ABSTRACT

Woman in India make up to 52% of its total population. Woman empowerment in India is a much debated topic and a harbinger of challenging task as one need to acknowledge the fact of gender divide issues and discrimination against women as social malice since thousands of years.

Empowering women aims to inspire women with the courage to break free from the chains of limiting self belief patterns and societal or religious conditioning that have traditionally kept women suppressed and unable to see their true beauty and power.

Mass media plays one of the significant roles in women’s development and its empowerment. Media can create an awakening inspiration to achieve their potential as prime movers of change in society.

Alternative media will be focused as one of the chief important alternative requisites in helping the women empowered. It will help as the best means and access to speak out against the oppression and marginalization of women at the grass root level. Such media will help rediscovering the purpose of mass communication as any conventional or mainstream media refuses to acknowledge mass communication as the mission for the benefit of the common people and their survival.

Thus the paper will specially highlight the positive perspectives of alternative media as a developmental tool to portray and resonates the views and ideas of the oppressed and marginalized women at the grass root level.
“Women must not accept; she must challenge she must not be awed by that it has been built up around her she must reverence that woman in her which struggles for expression”.

Margaret Sanger

INTRODUCTION

In India women comprise 52 percent of its total population and with the advent of 21st Century and its development in various scientific and technological era the status of woman are also changing at a fast pace but we cannot ignore the very existence of a world where woman are discriminated, marginalized and oppressed because of various gender divide issues. Women are vital human resources in improving the quality of life. The country’s overall development depends greatly on the inclusion of women in its development process. They have been the transmitters of culture in all societies. The status of women in a society is a true index of its cultural, social, religious and spiritual level. It is one of the most important criteria for estimating with precision the degree of civilization attained by a particular society in various period of its history. There is increasing realization that the process of development will be left incomplete without the active involvement of women.

Self decision regarding education, participation, mobility, economic independency, public speaking, awareness and exercise of rights, political participation and many more factors ensure women empowerment. In short woman empowerment is the breaking of personal limitation.

How to maximize the voice of those marginalized or weaker sections is a huge concern in the society and what the various tools are or medium to facilitate them to be heard in a society and why alternative media should be the chosen one as alternative to others is the present need of the hour.

NEED AND IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

There is inequality and vulnerability of women in all sphere of life. They need to be empowered in all walks of life. Without the active participation of women, establishment of a new social order may not be a successful one because women constitute half of the population. Women should realize that they have constitutional rights to quality health care, economic security, and access to education and political power. Mahatma Gandhi firmly states that the status of women would not change merely by bringing legislations; it must be supported by change in the women’s social circumstances and situations and also man’s sexist attitude to women.
Empowerment is a process aimed at changing the nature and direction of systematic forces, which marginalize women and other disadvantaged sections in a given context. A large segment of Indian womanhood still suffers deprivation and discriminatory attitudes. It is necessary to mobilize the vast women power, if the country has to progress in all walks of life.

Empowerment of women is a long and difficult process which is to be promoted with full public support and this could be successful only when those women living at the lower strata who have been suppressed by the male dominated society taking undue advantage of their lack of education and poverty can rise up to claim their rightful place in their own society.

**Defining alternative media in context of women empowerment**

While alternative media has been around for centuries, the concept did not begin to emerge as a specific form of media communications until the middle of the 20th century. As social unrest became more prominent in a number of nations, people with alternative points of view on issues such as race, religion, lifestyle, orientation, politics, and social organization began to use small presses to create their own publications. Brochures, newspapers, and eventually magazines provided a foundation for what was soon identified as fringe media, denoting the fact that these views were not generally held by the majority of the populace. By the 1960’s, alternative media has branched out from printed publications to the inclusion of low budget movies, as well as independent radio and television broadcasts that were syndicated on low-frequency media outlets.

Many alternative media publications begin life on shoestring budgets that make it necessary to utilize the most cost-effective means of printing and distributing the materials. Over time, a number of these underground or alternative publications build considerable reader bases, and are able to increase the scope and the quality of their work. Others remain publications that serve a niche base of readers and continue to operate with relatively little resources.

