

## ***Empowering Voices: Social Development Through Community Radio at a Village in Manipur***

---

**Dr. Sonia Wahengbam\***  
**Hoijahat Gangte\*\***

### **Abstract**

*Technological advancements have made significant strides in development and human progress. However, in a country like India, where more than 70% of the population still resides in rural areas, community radio stations remain a robust infrastructure for developing the rural populace. It is all the more relevant in India, because every region and stratum of society is endowed with a unique cultural identity, customs, traditions, and diverse local languages and dialects. It is a pivotal platform that allows people to exercise their rights to information, freedom of expression, participation, and knowledge about government activities.*

*The present study was conducted on 'Radio FEEDS', a community radio station under the aegis of KVK in Hengbung village, Manipur. The primary focus of this study is on the impact of 'Radio FEEDS' in promoting social development in Hengbung.*

**Keywords:** Community Radio, Social development, rural masses

### **Introduction**

According to the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC), community radio is described as "a non-profit station, currently broadcasting, which offers a service to the community in which it is located, or to which it broadcasts, while promoting the participation of this community in the radio" (AMARC-Europe 1994: 4). Although there is no universally accepted definition of Community Radio, it is generally perceived as those run, owned

---

\* Assistant Professor, \*\*Research Scholar, Department of Mass Communication, Manipur University, Imphal.

and controlled by community members or organisations, for their own communities, and funded by grants, sponsorships, donations, and advertising, with profits ploughed back into the community (Mtimde, 2000)

The key tenets of community radio are access, participation and self-management. Community Radio stations operate for social benefit and not for profit (Buckley, 2008), and through participatory practices, provide a range of educational (and entertainment) programming to facilitate community development.

### **Radio FEEDS (91.2 MHz), Hengbung, Senapati district**

Hengbung is a hilly village located in the Senapati district, approximately 54 km from Imphal, the capital of Manipur. It is inhabited mainly by tribal groups, such as Thadou-Kukis, along with a spatial population of Nagas and Nepalis. According to the 2011 Census, Hengbung has a total population of 1,226, comprising 603 males and 623 females, with a sex ratio of 1,033 females per 1,000 males. A majority of the population, i.e., 904, belongs to the Scheduled Tribe, and data indicate that there are approximately 234 households in the village.

According to the 2022 Ministry of Information and Broadcasting's list of operational Community Radio stations in India, Manipur has four Community Radio stations, all of which are owned and operated by NGOs, namely;

- 1) *Diamond Radio*, Integrated Community Development organisation, NGO, Imphal West.
- 2) *Radio Loktak* (90.4 FM), Khongjom War Memorial Trust, NGO, Thoubal.
- 3) *Radio Feeds* (91.2 MHz), Foundation for Environment and Economic Development Services (FEEDS), NGO, Senapati.
- 4) *Radio Nongin* (90.8 FM), Youths Step Forward Centre, NGO, Wangjing.

Radio FEEDS (Foundation for Environment and Economic Development) is a CRS operated by Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK), Hengbung. The radio was set up in 2019 with the motto, "To serve marginalised communities of interest, which mainstream media outlets represent less and to help diminish the 'voice poverty' that afflicts the geographical area".

### *Empowering Voices: Social Development Through Community...*

Radio FEEDS is not only the first CRS to be established in the hill of Manipur, but it is also the first KVK in the North-Eastern region to operate its own CRS. The CRS is operated by a station manager, a community reporter, a radio jockey and a technician. Apart from them, voluntary participation from community youths and students of FGI (FEEDS Group of Institutions) also contributes to the smooth functioning of the station. It broadcasts programmes daily for 6 hours, from 9 am to 3 pm. It serves the information needs of various communities, including the Thadou-Kukis, Naga, and Nepali communities. However, because the majority of Kukis reside in the village, more than half of the programmes are broadcast in the Thadou-Kuki language.

