

Beyond the Internet: Why Community Radio Still Matters in Rural Development

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How Community Radio is Transforming Rural India

In a world full of 5G networks and AI-driven tools, it's easy to forget that large parts of rural India still face electricity cuts, poor internet, and digital illiteracy. In these regions, community radio (CR) has emerged as a powerful, low-cost, and hyperlocal solution—not just to share information, but to solve real-world problems for farmers, women, and marginalized communities. UNESCO. (2022) From broadcasting mandi prices and weather alerts to giving women a voice in decision-making, CR is filling crucial gaps where other systems fail.

1. Farming Smarter with Local Knowledge

Climate change is making farming riskier every year. Irregular rainfall, pests, and declining soil health are now everyday challenges. CR stations act like village-

level agri-extension hubs, broadcasting timely and trusted information in local dialects.

- Radio Mewat (Haryana) runs *Kheti Ki Baat*, where agri-experts provide weather alerts, seasonal



sowing tips, and pest control advice. Local farmer Saroj Devi shared how a rain alert helped her delay sowing by three days—saving her wheat crop from heavy losses Chand (2018).

- In Tamil Nadu, Kalanjiam Samuga Vanoli partners with Tamil Nadu Agricultural University to give live plant health consultations. Farmers call in to describe pest symptoms and get real-time organic solutions that are cost-effective and locally available.
- Ujas Radio (Gujarat) serves tribal farmers in Dahod and Panchmahal districts. When locust swarms were spotted nearby in 2022, the station broadcast a locust alert every 15 minutes. Farmers used nets and

smoke as suggested—and saved entire fields from being eaten overnight.

- These aren't just broadcasts—they're lifelines One World Foundation India. (2020).

2. Cutting out Middlemen: Fair Prices for Hard Work

One of the biggest challenges Indian farmers face is lack of access to market information. Without knowing the current rates, they often sell produce to middlemen at throwaway prices.



- Radio Namaskar (Odisha) started broadcasting daily mandi prices in and around Ganjam district. Farmers began coordinating sales in groups, and over time, many reported earning ₹8,000–₹12,000 more per season just by choosing better market days CRFC (2014).
- Sangham Radio (Telangana), one of India's first community radios run by rural women, shares market trends and helps tribal farmers avoid exploitation. They also host role-play skits on how to bargain effectively—a method that resonates with low-literacy audiences.

3. Empowering Rural Women—One Voice at a Time

In many rural areas, women work from dawn to dusk in the fields but remain invisible in decisions about

farming, money, or family welfare. Community radio is changing that—by giving women space to speak, share, and lead.



- Alfaz-e-Mewat (Haryana) trains women as on-air reporters and producers. Their program *Chhoriyon ki Chhap* features girls interviewing local women entrepreneurs and grandmothers sharing seed-saving traditions. It's building pride and rewriting gender norms.
- In Madhya Pradesh, Radio Bundelkhand runs a WhatsApp service where rural women can send questions—often about taboo topics like menstruation, domestic violence, or legal rights. The station answers them on air anonymously, providing access without stigma.
- Ujas Radio's toll-free helpline has become a lifeline for tribal women. They ask about everything from goat-rearing to widow pensions. Trained volunteers even follow up to connect them with government schemes or veterinary support.

By hearing voices like theirs on air, rural women begin to believe that their opinions and experiences matter.

4. Why Community Radio Still Wins in the Digital Age

You'd think that with YouTube, WhatsApp, and agri-apps, radio would be obsolete. But in rural India, community radio often outperforms digital tools—

especially when it comes to accessibility, trust, and relevance.

Affordability: A battery-powered radio costs less than ₹200 and lasts for years—no need for smartphones or mobile data.

Trust and Familiarity: Unlike social media, where misinformation spreads easily, community radio stations are run by locals for locals. The language, culture, and accent match the listener, building instant trust.

Resilience: During Assam's 2023 floods, when mobile towers collapsed, Radio Brahmaputra continued broadcasting safety instructions, rescue alerts, and medical help—powered by backup batteries and sheer determination The Wire. (2023).

Hybrid Innovation: Stations like CGNet Swara (Chhattisgarh) blend traditional radio with mobile tech. Jha, A. (2021) Farmers can leave a voice message describing a crop issue. The solution is broadcast back the next day, creating an interactive, two-way platform.

The Future: What Needs to Happen Next

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India has over 4,000 viable community radio license zones, but less than 350 stations are operational. Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (India). (2022). To scale this powerful tool, we need:

- Simplified licensing and funding support for NGOs and farmer groups to start community radio stations.
- Public-private partnerships with agri-tech startups and Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs) to deliver expert content.
- Dedicated slots for women's voices, youth programs, and tribal dialects to make radio even more inclusive.

Conclusion

Community radio isn't about flashy tech—it's about real people, speaking real language, solving real problems. In a world obsessed with going digital, community radio reminds us that connection is more powerful than bandwidth. From saving crops to amplifying women's voices, India's community radios are proving that sometimes, the oldest technology can still create the most revolutionary change.

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