Newspapers or journalism in the pre-independent period were more for the cause and concern of the people, but with the advent of the 21st century and the changing status of media journalism instincts has been wounded by paid news, yellow, mud-slinging and propaganda based media giants and conglomerates.

The image of woman portrayed in mainstream media is that of a submissive stereotypical image being juxtapose as a weaker sex in the statistics of gender related hierarchy. Though some different forms of media has been successfully portraying
woman’s physiological image as western, over hyped and post modernistic essence which leads to deviate the reality of present sociological states.

So to such reserve comes alternative media which is mostly an unexplored arena with an agenda of movement against the monopolization of media space and time and against media de-regulation to create a platform for the poor, deprived, voiceless and marginalized women of the society.

Alternative media concept originally aroused from the mainstream media’s black out of alternative opinion. It can be defined by rediscovering the purpose of mass communication.

Alternative media are media inclusive of newspapers, radio, TV, magazines, movies, internet, etc. which provide alternative information to the mainstream media in a given context, whether the mainstream media are commercial, publicly supported or government owned.

Such form of media may involve traditional outlets such as newspapers and magazines, or radio, television, and movies. Alternative media may also involve the newer media outlets of web sites, e-books and e-magazines, streamed audio and video, or other media outlets that are found online.

The main function of alternative media is to offer a different perspective that what is presented in the media that is under the control of a government or a big business. At one time, alternative media was also known as counter-cultural or underground media, terms which helped to identify the media outlets that provided opportunities for dissenting points of view and ideas to be shared outside the established media. This was often thought necessary when other media alternatives were unwilling or unable to offer these dissenting views equal time with views that were more widely held.

One of the innovations in recent years has been the use of the Internet as a form of alternative media. While underground radio, television, and movies have been around for decades, the creation of alternative web sites that focus on minority points of view in politics, music, fashion, lifestyle, and other areas have proliferated. Today, it is possible to find media online that addresses just about any idea, concept, or opinion by conducting keyword searches using a reliable Internet browser. These online media outlets continue to offer the opportunity to explore different understandings and ideas
that are either overlooked media, or receive relatively little attention from the more conventional media outlets.

The main characteristics of alternative media are:

- Small scale and oriented towards specific communities, possibly disadvantaged groups, respecting their diversity;
- Independent of state and market;
- Horizontally structured, allowing for the facilitation of audience access and participation within the frame of democratization and multiplicity;
- Carriers of non-dominant discourses and representations, stressing the importance of self representation.

Alternative media often aim to challenge existing powers to represent marginalized groups of women and to foster horizontal linkages among communities of interest. It is dedicated to democratization of communication and these media provide an alternative viewpoint, different information and interpretations of the world that cannot be found in the mainstream.

The main objective of alternative media towards woman’s empowerment is to support social struggles, awaken women’s consciousness to their subordination, advocate and defend rights. It also aims to promote various groups reflection and popular communication.

Alternative media provides an alternative platform to voice the plight of woman against various marginalization and atrocities done to them. It connects amongst the weaker sections of the society who are deprived of their will to fight against their basic human rights.

It is a pro feminist perspective theory which can create a cult of belief among the grassroots woman to promote and empower them in the society. Such kind of medium can be treated as a breakthrough means of communication to bridge the traditional people through their traditional form of communication like community radio, folk art, folk music, folkllores, puppetry etc, which often portray a strong alternative effective tools at the grassroots level.

**Various constraining factors of women’s empowerment are:**

- Heavy work load of women
- Isolation of women from each other
- Illiteracy
• Traditional views that limit women’s participation
• No funds
• Internal strife/militarization/wars
• Disagreements/conflicts among women’s groups, unstructured adjustment policies
• Discriminatory policy environment
• Negative and sensational coverage of media

Why alternative media?

In the 20th century, alternative media was mostly known as leftist and gave readers insights into the world that mainstream publications did not, but with a distinctly collectivist perception.

The aim of alternative media is approach one serving the community which is often translated as enabling and facilitating access and participation by members of the community; ordinary people are given the opportunity for their voices to be heard, and take responsibility for distributing their own ideologies and representatives. Societal groups that are represented one-sided, disadvantaged, stigmatized or even repressed can especially benefit from using the channels of communication opened by alternative media, to strengthen their internal identity, manifest this identity to the outside world and thus enable social change or development. Alternative media forms are more accessible and participatory to a smaller scale and less constrained by bureaucracy or commercial interests than the so called mainstream media.

