ALL INDIA RADIO AND WOMEN’S DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AREAS OF MANIPUR

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ABSTRACT

Insurgency, extra-judicial killing, human right violation, ethnic tension, xenophobia etc. afflict the civilian population in Manipur. In the prevailing insecure situation in the state, finding and maintaining access to information is one of the most important coping skills for the people. But many villagers continue to rely on word of mouth or the radio for the majority of their news thanks to the poor communication infrastructure in the villages that are often isolated and disconnected from the information that flow into the capital city of Imphal. Though the All India Radio, Imphal plays a pivotal role in creating awareness for improving the quality of rural life, there is a mismatch between the informational needs of women and what the radio station has been delivering. Understanding women’s radio access and listening patterns in rural areas of Manipur is an important step in assessing the impact and effectiveness of the programmes of the radio station. This paper outlines radio reception issues for rural women in an effort to support the All India Radio Imphal in its endeavour to meet the informational needs of the women audience in general and Meitei Pangal women in particular. The study concludes that there exist significant gaps between the informational needs of the Meitei Pangal women and what the AIR Imphal delivered.

Keywords: insurgency, ethnic tension, All India Radio, Meitei Pangal, cultural barriers.

INTRODUCTION

The north-eastern Indian state of Manipur is afflicted with various problems including insurgency, killings, counter-insurgency operations, extra-judicial killings, human right violations, ethnic tension, kidnapping for ransom, xenophobia etc. thereby throwing the civilian population into an insecure environment of lawlessness, fear and frustration. Besides, due to lopsided development of the urban areas many of the
villages in the state are often isolated and disconnected from the resources and information that flow into the capital city of Imphal. As such finding and maintaining access to information is one of the most important coping skills for many villagers in the insecure situation that prevails in the state. Though television assumes greater importance as a cultural tool in the changing media landscape, radio still remains the most pervasive, accessible, affordable and flexible mass medium of first choice for most village communities in Manipur with poor infrastructure. And villagers continue to rely on word of mouth or the radio for the majority of their news.

Nonetheless, radio has dramatically influenced social life in the rural areas of Manipur which have about 60 percent of the state’s total population. The All India Radio, Imphal since its inception in 1963 has been playing a pivotal role in creating awareness about the ways and means to improve the quality of rural life. Though the growth of radio in terms of reach, popularity and variety has been phenomenal, there has not been a corresponding growth in their endeavour to address the informational needs of rural women in particular. In this respect the Meitei Pangal community in general and the Meitei Pangal women in particular have been a poorly understood demographic segment. In the absence of in-depth research on the issue the AIR Imphal has little reliable information to inform their programming decisions in regard to rural community. As such there is a need to understand the opinions of the target groups on the functioning of the media and to elicit their suggestions towards the improvement of the media in terms of content, duration, timings and methods available through them.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The first independent research directed at the mass media audience was Allport’s work on radio (1935). He reported about an average daily radio listening of around 2-3 hours in his study area. Lazasfield and Merton (1941) suggested that news reports can expose a discrepancy between private attitude and behaviour and public morality, thereby forcing the public to a decision.

Though anthropologists have conducted studies on the phenomenon of social change, the communication systems of channels which are crucial to the process of diffusion of information and adoption of new innovations have not been studied in depth. Spicer (1952), Mead (1953) and Foster (1962) conducted pioneering works in the anthropological analysis of cultural determinants of technological change and development. Foster emphasized the need for recognizing the change inhibiting factors (barriers) and change-promoting factors (stimulants) relating them to the process of socio-cultural change.

