making me feel good about the work I am doing, helping me give it my best and take pride in accomplishing it. Parul Malik, when you have a daughter as precious, endowed, loving, supportive, and caring as her, you seldom need to look elsewhere for inspiration. I want to make a special mention here of my friendly neighbours, the Das family (especially Meera and Ina), for being unconditionally affectionate towards me and ever so considerate about my work commitments and schedules. In addition to the PhD scholars named earlier, who have done research or projects with us on community radio, I am also thankful to Ram Awtar Yadav, Annapurna Sinha, Anila Backer, and Sreeju Viswanadh, my PhD scholars working in other spheres, for their intellectual companionship and encouragement for my academic pursuits.

Vinod Pavarala: Having a fellow academic as a spouse means that Aparna Rayaprol has to bear with a lot of my community media angst and provide critical inputs that have always come in handy. My daughter, Saranya, who was barely in primary school when our first community radio book came out, now goes to college. She follows all my public engagements related to community media and, I suspect, quietly admires the work I do ("So, you are talking about community radio *again*?").

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Kanchan K. Malik
Vinod Pavarala

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COMMUNITY RADIO IN SOUTH ASIA

A roadmap for media democracy

Kanchan K. Malik and Vinod Pavarala

Over the years, community radio (CR) has gained credence worldwide as an alternative to the mainstream broadcast media, as an entity owned and managed by marginalised groups, and as a tool for sustaining development, giving voice to the voiceless and contributing towards strengthening the communication rights of people. Many countries in South Asia, especially those who are members of the intergovernmental regional body, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, the Maldives, and Afghanistan, have been making efforts to promote community broadcasting as a legitimate sector within their respective mediascapes, with a view to further media democracy, social change, and freedom of expression.[1]

There is a lot of buzz around CR in the whole of South Asia today, with India leveraging its potential in facilitating electoral literacy during the 2019 General Elections, besides other projects that seek to augment democracy and social change. Some examples of these include Bangladesh utilising the potential of community radio stations for mainstreaming participation of women, youth, and marginalised populations in national development; Nepal seeking a distinct policy that recognises its 300-strong community radio sector; Sri Lanka lobbying the government to set up autonomous community radio stations; and Bhutan, the Maldives, Afghanistan, and Pakistan experimenting with the concept to explore its long-term prospects in their respective contexts.

However, the beginnings of this ferment for a CR sector in the various South Asian countries can be traced back to a little over two decades ago, when the Bangalore Declaration was signed in India in 1996, followed by the Pastapur Declaration in 2000, both advocating for a third, independent tier of broadcasting, outside of the state and the market, that would signify democratic media spaces. Representatives from Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka were also present when these two declarations were formalised. Even before this, there was a community radio station set up to serve settlers in the Mahaweli Development Project in Sri Lanka in 1980, but as it functioned within the state broadcasting system, it is not considered to be genuine CR even though its community-based

programme production process was a celebrated approach during the early period of the development of CR in South Asia.[2] Although Nepal did not have a policy for CR at that juncture (and is still struggling for one), the establishment of Radio Sagarmatha in 1997 in the Kathmandu valley as the first ever community radio station in South Asia anticipated the eventual freeing of airways from government monopoly in the region[3]

Around the same time, in India, too, initiatives by grassroots non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as the Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan (KMVS) in Gujarat, Alternative for India Development (AID) in Jharkhand, Deccan Development Society (DDS) in Andhra Pradesh, and Mysore Resettlement and Development Agency (MYRADA), in partnership with VOICES in Karnataka, served as a conduit for propelling the formulation of CR policy in India, which in turn sketched the roadmap for media democracy and giving voice to the people (Pavarala and Malik, 2007). At the Kathmandu South Asian community radio practitioners and policy makers meeting, held in February 2002, it was resolved that in light of recent trends in the region towards deregulation and liberalisation of media ownership, "community radio has an important role to play in giving expression to the community's needs and aspirations in order to make development efforts meaningful and relevant."[4]