How alternative media can be an effective tool to empower women?

• Various mass media campaigns should be organized at the grassroots level through their understandable medium like traditional form of communication which includes puppetry, story-telling, folk arts, folk music and other vernacular mediums.
• By creating a social climate favorable and susceptible to varied women’s issues.
• Undertaking different forms of alternative mediums to voice out for the economic independency of women through woman’s land rights an effective key to empowerment.
• Introduction of more feminist oriented research to explore and theorized the ways woman have intervened to challenge mainstream media representations of
themselves by producing new forms of media where feminist values tend to be central both the production process and the content of what is produced.

- To promote more grassroots activism alternative media can break the ice between the voice of the poor and the rich.
- Alternative media like woman’s community radio should be promoted which effectively nurtures equality, diversity and promotes democratic values amongst women.
- Alternative media with various development and participatory initiatives can help in equipping grassroots women leaders to become voice of change.
- More focus on community mobilization, outreach and mass media through alternative media movement among the grassroots level.
- Such kind of medium which provide a forum of “for the people and by the people” concept gives a new reformation to the developmental concept of a society which are hardly acknowledged.
- Various programmes and policies should be made which are alternative initiatives to the lesser known groups.
- Villages, communities should be maximized most in form of various alternative communicational medium like that of folks and traditions to convey effective message since folk media being close to the hearts and minds of the people.
- Using traditional media helps in fostering new ideas and the adjustment to a new or evolving social or political situation.

**ALTERNATIVE MEDIA IN PRACTICES**

**Community radio**

In many countries around the world, specific categories of radio stations are licensed to provide targeted broadcasts to specific communities, including community radio and low power FM (LPFM). Such stations typically broadcast with less wattage than commercial or public/state-run broadcasters, and are often non-commercial and non-profit in nature. In the United States, special classes of stations known as low-power FM (LPFM) stations were first authorized by the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in January 2000. These stations are authorized to provide non-commercial, educational broadcasting and cannot operate with an effective radiated power of more than 100 watts. LPFM services were authorized to meet the increasing demand which existed in the United States for the creation of new, hyper-local radio outlets that would be grounded in their respective communities. The Prometheus Radio
Project is a grassroots organization in the United States which advocates the establishment of LPFM stations and provides assistance to start-up LPFM stations.

**Pirate radio**

Pirate radio is illegal or unregulated radio transmission. The term is most commonly used to describe illegal broadcasting for entertainment or political purposes, but is also sometimes used for illegal two way radio operation. Its etymology can be traced to the unlicensed nature of the transmission, but historically there has been occasional but notable use of sea vessels – fitting the most common perception of a pirate – as broadcasting bases.

Rules and regulations vary widely from country to country but often the term pirate radio generally describes the unlicensed broadcast of FM radio, AM radio or short wave signals over a wide range. In some cases radio stations are deemed legal where the signal is transmitted, but illegal where the signals are received—especially when the signals cross a national boundary. In other cases, a broadcast may be considered "pirate" due to the nature of its content, its transmission format (especially a failure to transmit a station identification according to regulations), or the transmit power (wattage) of the station, even if the transmission is not technically illegal (such as a web cast or an amateur radio transmission).

**Community radio as an alternative media in context of women's empowerment in rural India**

Community radio is a radio service offering a third model of radio broadcasting in addition to commercial and public broadcasting and worked as an effective tool of alternative medium for the plight of the voiceless and marginalized women. Community stations serve geographic communities and communities of interest. They broadcast content that is popular and relevant to a local, specific audience but is often overlooked by commercial or mass-media broadcasters. Community radio stations are operated, owned, and influenced by the communities they serve. They are generally nonprofit and provide a mechanism for enabling individuals, groups, and communities to tell their own stories, to share experiences and, in a media-rich world, to become creators and contributors of media.