Dube (1958) initiated anthropological studies on communication, change and development. Studies of Mathur and Neurath (1959) have limited objectives of evaluating in quantitative terms the effects of pilot experiments on radio. Doob (1961) studied the role of mass media in the transition of traditional societies to a modern form. Lerner (1958), Schramm (1964) and Rogers (1969) espoused the view that mass media prepare, instigate and undersigned the development of a modern society. Schramm noticed change in social, cultural, religious and personal attitudes which subsequently have helped change and shape a society completely differently. YVL Rao (1963) studied the flow of information through various channels.
including the radio. Studies by Beals (1962), Epstein (1962), Bailey (1963), Aiyappan (1965), Vidyarthi (1970) and Srinivas (1976) paid inadequate focus on the forces of socio-cultural change, particularly the media. They did not analyze the role of radio in the social change process. Literature on communication and media in the 1960s concentrated on social and development role of media.

Most radio studies in developing societies have concentrated on the use of radio in health-related campaigns (HomikandSankar, 1986). Sociological studies by Pradipto Roy et. al. (1969) and Kivlinet.al.(1971) discussed the role of diffusion of agricultural and health innovations in the villages. But their basic objective was to measure the relative effectiveness of media in the diffusion process. Studies by Barghouti (1974), Spain, et. al. (1977), Shah (1988) and Tilson (1990) have suggested that too much reliance has been placed on the use of radio to disseminate health information as the number of working radios is limited among groups at the lower end of the socio-economic scale. Nevertheless, radio is still the most ideal mass medium available to reach vast segments of the population in developing societies (Kincaid, et. al. 1975). Some well-known studies conducted by Indian mass communication scholars such as Rao, Damle and several others have amply established that Indian society by and large reacted almost in an identical manner.

In a developing country like India the mass media has important roles to play. Radio is playing a significant role in reaching, informing and educating people. Though computers and internet have started influencing the way we learn, radio is still a dominant medium with wide access. Nevertheless, all these media are very powerful to reach, teach and enrich (Singhal and Rogers: 2001). That needs media to be socially responsible. Rao emphasized that social responsibility is a concept that need to be practiced by all the media including the radio. A socially responsible media can serve the interests of the society at large.

Studies conducted in India often neglected the remote areas and concentrated on urban areas, largely for reasons of access to these communities while there are very limited overseas studies conducted on radio and how age influences radio listening (Brown, 1990; Christenson, 1985).

There is a need for a communication strategy aimed at altering the audience from mere recipients of information to seekers of information for bringing out change in people’s behaviour. Onabajo F. (2003) felt there is a need to design messages that are embedded in the people’s traditional beliefs and culture. Listening radio is not merely an act of consumption but is "rather complex process of decoding cultural meanings" (Wang et al., 2000).

From the above review of available literature it appears that research on the patterns of radio listening in rural areas of the country is extremely meagre. Though the radio has become an intimate friend of villagers in Manipur, the study of radio listening is still an untouched field particularly in rural areas with the exception of the Radio Programme Listenership Survey conducted by the All India Radio, Audience Research Cell. The quantitative data from such surveys are significant for programme producers and advertisers. But these do not help in understanding the social and cultural background of listeners as there is little qualitative information regarding listeners. As such, it seems there is a lacuna in the existing
literature. In the absence of in-depth research, the radio station has little reliable information to inform its programming decisions in regard to these communities.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study examines Meitei Pangal women’s radio reception in rural areas of Manipur. The Meitei Pangals are the descendants of migrants who came from Bengal and Sylhet (now in Bangladesh) and settled in Manipur in the early seventeenth century. Traditionally rooted to the soil of Manipur, the Meitei Pangals are the Manipuri speaking Muslims who are a unique constituent of Manipuri society. They follow Islam as their religion. Though the Meitei Pangals form a minority group in Manipur with their active participation in the economy, politics and unique culture of the state, they occupy a unique position in the society. This minority community has different material conditions and value orientations which influence their media consumption patterns. Besides, Islamic regulations like the purdah system restrict the mobility of women in the rural areas thereby restricting their media exposure.