#### **Literature review**

Community radio is a relatively new movement born out of expressed needs for 'equality for the voiceless'. It is an arena where power imbalances can be addressed (Naughton, 1996). Community Radio is a type of radio service that offers a model of broadcasting beyond commercial and public service systems. It serves geographic communities as well as communities of interest and is designed to meet the needs of groups often overlooked or poorly served by traditional broadcasting structures. Operated, owned, and driven by the communities they serve, community radio stations function as not-for-profit initiatives that provide a mechanism for individuals, groups, and communities to share diverse stories, experiences, and perspectives. Free from the coercive power of advertisers and commercial interests, and managed by local communities, such stations open space for local dialogue on issues of local concern, thereby contributing to empowerment and community development (Gaynor, O'Brien, 2012).

Internationally, the historical evolution of Community Radio has been traced to different contexts and time periods. Some scholars define its beginnings geographically, while others associate its emergence with specific communities and struggles. In Australia, the call for independent community radio began in the 1960s, and a third tier of broadcasting was formally established in the mid-1970s. Today, around 200 fully licensed community stations and approximately 140 temporary stations operate across the country. In Norway, Radio Immigranten began transmission in 1982 following

deregulation in 1981, functioning as an interventionist platform to promote communication, mobilise anti-racist struggles, provide information on global events, and build media expertise among minority groups, particularly women and youth (Ananthakrishnan, 1987). Similarly, the women of Moutse Community Radio exemplified grassroots mobilisation through radio, initiating a communication project under conditions of socio-economic hardship.

Subsequently, in South Asia, the success of 'Radio Sagarmatha' in Nepal marked the establishment of the first community radio station in the region, inspiring the expansion of similar initiatives. 'Kothmale Community Radio' in Sri Lanka gained attention for integrating radio with the internet through the concept of 'radio browsing.' In the Community Radio Handbook (UNESCO, 2001), Colin Fraser and Sonia Restrepo Estrada emphasised that community broadcasting gives voice to the voiceless, enabling local communities to feel that their concerns are addressed and their rights respected. This perspective aligns with broader development discourse articulated at the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995), which underscored that development is fundamentally a social endeavour and that models ignoring cultural dimensions are bound to fail. Radio's comparative advantages as a tool for social change—its adaptability to local languages, traditions, and practices, and its cost-effectiveness in supporting long-term reconstruction, democracy, and nation-building—have further strengthened its global relevance (Noronha, 2003).

In the Indian context, the trajectory of Community Radio evolved through legal, policy, and civil society interventions. The Supreme Court's landmark 1995 judgement declaring that "airwaves are public property" laid the foundation for legitimising community radio in India. This judgement inspired free speech advocates, academics, and community members to organise a concerted campaign for establishing a third tier of broadcasting. In 1996, the Bangalore-based media advocacy group 'VOICES' convened a meeting where stakeholders signed a declaration supporting community broadcasting. The NGO Deccan Development Society launched the 'Pastapur Initiative' from July 17 to 20, 2000, urging the government to free broadcasting from state monopoly and make media space available to communities alongside private players.

### *Empowering Voices: Social Development Through Community...*

By early 2003, the Government of India released the first set of Community Radio guidelines, drafted by Dr Hari Om Srivastava, though eligibility was restricted to educational institutions. On February 1, 2004, Anna FM was launched as India's first campus-based community radio station, operated by the Education and Multimedia Research Centre with programmes produced by students. On November 16, 2006, revised Community Radio guidelines permitted NGOs and agricultural institutions to establish and operate stations, significantly expanding access. A notable example within India is 'Radio Sangham' in Andhra Pradesh, an all-women-run community radio station that demonstrates radio's potential as a tool for women's empowerment.

Thus, from its international emergence as a grassroots communicative movement to its institutionalisation within the Indian regulatory framework, community radio has evolved as a participatory broadcasting model aimed at democratising communication and strengthening local communities.

#### **Objectives of the study**

This study aims to assess Radio FEEDS's role in social empowerment in Hengbung, Senapati.