**Brief history of community radio in India**

In India the campaign to legitimize community radio began in the mid-1990s, soon after the Supreme Court of India ruled in its judgment of February 1995 that "airwaves are public property". This inspired groups across the country; however, only educational (campus) radio stations were originally permitted (under a number of conditions). Anna FM was India's first campus "community" radio station. Launched on 1 February 2004, it is run by the Education and Multimedia Research Centre (EM²RC); all programmed are produced by Media Science students at Anna University.
On 16 November 2006, the government of India implemented new Community Radio Guidelines, which permit NGOs and other civil organizations to own and operate community radio stations. About 4,000 community radio licenses are being offered across India, according to government sources. By 30 November 2008, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting of the Government of India had received 297 applications for community radio licenses. Of these, 107 community radio stations have been cleared for licensing through the issuance of Letters of Intent. 13 Grant of Permission Agreements (GOPA) has been signed with license applicants under the new plan.

By 30 November 2008, there were 38 operational community radio stations in the country. Of these, two are run by NGOs and the rest by educational institutions. The first community-based radio station licensed to an NGO (as distinct from campus-based radio) was launched on 15 October 2008, when Sangham Radio in Pastapur village, Medak district, Andhra Pradesh state went on the air at 11:00 am. Sangham Radio, which broadcasts on 90.4 MHz, is licensed to the Deccan Development Society (DDS) (an NGO which works with women's groups in approximately 75 villages in Andhra Pradesh). The community radio station is managed by General and Algole Narsamma. The second NGO-led community radio station in India was launched on 23 October 2008 at Taragram in Orchha, Madhya Pradesh state. Named Radio Bundelkhand after the Bundelkhand region of central India where it is located, the radio station is licensed to the Society for Development Alternatives (DA) (a Delhi-based NGO). Radio Bundelkhand also broadcasts on 90.4 MHz for four hours a day (including two hours of repeat broadcasts).

According to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 47 community radio stations were operational in India by 1 November 2009 (including 45 campus-based stations and two CRS run by NGOs). By December 2009, the number of CR stations run by civil groups had increased to seven:

- Sangham Radio (Pastapur, Medak District, Andhra Pradesh)
- Radio Bundelkhand (Orchha, Madhya Pradesh)
- Mann Deshi Tarang (Satara, Maharashtra)
- Namma Dhwani (Budikote, Karnataka)
- Radio Mattoli (Wayanad, Kerala)
- Kalanjiam Samuga Vanoli (Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu)
- Barefoot (Tilonia, Rajasthan)

By 4 December 2009, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting had issued Grant of Permission Agreements (GOPA) for 62 community radio stations. Most of the GOPAs were issued to educational institutions.

The Society for Development Alternatives, a Delhi based NGO, received its Wireless Operating License on 31 July 2008 (for a Nomad 50 Watt FM transmitter, the NIN100) and began test transmissions on 15 August. Their CR station is located in the NGO’s Taragram campus, Orchha, Bundelkhand (Tikamgarh District, Madhya Pradesh), some
12 kilometres from Jhansi. The CRS, which broadcasts on 90.4 MHz, was inaugurated on 23 October 2008 at 11.35 am by a community worker, Prabha.

‘Gurgaon ki Awaaz’ (The Voice of Gurgaon) received its Letter of Intent in July 2008, signed their GOPA in August 2009 and started broadcasting on 19 November 2009. Based in Gurgaon (which, though in the state of Haryana is considered a part of the National Capital Region of Delhi), GKA is the first and so far only civil-society-led community radio station in Delhi NCR. Gurgaon ki Awaaz broadcasts 24X7, in Hindi and Haryanvi.

Community Radio Sarang on 107.8 is managed by the Mangalore Jesuit Educational Society (MJES) and run by St. Aloysius College, Mangalore (a coastal town in southern Karnataka). Radio Sarang is a campus radio station but is oriented towards local communities as well. It broadcasts in Konkani, Kannada, Tulu, and English daily, and in Malayalam, Beary (the mother tongue of local Muslims) and Hindi on a weekly basis. It also broadcasts in Punjabi, by request of the local Sikh community. Since 15 June 2010, the CR station broadcasts 14 hours a day from 6:30 to 20:30. Richard Rego, SJ is founder and director of the station.