There has been a general perception that almost all the Meitei Pangal households in Manipur own radio sets and the community has a radio culture. However, no in-depth study has been done on the patterns of radio listening in Meitei Pangal community let alone in the Meitei Pangal women. As no such study has been undertaken in this sphere, exploration of this subject is significant in the area. In this context the present study is an attempt to explore the informational needs of the indigenous Meitei Pangal women in rural areas of Manipur and their patterns of radio listening.

The study was conducted in Thoubal district of Manipur and focuses on understanding women’s radio use in the Meitei Pangal settlement of Thoubal Moijing Leingoijin. The study used a quantitative survey of female heads of households, focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and observation as the main sources of its data.

AREA OF STUDY

Situated between latitudes 23.80°N and 25.68°N and longitudes 93.03°E and 94.78°E, Manipur covers a total geographical area of 22,327 Sq. kms. Of the total area, about nine-tenths constitute the hills, which surround the remaining one-tenth valley. Manipur is one of the border states in the north eastern part of India and is bounded by Nagaland on the north, Assam on the west and Mizoram on the south and along the east it shares a 352 km. long international boundary with Myanmar. The hills are inhabited mainly by the tribals including the Nagas, the Kukis, the Paite etc. and the valley by the Meiteis and the Meitei Pangals.

The area of study is Thoubal Moijing Leingoijin, an ethnic Meitei Pangal settlement in Thoubal district of the state. With a population of about 550, the village settlement is about 23 kms from the capital city of Imphal. The inhabitants depend for water on Thoubal river which flows in the middle of Thoubal Moijing
village. The settlement has an erratic electricity supply and no healthcare facility. The main economic activities of the villagers are rearing of animals, fishing and farming by men, and weaving by women.

QUANTITATIVE SURVEY

The study employed a quantitative survey of 100 female heads of households out of the 120 households in the Thoubal Moijing Leingoijin settlement. Age of the female respondents was in the range of 15 to 75 years. 70 of the respondents were illiterate while almost all had received some Madrassa schooling on the Koran. Though on average all the households had enough resource to have food every day, most did not have enough for the luxury of owning television or other media system.

FINDINGS

Out of the total households surveyed, 65 percent owned working radio sets, 7 percent owned sets that worked but were out of batteries, and 4 percent owned broken sets. This was a different reality from the common perception of the villagers that everyone in the village owns a radio. Reasons for not owning a radio included poverty, illiteracy, absence of husband or grown up male member in the family etc. All the radios were battery operated. Four households owned two radio sets each, and 5 household owned television sets.

30 percent of the women surveyed reported listening to the radio. They said they listened to the AIR Imphal and the Vivid Bharati for news, music and drama. They listened to radio for enjoyment and to find out what radio is saying about the world.

All the women surveyed said they had difficulty understanding radio broadcasts particularly the news. Some of them complained that the radio use difficult words which only men understand. 20 respondents said they listened to AIR Imphal’s Khungangi Thouram and Khonjel Nachom with understanding. They do not understand the classical music and Natsanskritan programmes. When they do not understand they simply did not listen to broadcasts.

Men of the households predominantly controlled the radio sets. In 90 percent of the households with working radio sets, only men turned the radio set on and off while in the remaining 10 percent, women were secondary controllers. They reasons for not using radio include not knowing how to use the radio and lack of interest/not listening.

63 percent of the women felt that it was not at all important to know about events in other places. They said frustration over not understanding, lack of time or opportunity, and family problems are the main reasons for lack of interest in news. Only 10 percent of them felt that it was important to keep abreast with the happenings in other places. Apart from music, educational and Islamic programming, they wanted broadcast of good news that they could understand while the remaining 27 percent had no opinion. The most common listening time for the women was 7 p.m. at night. According to the respondents listening
times are synonymous with dinner times. 20 women also said that the radio was on for lunch around 9-11 a.m. in the morning. Five women said listening time is when their husbands switch on the radio.