This book is an effort to understand the state of community radio in South Asia through a perusal of its historiography, policy processes, characteristics, and underlying principles, in addition to its linkages with both the conceptual issues of media democracy and the pragmatic concerns of daily practice and outcomes. Amongst the chapters included in the book are those that analyse the pressing policy concerns crucial for the sustenance of community broadcasting in the region and link them back to the media environments in different national contexts. While some of the themes examined in the book are technology-centred, such as spectrum allocation and transmission issues, others deal with the day-to-day practices and struggles related to the community radio sector – for example around issues of licencing, capacity-building, networking, sustainability, and inclusivity. The subjects tackled in the book also explore CR vis-à-vis discourses around gender, identity, ethnicity, and multiculturalism, in the context of social change and participatory governance. CR is a medium supported by multilateral agencies and one that requires constant negotiation between the state and civil society for its existence. All the chapters included in the book seek to make theoretical interlinkages that contribute towards a more nuanced understanding of community radio in South Asia within the context of media globalisation and its ramifications for access and control of communication spaces.

Community radio in South Asia – resilience and reform

The socio-political, economic, and cultural diversity of South Asia is suitably mirrored in the community radio scenarios found in the region. With over 300 community radio stations to flaunt, including the first ever established in the region, Nepal exhibits assorted ownership models, including by NGOs,

cooperatives, local government authorities, and even commercial organisations, but the country still awaits a clear-cut policy on community radio (ACORAB, 2015). In India, the policy guidelines for community radio that were issued in 2003 allowed only educational institutions to set up stations. This was modified in 2006 to include other civil society organisations, with over 200 CR stations today. Bangladesh also witnessed a decade-long advocacy effort by development organisations, and the policy for community radio was announced in 2008, leading to the 17 CR stations currently on air today. Active deliberations have been held in the other South Asian countries, including Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives (with Pakistan and Afghanistan also weighing options), and efforts are on to convince policymakers of the exciting prospects and variety community radio can bring to their respective national development goals and expanding media outlets.

The entire South Asian region, at present, is going through a period of unprecedented economic, social, and political shifts and challenges. While a few of the countries are dealing with constitutional complexities and political upheavals, others are having to deal with the difficulties of reconstruction after years of conflict played havoc with their economy and the social circumstances of their citizens. While in some countries the materialisation of democracy is taking forever, in the so-called established democracies, such as India, the governments in power are struggling to gain legitimacy from people who are raking up issues of livelihoods, corruption, and gender justice. There are countries in the region that are still grappling with providing basic entitlements for their citizens, such as peace and safety, affordable housing, basic education for both boys and girls, and food security. In such a cultural and social context, people's voices and ability to influence decisions that affect their lives become significant, and so do community radios, which are owned, produced, and operated by the people themselves.

However, the formation of a dynamic and autonomous community radio sector in South Asia seems to be perpetually "in progress," in the sense of being a slow/gradual revolution that has not yet managed to fully realise its potential to open up and democratise the media landscape of the South Asian region (Pavarala, 2015). There is an urgent need to facilitate a policy environment in the South Asian region that enables access to media by people and thereby recognises their voices. This will help to address the issue of "voice poverty," i.e. of denial of voice as a consequence of systemic restrictions on modes of self-expression that provide people opportunities to participate in decision-making (Tacchi, 2009). Although CR has become a reality in some of the countries of South Asia, it is not difficult to identify the challenges that make the sustainability of this third tier of broadcasting a daunting task in the region. Hurdles are many, including bureaucratic delays in the issuing of licences, prohibitive costs of technology, vanishing spectrum for communities, and declining volunteer support. While some of these are addressed in various chapters of the book, let us consider here the issue of the macro-level institutional environment, which forms the basis of the democratic and sustainable community radio sector in South Asia.

The democracy dividend: To nourish a sustainable, autonomous, and vibrant community radio sector in South Asia, it is imperative that the democratic ecosystem in the region is reinforced. Political scientists speak of six different models of democracy: electoral, liberal, majoritarian, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian (Coppedge et al., 2011). Following this typology, we can affirm that, in spite of the chequered trajectory of democracy in South Asia, the region has not been found deficient in substantive and procedural democracy. However, for community radio to find fertile ground, take root, and grow in a healthy manner, it is essential that ruling dispensations promote a concept of democracy that is more participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian (Pavarala, 2015). The need is not just to build the scaffolding of procedural democracy but also to imbibe the soul of democracy through greater citizen engagement and participation in the rough-and-tumble issues that matter to them. Only then will the domain of community radio and alternative media get energised and reinvigorated.