#### **Specific objectives:**

1. Examine whether the CRS serves as an imperative tool in social upliftment.
2. Assess the programme content, broadcast frequency, and language to determine whether they facilitate improvements in the lives of the rural populace.
3. Find out whether Radio FEEDS evaluates the effectiveness of its performance.
4. Identify potential problems and issues affecting the proper functioning of the radio station.

#### **Theoretical foundations**

Participatory Communication Theory is the foundation for this study. Paulo Freire's dialogic pedagogy positions marginalised communities as active communicative agents rather than passive recipients of information. Within this perspective, Community Radio

functions as a decentralised platform where communication flows multi-directionally and local knowledge is legitimised.

Complementing this perspective, Empowerment Theory is employed to examine the transformative potential of media participation. Empowerment in communication contexts involves enhanced agency, increased awareness, and greater capacity to influence social and institutional processes. Access to media production and representation is understood as a critical component of communicative empowerment, particularly in peripheral regions where mainstream media visibility is limited. This theoretical lens enables assessment of whether participation in Radio FEEDS contributes to substantive empowerment or remains constrained by structural limitations.

The study further draws upon Alternative Media Theory, which conceptualises community media as counter-hegemonic spaces operating outside dominant commercial and state-controlled communication systems. Alternative media are characterised by local ownership, participatory production, and cultural affirmation. In geographically marginalised and ethnically distinct regions such as the hill districts of Manipur, community radio can function as a localised public sphere that facilitates identity negotiation, socio-cultural continuity, and grassroots dialogue.

Together, these theoretical strands frame Radio FEEDS as a dialogic development platform, a potential site of empowerment, and an alternative communicative space embedded within structural realities.

## **Methodology**

### **Research design**

The study employs a qualitative research design, which is suitable for exploring the experiences, perspectives, and practices of stakeholders involved in community radio operations.

### **Study area**

The research was conducted in Hengbung village, located in the Senapati district, where Radio FEEDS is based and operates. The village's hilly terrain, predominantly tribal population, and limited infrastructural resources make it an ideal site for studying the developmental role of community radio.

### **Sampling and respondents**

Purposive sampling was used to identify key stakeholders associated with the functioning of Radio FEEDS. The respondents included:

- Station Manager
- Programme Producer
- Technical Support Personnel
- Faculty Members associated with FEEDS Group of Institutions
- Volunteer Presenters

The respondents were chosen because they possess direct knowledge of programme creation, station operations, and community engagement.

### **Data collection**

Data were collected through:

#### **In-depth interviews**

Semi-structured interviews conducted enabled respondents to elaborate on station activities, operational challenges, and perceived community impact.

#### **Observation**

Visits to the station gave insights into daily operations, equipment, scheduling, and volunteer involvement.

#### **Document and programme analysis**

Programme scripts, schedules, announcements, and audio content were reviewed to understand broadcast themes and messaging.

### **Results and discussion**

#### **1. Effective channel of communication**

Radio FEEDS serves as a robust infrastructure for sharing information, communicating ideas, and documenting shared experiences within the transmission area. It also fosters grassroots participation; since community radios are built on the principle of participation, content creation and programme planning take place through the direct or indirect involvement of the community they serve.

The station provides a platform for community volunteers to produce and present. Amateurs, including farmers, youths, artists, and teachers, are allowed to produce and host shows after receiving basic training. Moreover, it often collaborates with local organisations, such as NGOs, schools, farmers' groups, and women's groups; these collaborations provide expertise and ensure that the content reflects real community concerns. Radio FEEDS, thus, ensures community participation

## **2. Broadcasts content on health and well-being**

The station broadcasts health programmes regularly. It often airs health-related content to emphasise the importance of health and disease prevention. Radio FEEDS has broadcast a range of health programmes, including Polio vaccine, Immunisation Programmes, Tuberculosis eradication, Malaria and Dengue prevention and control, Cold Wave awareness, and Chikungunya signs and symptoms. These programmes are broadcast through central government advertisements or by inviting medical practitioners on talk shows.