90 percent of the respondents said that they seldom heard of programming for Muslims. When asked what they would like to listen to, the respondents mentioned radio programmes that had lots of music, was funny, understandable, and had stories. The respondents wanted radio programming to help them learn something about raising children. They also wanted the radio to create awareness about early marriage of girls, woman’s rights, Islamic culture, healthcare, stories, recreation, and laughter. Political news and news of the world was not immediately relevant to Meitei Pangal women. They felt that their community could benefit from learning the importance of adult literacy programs.

QUALITATIVE DATA

Cadres of underground outfits and the security forces who frequent the village in hot pursuit rule the roost in the village. Killing and kidnapping are a commonplace. Insurgents taking shelter forcibly create nuisance. A major task of radio organizations will be in peace building.

For the qualitative data collection participant observations, interviews and focus groups were conducted in the settlement. The data below is drawn from participant observation, 5 semi-structured interviews, and 4 focus groups. The semi-structured interviews were with the Pradhan, a head mistress, and 3 women. Two of the focus groups were conducted with 10 schoolgirls aged 11-16, one with 5 of their mothers, and one with 4 male leaders of the village.

1) Radio sets and Women

Meitei Pangal women’s lives are very hard and filled with continuous physical labour. Waking up early in the morning, they fetch water from the river. Then they cook rice. After feeding the children and other family members they attend to livestock, if they have any. After serving lunch, they sit for weaving cloth. Preparations of supper and cleanup take up the bulk of the night. They leave village once in a while to visit hospitals in the nearby town. Most were married by the age of 15 to males aged 18 years or sometimes much older. Their life is monotonous with repetitive household chore though occasionally they have marriage, funeral ceremony to break the monotony.

The radio set was not an integral part of the women’s lives. Almost all of them were unable to give information on radio reception patterns in the household. However, women were responsible for the storage and safety of the radio set as they were more generally for all domestic goods, but otherwise had a limited relationship with the radio. They realised that living in the village made them different from urban women. They thought that owing to illiteracy they are unable to use the radio set. They expressed lack of hope or interest in the future. Out of the respondents, 10 educated women agreed that the radio set has importance in the households. Some of them felt that people who had radio sets were more knowledgeable than those who did not.
2) Radio sets and girls
Confirming the importance of radio sets the two focus groups of school going girls felt that people who had radio sets were more knowledgeable than those who did not. All perceived the set as belonging to the male head of the household. When asked who switches the radio on and off they revealed that children were usually not allowed to touch the radio dials and they were not allowed to make noise while the radio was tuned to newscasts. Both focus groups of girls said radio set facilitated a way to enforce silence on unruly children. Most of them said that their mothers didn’t touch the dial and usually wait for others to turn on the station.

They listen together most of the time but in isolated cases they also listened separately. The girls said they had trouble in understanding news while they could understand other programmes in bits. They said their mothers didn’t use the radio as they had trouble in understanding the broadcast. One group said their mothers had too much work to listen to radio and the other felt it was because they were illiterate. Both groups said that there was no difference in listening between girls and boys in their homes. They also believed that radio was for both men and women. The difference in the radio listening of mothers and daughters could be the result of generational, class-based, or educational factors, among others.

3) Male ownership of radio set
Asked who chooses the channel they said mostly the male members did it. In most of the households, male control and ownership of the radio set was noticed. The radio set is positioned within the male domain thereby increasing its aura of authority and importance. Women perceived the radio set to be a tool of the educated and mobile, and outside the scope of their own lives. There was often a substantial gap between husbands and wives in terms of literacy skills, age, and range of experience. Husbands go out of the settlement for work while the wives remain in the village. When husbands were back they would listen to the radio and wives went about their domestic chores thereby increasing silence between them. The radio’s circle of chatter in most households excluded women, and appeared to be a physical mechanism for creating privileged male space within the bustling female domain of the household.

4) Effect of economy
Male informants explained that because of the economic hardship, the residents often had little spare time to spend or money to spend on luxuries like the radio. Mentally, there were generally not many changes in the older generation, but the youth learned clothing styles and hygiene. In terms of radio listening preferences, there was perhaps a greater liking for Hindi music than before.