In Nepal, with the volatile political situation not permitting the formal adoption of the new Constitution until four years ago, community radio does not have recognition as a distinct entity or a clear policy regulating it (Raghunath, 2014). In Sri Lanka, the much applauded Kothmale community radio station (an initiative of the state broadcaster, Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation), backed by UNESCO, never paved the way for establishing a sovereign tier of community broadcasting. The extended years of civil war and the steady dwindling of civil society in the country have made it quite challenging for Sri Lanka to evolve an autonomous community radio space. After the presidential elections in 2015, new possibilities opened up for civil society, and yet there remain persistent human rights concerns (Civicus, 2019). In this atmosphere, some Sri Lankan activists have expressed fresh hopes for the emergence of genuine community radio in Sri Lanka (Rasmin, 2015). In Bangladesh, incidents of violence targeting independent secular bloggers and media persons have been interpreted as suggestive of a divided political milieu that is muzzling free speech and expression and upsetting deliberative democracy (Civicus, 2019). In Bhutan, there have been attempts to kick-start the community radio sector in the country after the transition from an absolute monarchy and subsequent progression towards electoral democracy. In India, which boasts of an energetic civil society exercising a constructive role in social movements and representing the concerns of the marginalised, there are disenchantments within the CR sector because not only are the numbers growing at a slow rate (barely reaching 250 compared with the original projection of about 4,000), but there are also fewer licences granted to civil society organisations, with a majority being handed over to educational institutions.

Narrow development perspective: While community radio is identified with civil society groups, and NGOs are the legitimate actors in the establishment and operation of community radio in all countries where the sector is recognised, this phenomenon, too, has led to some anomalies. Whereas "media as a tool for development" is a justifiable vision for community radio, the construction of community radio as simply a means to communicate "development" makes it fall into the trap of the post-colonial nation-building project in which media are

mobilised for "national development" (Schramm, 1964). This dominant paradigm of development communication involves a top-down linear transmission of information to people who are considered passive recipients. The NGOs then take on a pedagogical role of proffering appropriate instruction to the masses, giving short shrift to people's right or ability to express themselves as citizens or failing to recognise people's role as active drivers of change.

The compulsions of financial sustenance, the policy accepting only registered NGOs as eligible applicants, and the overall developmental imperative for the sector have resulted in the NGOs playing a primary role in directing the growth of community radio in India. While some of them adhere to the democratic and participatory principles of genuine grassroots community radio in India, other NGOs entering the arena have transformed themselves into development diplomats of sorts, extracting grants from various sources to further their own programmatic agendas. Such initiatives end up adopting methods that are not participatory or people-centric and come under pressure from donors to demonstrate the impact of their work on large numbers of people. Pavarala has written elsewhere and in this volume about the NGOisation of community radio, which, amongst other things, leads to "a stultifying adoption of standardised genres and formats" (Pavarala, 2015: 15).

In Bangladesh, where community radio is conceptualised predominantly as a tool for development and disaster management, the situation is not much different, especially as NGOs that form a crucial part of the social sector depend heavily on international donors. Nepal, by contrast, is witnessing widespread politicisation of community radio in the absence of a regulatory framework guiding its CR sector, and there are clearly distinguishable ties with established political parties that are influencing the editorial policies of the stations (Pringle and Subba, 2007). When NGOs, or even CRs, are used increasingly by the government for service delivery, there is always a danger that they may be reduced to what Geoffrey Wood (1997) characterised as a "franchise state," losing, thereby, their activist political edge and sovereign voice. Therefore, if community radio initiatives are to result in the forging of a truly democratic public sphere, with space for the articulation of marginalised voices, the civil society groups and advocates in South Asia must work towards shifting the focus of the CR movement from a purely developmentalist agenda towards a more radical, communication rights paradigm.

