

Utility of Amateur Radio Organisations for Public Service: Case Study of West Bengal Radio Club (2011-2021)

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Abstract

Due to the cautious attitude of successive governments in power, technology and communication have only recently gained traction in West Bengal. However, since the turn of the millennium, that state has been unable to resist the pervasive inroads made by satellite communication technology to enhance public service delivery. Historically, radio communication has had a big impact on the cultural and political mentality of the people in West Bengal. Community radio stations have been much touted as a participatory form of communication approach lately, alongside the lively FM radio stations and the enduring Akashvani (government initiative). The Jadavpur University community radio station (90.8 MHz) is the most prominent example. Nonetheless, outside of the media spotlight and mainstream academic penetration, amateur radio clubs in West Bengal have multiplied and engaged in a variety of community service-related activities over the past twenty years.

Introduction

Ham radio (amateur radio), apart from being a mere hobby, requires operators who need to understand radio theory, be able to trace a schematic and know how to build a transmitter and receiver with whatever material they might be available (Barlett, 2015). Hams have been operative in the West from late 19th century but in India it started from 1921 onwards. Before independence amateur radio in India operated in amateurish and adventurist way at individual level mostly helping local administration. After independence the presence

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of political and social personalities in the field of amateur radio communication popularised Ham radio in Indian society. People well versed in physics and in telecommunications to map frequency were the frontrunners as Ham radio operators. With the opening of Indian economy to the world market the experiences of role of Ham radio in western societies started to broaden the vision and mission of Ham radio operators in India. Ham radio's utility in society is an unexplored research area in communication research as awareness, perception and popularity of role of Ham radio is low in the rank of available radio communication channels (Suri, 2019). The first two amateur radio operators in India were from Kolkata. Amarendra Chandra Gooptu (2JK) and Mukul Bose (2HQ) got their amateur radio operator's licence in 1921 in Kolkata. Keeping in mind the continuous work of Hams in West Bengal in the last ten years, this work tries to bring forth the value of Ham radio communication in contemporary society with special reference to West Bengal's most active Ham group - West Bengal Radio Club (WBRC), which is located in Sodepur in the North 24 Parganas district.

Research method

This article is based on primary data gathered from extensive interview with the founding members of West Bengal Radio Club and focus group discussion with members of the club.

The West Bengal case

The West Bengal Radio Club (Amateur Club), founded by Ambarish Nag Biswas, VU2JFA, is a non-profit organization. The group was established in 2010 at Sodepur High School (H.S), Station Road, Sodepur, Kolkata, West Bengal, India, with the club station call sign VU2MQT. The group regularly hosts activities throughout West Bengal to promote amateur (HAM) radio communication, with the real support of Dr. Sudip Chowdhury, Headmaster of Sodepur High School (H.S.) and National Institute of Amateur Radio (NIAR), Hyderabad. Because of its access to a unique frequency network, WBRC is able to reach remote areas that do not have a well-established communication infrastructure. For the past ten years, it has been a volunteer group seeking missing people, those with mental illnesses, and those who get separated from their families or groups during major religious events like those in Gangasagar. People who

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go missing are frequently not Bengali speakers and use a different language that the local police agency cannot comprehend. This is where WBRC comes in. They bring these people back together with their loved ones and friends via their Ham radio hobby, and many bilingual people join their group on a voluntary basis. WBRC members played a significant role in disaster management during cyclones like Ayla, Amphan, Iyas, and Bulbul, when they were the only mode of communication, as well as in the 2015 and 2022 earthquakes in Nepal (Chakraborti and Ghosh, 2021). These Hams work to re-establish the radio communication channels by setting up temporary radio stations in the affected areas in collaboration with government disaster management organizations like the National Disaster Relief Management (NDRF). Despite the unpredictability of clouds, rain, and cyclones, WBRC members are now concentrating on satellite preparation in order to facilitate more rapid communication in remote areas. WBRC members work with state government, emergency management agencies, evacuation operators, and fire brigades to respond to any emergency situations that may arise in the state. Furthermore, they have employed their radios to get in touch with deep-sea fishermen during unforeseen severe storms, which has helped reduce the danger to those fishermen (Pasupati Mondal Call Sign: VU3OPT Member of West Bengal Amateur Radio Club, personal interaction on 4.9.22).