5) Programming of relevance for rural women
The focus group said the quality of the radio reception was good but they listen when they are free. They listened too music, drama etc. One young girl said that she had never heard of programming for Muslims on daily basis. Occasionally when Idd festival comes they heard religious programmes. Very few women had the opportunity to study the Koran the way men did, and thus were interested in programming that would allow women to “understand own Muslimness.”
When asked what their mothers would like to listen to, schoolgirls said radio programmes that had lots of music, was funny, understandable, and had stories, like All India Radio Imphal soap opera ChatledoEidi, Basantagi Nongalamdai. They like good programmes that they could listen to and be happy rather than discussions on things about far-flung places that they don’t get.

They felt that programmes on raising children, importance of education, health and hygiene etc. would be useful for their mothers. The women wanted radio programming to emphasize not to marry girls early, women’s rights, roles of wife and husband as practiced outside of the village. Male respondents felt that political news, and news of the world was not immediately relevant to women in their community. The women needed radio programme on health, stories, recreation, and laughter. They could benefit from programmes on hygiene and raising children.

They felt that their community could benefit from learning the importance of school and education, and adult literacy programs. One informant reported that night is a time of relaxation for men, and it would be a good time to broadcast literacy programs at that time to allow men to improve themselves. Some respondents felt that awareness raising to increase the community’s level of culture was important: Books and tables and the school building are important than conflict.

CONCLUSION

This study is limited in scope to Thoubal Moijing Leingoijin, a Meitei Pangal settlement of 550, in Thoubal district of Manipur. In many ways, it raises more questions than it answers. However, its findings do strongly suggest that current radio programming of the All India Radio Imphal is not as effective as it could be in reaching Meitei Pangal women in rural areas of Manipur. The efforts of the radio station have been positive from many standpoint. However, it has also shown an unfortunate lack of accountability to its audience in some respects. It is very important that the All India Radio Imphal invest more time into feedback mechanisms and audience reception studies. Based on this investigation, it seems reasonable to suggest that significant numbers of rural Meitei Pangal women are cut off from the discourses and engagements of their society. The women respondents could identify issues like women’s rights, Islam, women’s health and family counselling as relevant to their lives. However, the All India Radio Imphal will have to review the programme packaging and timing of broadcast in order to engage and serve rural Meitei Pangal women more effectively.

The study concludes that there exist significant gaps between the informational needs of the Meitei Pangal women and what the AIR Imphal delivered. Besides, cultural barriers, lack of relevance of radio programming and treating the radio set as part of the man’s world are some of the major factors behind the low listening pattern of Meitei Pangal women. Nevertheless, radio and word of mouth were often the women’s only source of information in the settlement. Therefore, the All India Radio Imphal will have to review the programme packaging and timing of broadcast in order to engage and serve rural women more effectively.
SUGGESTIONS

In the light of the above findings some suggestions can be made to improve the AIR Imphal’s accessibility for rural Meitei Pangal women. Spoken Manipuri language is very different from the formal and very literary Manipuri used in AIR Imphal broadcasts. This alienates a substantial segment of the Meitei Pangal population including the women. An immediate and easy way to encourage rural Meitei Pangal women’s radio listening is to use simple and everyday words. The news stories are often on painful events rather than on joy. Painful subjects should not be avoided, but positive achievements and hope should also be given appropriate airtime.

For women to have access to radio programming and feel greater ownership of the radio set, it would be advisable to distribute radio sets for women in the rural areas making it theirs in name. This may encourage women to control the radio set more than they do at present. Factual information on women’s health and rights are crucial for women empowerment. Simple, easy to digest, and inclusive messages could be aired around 7-9 p.m. It seems reasonable to suggest that there may be opportunities for creating a strong future listening base among Meitei Pangal women by targeting programming at young. This may also be an effective way of reaching their mothers.

REFERENCES