A matter of right: According to the World Association of Christian Communicators (WACC, 2006: 67), communication rights "go beyond mere freedom of opinion and expression, to include areas such as democratic media governance, participation in one's own culture, linguistic rights, rights to enjoy the fruits of human creativity, to education, to privacy, peaceful assembly, and self-determination. These are questions of inclusion and exclusion, of quality and accessibility. In short, they are questions of human dignity." Thus, community radio must go beyond just providing communicative spaces where people can openly participate in discussion and debates and act as arenas for power contestation to challenge the spiral of silence induced by standardised global media. However, the political anomie in Nepal meant that no progressive regulatory

framework could surface for shepherding community radio. In Sri Lanka, the protracted internecine conflict did not allow the government to even concede to the need for community radio in the country. Bhutan, too, has not ventured on the path of formulating any resolute policy for community radio but has introduced the process for setting up a few community radio stations within the existing regulatory framework. Even in those South Asian countries where there is a formal recognition of the community radio sector and an inclination to give it legislative sanction, the prevailing policy provisions continue to be restrictive.

A critical part of communication rights is the right to report freely on one's own environment, independent of state or commercial controls. News and current affairs are still on the prohibited list of content on community radio in India – perhaps the only instance of this kind of policy outside of the subcontinent. The Bangladesh community radio policy, modelled closely after the Indian one, also has a restrictive "development" function for community radio. At a time when news is permitted to be transmitted through all kinds of media, radio still faces this anachronistic ban. It is ironic that in some African countries the policy "requires" stations licenced as community radio to devote minimal time to broadcasting news and current affairs to its audiences. Genilo et al. (2013: 67) have pointed out that despite the apparent enthusiasm for the medium, the Bangladeshi authorities continue to be wary of community radio as a "potential source of opposition and dissent." It perhaps explains, in part, the cautious approach and "planned growth" of community radio in the country, with only a couple of new community radio stations going on air in the last five years despite promises to permit a community radio station at every upazilla (488 sub-districts). In Bhutan, too, there is a tentative opening for about eight organisations to start community radio stations, with some support for capacity-building and technology being provided by UNESCO. The approach by the Bhutan government can be aptly summarised as "extreme caution," with no transparent, publicly announced policy under which organisations can apply for CR licences.

Reaching the unreached: The somewhat constrained and guarded opening of airwaves in South Asia can also be attributed to apprehensions about security arising out of disruptive activities of a variety of non-state actors in the region. While ethnic conflict has for decades entirely obstructed the advancement of community radio in Sri Lanka, other countries of the region are also vexed by similar circumstances. Although scholars from several regions of the world have carried out research that validates the peace-building role of community media in conflict prone or post-conflict societies, most governments in South Asia remain suspicious of its potential. Clemencia Rodriguez (2011), in her exceptional study on community media in Colombia, provides a persuasive rationale to substantiate the position that citizen media help communities "reconstitute symbolic universes that have been disrupted by violence."

The Ministry of Home Affairs in India, with a tendency to filter everything through an internal security prism, has only recently begun, albeit hesitantly, to shed its opposition to permitting licence applications for community radio from regions in the country it classifies as "disturbed areas." This step has come

about as a consequence of assertions by those advocating for democratic media that many of the places that are denied licences are the so-called "media-dark" areas in historically deprived rural or border regions, where the provision of community-based media service is the fundamental obligation of the state. However, recent tensions between different countries of the region and continued civil strife within the various countries of South Asia make one pessimistic that the security discourse that defines the lives of citizens in these countries will recede any time soon.

Resources for sustainability: Sustainability of community radio as a social entity was always meant to be considered a matter of practices that would draw on social and human capital. However, a principal focus of all sustainability deliberations within the sector in South Asia is on the physical and financial resources of the stations. Raghu Mainali (2008: 46), a leading crusader for community radio in Nepal, mentions with a tinge of unease that in their "stampede for resources," stations make liberal concessions with the "spirit and values" of community radio, triggering even the "death" of the sector. The exorbitant cost of establishing and maintaining community radio has made the sector rely heavily on state schemes, NGO projects, and donor aid, all of which have tangible consequences for the editorial freedom of the CR stations. India witnessed a well-meaning attempt by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB) to address the matter of financial sustainability of community radio through a package to empanel stations to obtain government advertisements (ads) that propagate state welfare schemes and their accomplishments. The low rates at which these so-called public service ads are supplied and the steps involved in procuring the remuneration may not have disentangled the sustainability conundrum, but they have led to the community radio sector, ideally envisioned as forging alternative public spheres to counter hegemonic overtures of the state, seeking government handouts to essentially promote its achievements and agenda – a function that state-owned radio is well primed to perform.