It has also aired programmes on the Tobacco Control Campaign to impart awareness on the ills of tobacco use and to curb the use of tobacco products among the youth.

Another point worth mentioning is that Radio FEEDS played an active role during the COVID-19 pandemic in promoting the importance of good health practices, such as wearing face masks, washing hands correctly, and using hand sanitiser.

## **3. Enhances economic upliftment via agricultural information**

Among the many programmes the station airs, agriculture appears to be one in which the station places great emphasis, as it is an initiative under KVK focused on improving agricultural practices and the welfare of farmers.

Over the years, the station has broadcast numerous programmes on improving farming practices and agriculture. However, a few programmes that have been aired recently include the advisory on cabbage plantation, kiwi plantation programme, scientific method and knowledge on plantation (systematic plantation and proper water supply), backyard kitchen garden, and High-Yielding Variety (HYV) plantations of broccoli, ginger, and turmeric.

### *Empowering Voices: Social Development Through Community...*

All programmes on agriculture and farming practices are imparted by experts from the KVK and scientists who are often invited from various institutions. These programmes are designed to enhance the livelihoods of farmers by enabling them to adopt the most effective farming practices, supplemented by advanced equipment, which will ultimately increase yields.

#### **4. Address environmental issues**

Radio FEEDS has taken up the cause of environmental concerns, including climate change and the broader social impacts of environmental issues. It has also addressed deforestation concerns. The following are a few programmes the station has broadcast in this regard:

- Hill Agri Boost: Training for Sustainable Cultivation and Market Linkages
- Empowering Hill Farmers: From Cultivation to Commerce
- Harvesting Prosperity: Skill Development and Market Integration for Farmers
- Growing Green: Sustainable Farming and Market Access for Hilly Farmers
- From Hills to Markets: Skill Development for Fruits and Vegetable Growers
- Agri Forward: Bridging Farmers and Markets in Hilly Regions of Manipur

#### **5. Promote Government schemes**

The station plays a vital role in raising people's awareness of various government schemes and programmes which members of the community would benefit from. Radio FEEDS has helped inform its audiences about schemes such as 'One Nation One Ration Card', which allows any eligible beneficiary of the National Food Security Act (NFSA) to obtain subsidised food grains from a Public Distribution System (PDS) outlet.

It has also raised awareness of 'Rashtriya Poshan Maah', a nutrition campaign by the Government of India that promotes nutrition and combats malnutrition, with special attention to children, pregnant women, and adolescent girls.

## **6. Cultural Preservation and Infotainment**

Community members are invited to share their stories, perform, and participate as musicians and guests, with oral traditions, local music, and community stories at the core. Students of the Feeds Group of Institutions (FGI) also contribute to script reading.

The station has served as a repository of tradition and culture, airing folk music, storytelling, poems, and inviting spokespersons to discuss the benefits of traditional herbs and medicines. Not only does it play an important role in preserving culture, but it also preserves the Kuki dialect.

### **Challenges**

Community radio stations typically serve local or marginalised communities and, operating on meagre budgets and reliant on volunteers for production, they usually face several challenges.

- Funding - Radio FEEDS depends on donations and grants. The Directorate of Audio and Visual Production (DAVP) and CRS projects from UNICEF, UNESCO, CDAC, SMART, and the Gates Foundation are the organisations that fund the station. Funding from advertising is also inconsistent due to the state government's failure to release advertisements on time.
- Technical equipment, such as microphones, mixers, transmitters, and studio soundproofing, tend to be expensive. Moreover, it lacks trained engineers, and maintenance can be expensive.
- Terrain obstruction - Due to CRS's characteristic of limiting transmission to up to 17 kilometres, broadcast airing is limited by terrain altitude and hills, which blocks the frequency.
- Lack of human resources- this challenge is often overlooked yet it is one of the biggest lacunas in community media. CRS usually relies heavily on unpaid volunteers, who lack the basic training needed for operational efficiency.
- Power instability - Like many other rural areas, Hengbung is also prone to power outages, forcing the station to rely on various power backups. Additionally, weather conditions such as thunderstorms and heavy rainfall also cause mishaps in antenna towers.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the findings of this study it can be safely concluded that Radio FEEDS, Henbung, has successfully established its role as an instrument of participator communication within a geographically and socio-culturally distinct rural setting. Although it operates in a hilly tribal region where there are infrastructural limitations, the station has marked itself as a space where local voices are heard and discussed, the community problems are discussed and information is disseminated in dialect easily understood by the local population. The participatory production model, engagement of volunteers and collaboration with local institutions reflects the principles of community radio which puts emphasis on access, participation and self-management.