Banasthali Radio was the first campus-based CR station licensed in the state of Rajasthan, primarily covering the north-eastern part of Tonk district. Banasthali Radio has been operating since January 2005 as a campus radio station for students. The transmission reaches 50 villages surrounding the campus.

To create a common platform for the local communities of Supi in Uttarakhand, TERI launched Kumaon vani (a community radio service) on 11 March 2010. Uttarakhand Governor Margaret Alva inaugurated the community radio station, the first in the state. Kumaon Vani airs programmed on the environment, agriculture, culture, weather and education in the local language and with the active participation of the communities. The station covers a radius of 10 km, reaching an audience of almost 2,000 around Mukhteshwar.

Licensed to the Tibetan Children’s Village School in Dharamsala, Kangra (Himachal Pradesh), Radio Tashi Delek 90.4 FM is believed to be the first licensed community radio station in the Indian Himalayan Region. The Tibetan Community Radio Station was inaugurated by the Dalai Lama on 1 June 2010. Tashi Delek broadcasts from the Tibetan Children's Village (TCV) in Dharamsala, serving the Tibetan, Indian and expatriate communities of the region with music and local information.

JnanTaranga (90.4 FM), the first community radio service in the North East of India, began regular broadcasts on 20 November 2010. The campus-based station, licensed to Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University, Guwahati, Assam, aired its first programmed on 28 January 2009 as an experimental broadcast. Jnan Taranga literally means "knowledge wave".

Radio Sharda, launched on 6 Dec 2011, is the first community radio station in the state of Jammu & Kashmir. It broadcasts in Kashmiri and Hindustani on 90.4 MHz in
Jammu (Buta Nagar) and is billed as “a community radio for the displaced people of Kashmir” (i.e., Kashmiri Pandits). It is licensed to Pir Panchal, a civil society organization.

Radio Ujjias, licensed to Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan (Kutch Women’s Development Organization) is probably India’s first community radio station close to its international border. It began test transmission at around 6.30pm on 10 Mar 2012. KMVS has been broadcasting its flagship Kutchi language programme, ‘Kunjan Paanje Kutch Ji’ (Sarus Crane of our Kutch) from AIR Bhuj since 16 Dec 1999. Radio Ujjias is located in Bhimsar village in Nakhatrana Taluk, Kutch District of Gujarat, close to the Pakistan border. They applied for a CR license in 2007.

Under the 2006 community radio policy, any not-for-profit "legal entity”—except individuals, political parties (and their affiliates), criminal and banned organizations—can apply for a CR license. Central funding is not available for such stations, and there are stringent restrictions on fundraising from other sources. Only organizations which have been registered for a minimum of three years old and with a proven track record of local community service may apply. License conditions implicitly favors well-funded stations over inexpensive low-power operations, several of which (Mana Radio in Andhra Pradesh and Raghav FM in Bihar, for example) operated successfully on shoestring budgets before the imposition of a community radio policy.

Five minutes of advertising per hour is allowed on community radio. Sponsored programs are not allowed, except when the program is sponsored by the government at the local or state level.

Activists and community workers from across the country have banded together under the aegis of the Community Radio Forum of India to coordinate training and support for community radio stations, and to work for a more proactive community radio policy.

By 1 July 2010, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting announced that 715 applications for CR licenses had been received, including 104 under the old campus-radio guidelines. 231 Letters of Intent were issued. Grant of Permission Agreements was signed with 102 applicants, and 68 community radio stations were on the air. 107 applications were rejected, and 377 applications were being processed.

By 1 February 2012, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting had received a total of 991 community radio license applications. Grant of Permission Agreements had been signed with 161 applicants and 126 community radio stations were on air.

From April 1, 2012, the Ministry of Communications and IT has hiked the spectrum fees to Rs. 91,000 - a fivefold increase from the previous annual fee of Rs. 19,700. This move has provoked widespread protest from functional community radio stations, advocacy bodies like Community Radio Forum, and even the Secretary, Ministry of Information and Broadcast has gone on record to say that his Ministry’s views were not sought before the decision was taken. He also expressed concern that many organizations would find it impossible to pay the increased spectrum royalty charges. The Community Radio Forum has already boycotted one policy consultation held by the
Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, on 9th and 10 May. Several community radio stations also observed a 'Day of Silence' on 9 May, where the spectrum fee hike was announced, a protest song played, community views were invited, and subsequently transmission was switched off for the rest of the day.