A Community Radio Support Scheme was also introduced by MIB to subsidise the acquisition of equipment by stations, but the Delhi-centric processing mechanisms, as well as the copious prerequisites, did not make it popular with CR stations. Public funding of community radio is a desirable phenomenon practised in other parts of the world, too, but it has been effective only where it is autonomously administered and government control of the pursestrings is minimal. In India (and also in Bangladesh), government departments and ministries have to move beyond viewing community radio as a cost-effective, last-mile delivery service for information on their development schemes and programmes. The onus is also on CR stations to codify their own terms and not become, under pressure of financial sustainability, a willing partner in taking on an uncritical transmission role.

Culture of self-regulation and peer review: Finally, as the South Asian region gears up for a network of thousands of autonomous community radio stations, it becomes important to define a set of codes of practice for this third tier of broadcasting so that it contributes to the strengthening of civil society and democracy in the region. It is also essential to enhance the integrity of the sector

by adhering strictly to the core non-negotiable principles that define the sector, such as community ownership, not-for-profit status, and community participation in production and management. Thus, CR stations in South Asia must identify self-regulatory norms and make ethical choices that put them in a strong position to resist external regulation (Malik, 2015). Any steps to bolster the social and financial sustainability of community radio in South Asia must also be accompanied by periodic performance audits of radio stations.

Anxious about encouraging accountability to the community amongst CR stations and ensuring adherence to the foundational tenets of community radio, the Community Radio Support Centre in Nepal brought out the Community Radio Performance Assessment System (CR-PAS) in 2011. Positioning it as an index for "process assessment" instead of "impact assessment," CR-PAS is intended to assist stations in periodically assessing their own strengths and weaknesses (CRSC, 2011). Similarly, in India, the UNESCO Chair on Community Media developed, through an elaborate, participatory process, a toolkit (Pavarala et al., 2014) for self-assessment and peer review of community radio stations and also trained a cadre of peer reviewers to facilitate its application at the station level. A sector-wide peer review process that was facilitated by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting in India recommended the use of the toolkit. The toolkit has since been adopted by the community radio sector in Bangladesh and also validated for use in East Africa. Aimed at continually improving community radio and instilling a culture of self-assessment amongst radio stations, these reflexive exercises not only help ward off misdirected efforts at external monitoring by the state but also create conditions for the long-term sustainability of the sector in South Asia (Pavarala, 2015).

To sum up, creating a favourable environment for nurturing a sustainable community radio sector in South Asia requires a strengthening of participatory and deliberative democracy, an energetic civil society, avoidance of the drawbacks of NGOisation, advocacy for communication rights that goes beyond the development discourse, lifting restrictions on news and political content, catering to areas underserved by media, recognising CR's role in conflict resolution and peace-building, setting up an autonomously administered public fund to support CR, and promoting a culture of self-regulation and peer review amongst community radio stations.

Borrowing from Atton (2002: 8), the authors understand that even within South Asia "there is much heterogeneity (of styles, of contributions, of perspectives)" in the area of community radio. Thus, even though the genealogy of community radio in most South Asian countries relies on distinctions such as that between state-owned and independent or commercial and non-commercial or development and entertainment media, the identity of community radio in the region could best be described through a rhizomatic approach to alternative media as theorised by Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier (2008). This approach acknowledges that alternative media tend to cut across borders and build linkages not only with other civil organisations but also with sections of the state and the market. This does not necessarily make them lose their identity or become incorporated but enables them to sometimes critique hegemony

vehemently and other times to strategically use and abuse the dominant order (Bailey et al., 2008).

Thus, pursuing the notion of rhizomatic media, and given the challenges discussed earlier in this section, community radio in South Asia must aim to be a form of mediated communication that is an alternative, not only in relation to the mainstream but also in its potential to voice ideas that are significant and distinctive in their own right and that may not be necessarily counter-hegemonic but still critical to the lives of different communities (Bailey et al., 2008). The resilience of the sector does not lie in being alternative per se, but in reclaiming the spaces that allow for a renewal of what constitutes the practices that empower ordinary people who do not have access to media and the public sphere.