The study demonstrates that Radio FEEDS contributes to social development in multiple dimensions. Breaking down the dimensions into three aspects--social, economic and culture, the study concludes that it is communication platform that bridges institutional knowledge and grassroots realities. In the social perspective, it informs citizens by strengthening awareness of health, nutrition, and government welfare schemes. Focus on agricultural advisories and scientific farming methods aligns with the mandate of the Krishi Vigyan Kendra and this is what is required for the development of an agriculture-based economy. In an era of rapid media homogenisation, the station plays an important role in preserving indigenous traditions, oral narratives, and the Thadou-Kuki language, thereby reinforcing cultural identity.

Overall, the station illustrates how community radio serves as an enabling space for empowerment, dialogue and collective progress in rural areas when it is rooted in local participation and programme contents have contextual relevance.

## **References**

- Abdul-Malik, A., Al-Hassan, S., & Andani, A. (2011). The role of community radio in livelihood improvement: The case of Simli Radio. *Field Actions Science Reports*, 5. <https://journals.openedition.org/factsreports/869>
- Al-Hassan, S., Andani, A., & Abdul-Malik, A. (2011). The role of community radio in livelihood improvement: The case of Simli Radio. <https://core.ac.uk/download/224102301.pdf>

- Asomah, J. Y. (2018). *Ghana in search of government accountability in controlling political corruption: Are the private mass media part of the solution or the problem?* <https://core.ac.uk/download/226138050.pdf>
- Dissanayake, C. (2014). *Tuning the migrant voices: A study of Sinhala language ethnic radio programs in Melbourne* (Doctoral dissertation). <http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30067407>
- Gangte, H. (2022). *Socio-economic representation of tribal community groups under Radio FEEDS (91.2 MHz), Hengbung, Manipur* (1st ed.). Notion Press.
- Government of India, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. (2025). *List of commissioned community radio stations in India having valid GOPA as on 17.01.2025*. <https://mib.gov.in/sites/default/files/2025-01/list-of-commissioned-community-radio-stations-in-india-having-valid-gopa-as-on-17.01.2025.pdf>
- Mawokomayi, B. (2017). *Assessing the role of community radio stations in facilitating development: A case study of Forte FM in the Eastern Cape Province*. <https://core.ac.uk/download/327278176.pdf>
- Otto, H. (2025). *A theoretical-conceptual framework for South African community radio as participatory media*. <https://core.ac.uk/download/672537999.pdf>
- Press Information Bureau. (n.d.). *Fact sheet*. <https://www.pib.gov.in/factsheetdetails.aspx?id=148563&reg=3&lang=2>
- Press Information Bureau. (n.d.). *Press note*. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressNoteDetails.aspx?NotelD=155235&ModuleId=3&reg=3&lang=2>
- Seth, A. (n.d.). *The community radio movement in India*. Gram Vaani. <https://gramvaani.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/community-radio-indian-history.pdf>
- Tarafdar, S. (2015). Role of community radio in India. *International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies*, 2(2), 375–379. <https://oaji.net/articles/2015/1115-1443863408.pdf>
- Technological AI tools for multilingual communication. (n.d.). WhatLetter. <https://www.whatletter.com/blog/technological-tools-for-multilingual-communication>
- UNESCO. (2001). *Community radio handbook*. UNESCO.