**Various alternative media practices in the world:**

- **Woman’s community radio**: such kind of alternative media effectively nurtures equality, diversity and promotes democratic values amongst women. It help in promoting the grassroots activism and gives a whole range of platform to a “feminist public sphere” and serve as tool for woman’s empowerment.

- **World pulse magazine**: which was founded in 2003 and a nonprofit NY media organization in which ground level initiatives network of people has grown into an international network connecting women across borders and building and rising pulse of women’s empowerment across the globe. Such media help woman to become voice of change.

- **GAMCOTRAP**: a movement organization which is abbreviated as Gambia committee on traditional practices that affect health of women and children is a space where women speak in their own language – the very personnel and intimate experiences to express the challenges they face and share the coping strategies they have employed.

- **NYC grassroots media coalition**: the coalition works to build the capacity of diverse communities to communicate, collaborate and strategize ways to increase awareness and participation in independent media and social justice movements.

- **Democracy now**: An alternative news service hosted by Amy Goodman. It plays a more subtle role which serves to sow powerful seeds of misinformation in a way that the ‘compromised’ mainstream media cannot.

- **Black music radio or pirate radio**: a form of alternative media that defies narrow definitions focused on radical content and social movement.

- **Indy media**, the Independent Media Centre "is a network of collectively run media outlets for the creation of radical, accurate, and passionate telling of the truth." AlterNet is news-magazine and online community that challenges the right wing media in the United States.

- **OneWorld.net** brings together the latest news and views from over 1,600 organizations promoting human rights awareness and fighting poverty worldwide.
• Jay's Leftist & “Progressive” Internet Resources Directory is a vast site. Check on the Alternative Media topic, (under Subjects), which includes magazines (such as the New Internationalist, Third World Resurgence and Resurgence), publishers, e-zines and radio/TV.

• Community Broadcasting Online provides background information and links to Australian community radio and television. Alternative Radio is a source for public affairs programming which is made available without charge to all public radio stations.

• The Common Dreams News Center provides “news & views for the progressive community” as does ZNet and the Alternative Press Review - all are American. Znet also has an Alternative Media Watch page.

• Global Voices Online scans the international community of bloggers to bring attention to news that otherwise might go unseen.

• What could be more alternative than “good” news in the media! The Good News Agency relates voluntary work, the United Nations, NGO’s and other institutions engaged in improving the quality of life. Positive News reports on "the people, events and influences that are helping to create a more positive future for the world."

CONCLUSION

Mahatma Gandhi very aptly said “if you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate an entire family”. So education is also one of the prime needs of women towards its development and empowerment in the society.

Though alternative media can act as a platform or bridge to surpass the barrier of essential communication and information; education is fundamental, pre-requisite of all human beings.

Women especially at the grassroots level are often ignorant and uneducated and seldom speak out against atrocities done to them. Alternative media like community radio, alternative newspapers or developmental journalism can come to the rescue to highlight their problems and guide them their intrinsic and extrinsic rights.
Women who are deprived of basic human rights can reach to various helpline through the initiative of alternative media groups and members.

Thus, there is no doubts that the developmental facts of women has always been the prime focus of planning since independence and a clear vision is needed to remove the obstacles on the path of women emancipation from the government and women themselves.

The various Challenges posed by the new era have forced us to provide a concrete and developmental aspects alternatives in lieu of empowerment of women through the possible available media. We need more action oriented programmed and policies which inculcate in understanding the various technicalities and prospects of media keeping into consideration women’s empowerment a must need of the society. Impact analysis of popular media throws light on empowering and debilitating influence of media. Generation of alternate media for women’s empowerment and protest against derogatory and indecent portrayal of women in media must go on simultaneously. Committed and gender sensitive men and women can implement gender sensitive strategies within the system and effective use of the media by activists outside the system can generate awareness and non scientist masses for social transformation favorable to empowerment of women.

Likewise, alternative media and other positive approaches need to harness to bridge the age old gender divide issues in India to achieve the rightful share of women and their empowerments in most optimal way.
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