About the book

In this book, we have endeavoured to integrate content that creatively captures the hubbub around community radio for a holistic understanding of the sector in the South Asian region. Structurally, the book is distributed into three parts. The first section walks the reader through an analytical policy terrain of community radio in South Asia through chapters that closely assess the policy ecology in India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. The second part comprises chapters that contend with the macro-level, techno-social, and politico-economic concerns faced in the implementation and practice aspects of community radio by the sector as a whole in the region. The third and final segment of the book deals with ground-level experiences, and the chapters foreground subjectivities and lived realities faced by grassroots stakeholders of specific community radio stations. What follows is a sneak peek of the chapters included in the book to give an idea of the range and complexity of issues dealt with in the pages of this volume.

Preeti Raghunath (Chapter 2) attempts to go beyond the traditional approach to the study of community radio policy. Using critical policy ethnography as a methodology, the chapter unravels the policy history and practice of community radio policymaking in India. She attempts to bring to the fore the deliberative process of policymaking for CR in India and examines the various actors involved in policy formulation within the larger context of the broadcasting sector in the country.

Positing Bangladesh as a developing South Asian nation facing increasing social, economic, political, and cultural development challenges at the rural level, **Mohammad Sahid Ullah** (Chapter 3) looks at community radio as having emerged in response to these challenges. The Bangladesh CR policy adopted in 2008 states that CR stations may be established and operated in the oral languages of "marginalised communities as well as with their full participation and management, which will reflect their hopes and aspirations, the indigenous knowledge, resource and culture of local communities and will combine modern knowledge and technologies." How does Bangladesh incorporate a participatory approach in CR planning, management, and programming to raise

the voice of marginal communities? This is a major concern of the author, and he argues that community ownership and participation, capacity-building, fair operations, and sustainability are the crucial areas that must be addressed.

Nepal has been a pioneer in establishing community radio in South Asia, and **Sudhamshu Dahal** (Chapter 4) claims that it was the presence of alternative voices that significantly contributed to the emergence of community-specific radio stations in the country as a potential tool for community empowerment. The 2015 Constitution of Nepal abandoned the idea of "nation" as a monolithic entity founded in one language, one religion, one identity, and one culture, with the monarchy as the unifying force, and instead espoused an idea of "nation" as a dialogue amongst diverse ethnic and cultural identities. This background, conducive to openness and democracy, was reflected in the establishment of citizen media by the various communities in Nepal, who were previously marginalised.

On the policy front in Sri Lanka, **M.C. Rasmin and W.A.D.P. Wanigasundera** (Chapter 5) point out that the Mahaweli and Kothmale community radio projects are no longer functional in Sri Lanka and the stations labelled as CR, such as Uva Radio, Dambana, and Pirai, are controlled by the state broadcaster. Gemidiriya Foundation established Saru Praja Radio as a community-driven community radio station, but it could not survive beyond the test transmission. The authors examine the need for legal recognition of CR and also identify the impediments in the path of community ownership. Putting this in the historical context of how CR in Sri Lanka was always under the control of SLBC, inhibiting any efforts to initiate a truly community-owned CR sector in the country, the authors advocate for freeing of airwaves, to be taken up by civil society groups, so that community radio can emerge as an autonomous tool of community communication.

Vinod Pavarala (Chapter 6) makes the case that civil society organisations, media activists, and advocates, who ran a campaign for the opening up of airwaves from the mid-1990s to early 2000s, emphasised the potential of using community radio for development, rather than foregrounding what seemed to be the more radical framework of communication rights. However, the research done by the author and his colleagues at the UNESCO Chair on Community Media compelled him to reflect critically on the role of civil society organisations in the development of community radio in India. This chapter critiques the pitfalls of NGOisation of community radio, with some concrete cases, and explores the possibilities for saving CR from being beholden to NGO goals and donor agency agendas and rendering it a true people's medium.

Electromagnetic spectrum and its use are often seen as a technical issue, without going into the social and cultural implications of the media and communication sector that uses spectrum as its backbone for wireless distribution. However, **Ram Bhat** (Chapter 7) maintains that technology is rarely neutral or innocent; rather, it is a reflection of the wider political economy and discursive formations surrounding and shaping all technology. This chapter examines the politics and design of spectrum allocation for community radio and traces how it shapes some of the key policy and programming issues. While the chapter focuses specifically on community radio spectrum allocation in India, some

of the processes and principles that guide spectrum allocation policies could be used to draw broader conclusions about how technologies are deployed as well as their social, political, economic, and cultural consequences in any given society.

Hemant Babu's chapter (Chapter 8) examines the paradoxical emergence of democratic and inclusive media in a monopolistic and exclusive technology environment in the context of community radio in South Asia. In its philosophy and practice, community radio promises to give equal access and control to communities. However, the medium is heavily dependent on technology, which is historically known for creating a hegemonic relationship amongst practitioners and technology providers. This has been evident in the growth – or lack thereof – in the community radio sector in South Asia. The chapter stresses that, for independent media, open and independent technology is an absolute prerequisite. The chapter attempts a comparative analysis of regulatory approaches towards transmission and audio technology prevalent in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal.

Kanchan K. Malik (Chapter 9) delves into the conceptual insights that critically assess the dynamics of gender and participatory development as well as the complex process of women's empowerment in South Asia. The chapter presents an overview of the engagement of women with community radio in South Asia. The chapter looks at the capacity-building efforts being carried out to mentor women to participate in programme production and management of CR stations in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, even as there exist challenges posed by social structures within the communities that hinder the construction of democratic "we" spaces by women. She concludes by arguing that CRs within South Asia, as well as globally, must strive to become instruments that boost the complex process of women's empowerment through strengthening what the author calls the "voice capability" amongst women.

Ashish Sen (Chapter 10) writes that despite community radio's proven credentials in addressing disaster mitigation, its potential has been grossly underestimated in South Asia. The absence of appropriate policy reform in the region contrasts sharply with that of other countries like Indonesia and Japan. The lacuna is ironic given that South Asia is increasingly vulnerable to disasters. He emphasises the need for a proactive community radio environment in South Asia that would address disaster mitigation effectively. Examining both anecdotal evidence and documentation-based data, the chapter builds its premise through a case study of Kalanjiam Vanoli community radio station – India's first community radio station for disaster preparedness, which was set up after the 2004 tsunami in Nagapattinam district, Tamil Nadu.

N. Ramakrishnan and Venu Arora (Chapter 11) outline the two critical learnings emerging from recent studies done on the sustainability of CR stations in the region. The first involves the impact of policies on sustainability and the advantages and disadvantages of having a formal policy for community radio. The second involves the institutional character of CR stations emerging in the South Asia region. CR stations in both India and Bangladesh, in comparison to those in Nepal, are less local media institutions and more an extension of public

radio with a "service" or "welfare" oriented, information provision mandate. This chapter discusses a strategic design for ensuring the sustainability of CR as a local media resource – a way to amplify local voices and prioritise marginalised concerns while imparting information critical for development.

Pradip Ninan Thomas (Chapter 12) explores the possibilities for community radio in India to be used for reconciliation of conflicts faced by communities. The chapter focuses on the diversity and complexity of religions and cultures and the secular fabric that is under strain from the pressures of majoritarian and minoritarian identity politics in India. These pressures have also begun to impact the CR movement in India given moves to grant licences to religious bodies and organisations, some of which have explicitly religious and communal agendas. The author also goes on to deal with the possibilities for CR to be used by communities on the edge in India, especially Dalits. The chapter makes the case for the grounding of CR in India in values that are supportive of the interests of communities and that strengthen local values and livelihoods.

Vasuki Belavadi (Chapter 13) recalls how the announcement by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB) that it was keen on introducing a process of performance evaluation of CR stations generated debate on the methods to be adopted to carry out such an exercise. After some discussions, MIB agreed, in lieu of an external evaluation of the sector, and in the spirit of co-learning, to a process of self-assessment and peer review by CR stations. By then, three toolkits for self-assessment had been developed by different agencies that had academic as well as altruistic stakes in the sector. MIB adopted them as part of what it called a "peer review" process. This chapter examines the participatory processes that went into the development of one of these toolkits, i.e. the Community Radio Continuous Improvement Toolkit (CR-CIT).

Madhavi Manchi considers her chapter (Chapter 14) an attempt to move away from an anthropocentric understanding of media technologies. She draws on ideas from material media ecology practice, affect theories, memory studies, and ethnoecology to study the case of a CR station in Telangana, India, that is embedded within a larger biodiversity movement in the region. Working through women's collectives, the community seeks to gain autonomy over five major aspects of their lives: food production, seeds, natural resources, market, and media. The author believes that Sangam Radio, which lies within a unique interlay of memory, media, and biodiversity, serves important archival and mnemonic functions within the larger movement and that such spaces as community radio need to be recognised and celebrated, as they provide a real alternative to the homogenising tendency of neoliberalism.

Bidu Bhusan Dash (Chapter 15) brings out the complexity of the production process of a community radio programme where participation must be the core principle. The juxtaposition of the "implied" meaning of "Choupal" as an open public space with its role as a site of power hierarchies in its day-to-day "functioning" in a village system reveals the challenges faced in programme production. The chapter, based on an ethnographic study of a CR station in the Bundelkhand region of India, explores the role of CR in the promotion of grassroots democracy where the society, culture, and economy are not quite

democratic. The programme, Gaon ki Choupal (Village Choupal), produced by two community reporters, appears to have improved people's involvement in CR programmes. However, he asserts it is not simple to produce and broadcast such programmes in a feudal society.

Priya Kapoor (Chapter 16) examines how the Himalayan communities whose youth are mobilised by the Tehri Dam and Chipko movements have indigenised the seeming globality of climate change to help their communities during recurrent disasters, especially floods. The author studies community radio sites that assert identity and agency of local youth from the Tehri Garhwal region to serve as indispensable intermediaries when floods paralyse life in the region. The author provides theoretical insights into the confluence of scholarly discourses of disaster and risk, climate change, and community media to assert that CR has strong synergies with issues of climate change, especially during natural disasters. She suggests that unless the CR sector is recognised as a close ally of local and national governments, climate change and disaster cannot be mitigated, nor communities made resilient.

Each chapter in the book is followed by a boxed news story about community radio that is broadly related to its theme. These stories, some in the form of interviews and others reports, appeared in *CR News*, an e-newsletter put out by the UNESCO Chair on Community Media. Apart from serving as interesting chapter separators, the idea behind these boxed features is to give a flavour of the real-world happenings in the CR sector in South Asia over the last decade and also to foreground the voices of some of the significant actors, grassroots practitioners, and enthusiasts in the field. After all, as the late Zane Ibrahim, the legendary South African community broadcaster, put it: "Community radio is 99% about community and only 1% about radio."

This volume brings together contributions from 17 authors, including the two editors of the collection. The contributors, residing in seven different countries of the world, are a mix of academicians, researchers, experts, and followers of CR. The editors have ensured, amongst other things, that all chapters in the book are written in a language that is academically inclined and yet accessible. However, the opinions expressed by the authors in their chapters are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the editors. The presentation is such that the book can be part of an academic curriculum on community media while at the same time being of interest to CR practitioners, advocates, or enthusiasts.

Notes

1 Let us hasten to clarify that the South Asia focus of this volume has nothing to do with any specific intergovernmental conceptualisation of community radio in the region. There have been several South Asia–level civil society deliberations on community radio over the past decade, with the intention of forging a common sense of purpose and action. Some of these meetings were indeed facilitated by the SAARC Secretariat. As far as we can tell, community radio has yet to get on the agenda of a regional policy platform of any kind. In fact, at the time of this writing, political tensions between and among member states have prevented the holding of even a summit meeting in the last five years.

2 See UNESCO (1983) for an evaluation report on Mahaweli, prepared by the Government of Sri Lanka. Also, David (2001) for a detailed account of the project.
3 Details about these landmarks in the community radio movement in India as well as other South Asian countries are available in some of the chapters of this book and also in the earlier book by the authors, Pavarala and Malik (2007).
4 www.mediasouthasia.org/communityradioworkshopforwebsite010604.htm Accessed on April 20, 2019.

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