In the event of communication problems in shadow areas (where mobile networks are not accessible and the wireless service of the police wireless operator is slow) during elections, the State Election Commission (SEC) office employs WBRC operators as fillers to fill the communication gap. Additionally, the SEC office sometimes hires WBRC operators to use code languages for communication in order to protect the secrecy of election management strategies. While ascending mountains in the other direction, mountaineering enthusiasts often utilize Ham radio equipment for communication. This type of communication is made easier by the use of distinct call signs that are assigned to specific Ham operators. Voluntary social service encourages Ham radio operation as a hobby in order to install a scientific mindset in youngsters. Throughout India, WBRC has been lauded for its role in using its radio network to help find missing individuals. WBRC has surpassed the initiatives of every

other Ham radio organization in West Bengal by promoting its activities. In the recent Covid-induced lockdown, WBRC members made every effort to maintain communication channels between those who were affected, such as students and migrant labourers from other states, and to facilitate contact between them and their families. They also provided door-to-door medical care, including delivering oxygen tanks to the residences of Covid patients and helping seniors and others with medical crises.

The Indian Trustee Act registers the non-profit organization Indian Academy of Communication and Disaster Management (IACDM), which complements the work of the WBRC. The Amateur (Ham) Station Operator License Examination (ASOL) is the subject of awareness and training sessions that this academy offers in a three-month certificate course on a regular basis. Classes are held every Sunday at 17 Railway Park, P.O. Sodepur, Kolkata 700110. These students are eligible to join the West Bengal Radio Club, VU2WB, upon passing the ASOL test. With WBRC, IACDM conducts several technical workshops, seminars, and mock drills on a regular basis. Students in this group could have the chance to collaborate with WBRC across a wide range of disciplines. Mrs. Rinku Nag Biswas, VU2JFB, serves as the secretary of this institution.

Ambarish Nag Biswas established the organization, which has a large membership throughout the state. However, about three hundred of them are active members who take part in different events. With the aid of his club, he was able to engage more in the public service of responding to disasters, such as rescuing missing individuals during the Gangesagar Mela. Despite numerous challenges early in his career, he persevered and kept working hard under the guidance and backing of the Indian government. Furthermore, the most remarkable aspect of his organization is that in the past, Ham radio operators were required to pay a charge of 200 rupees in order to get permission to move their Ham radio equipment from one location to another. However, the first person to petition the Prime Minister for a fee waiver was Ambarish Nag Biswas, the editor of the West Bengal Ham Radio Club. His request was granted when the legislation was changed. As a result, Ham operators are now free to conduct their business without having to pay for a site. Additionally, he established his own Ham club. There, he taught

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himself how to be a good Ham operator and set out to put together a team, where the members interact, unlike other clubs that are created after a license is granted. He regards this work as an accomplishment. First a control room for a temporary Ham radio station is established that is prone to disruption by cyclones. When a catastrophe breaks out and the administration's communication system with its other agencies, such as the police, fire department, and civil defense, is disrupted, they use Ham radio to communicate with one another. The National Disaster Response Act was ineffective in that sense during Cyclone Ayala, as only the Ham radio was able to restore communication when the network service was interrupted in several areas of South 24 Parganas. In addition to this, the lack of a result network for those secondary tests caused the pupils a great deal of hardship. By disclosing the findings, Ham radio assisted them. The West Bengal Radio Club (Amateur Club), which Ambarish Nag Biswas established, marked the beginning of the Ham Radio Club's journey in West Bengal. Previously, they were required to conduct their business while paying the government the bare minimum. However, he took the initiative to petition the former prime minister and obtain permission for the levy. Ham members still labour independently and tax-free for this specific project, which might be considered one of his major accomplishments.

Findings

This study discovered through field work in Delhi and West Bengal that, of all the current Ham groups in India, the West Bengal Radio Club stands out as the most well-known and well-liked because of its creative approach to providing volunteer support to government administration in various ways for the purpose of social service. The West Bengal Radio Club, which Ambarish Nag Biswas founded personally in 1996 and which was later registered as an organization in 2010, is based on the use of wireless communication by civilians for research purposes rather than commercial purposes, subject to certain regulations, after obtaining a license by passing exams (formerly four grade, currently two grade) administered by the Government of India's Ministry of Information and Communication Technology. Because it was challenging to get a club station license in the 1990s, Biswas set out on his social service mission with the tenet of 'help always mankind' (HAM). Unlike other clubs where

anyone can become a member by obtaining a license from anyplace, the uniqueness of WBRC is that all members of this organization are initially trained by WBRC. Because WBRC places a strong emphasis on instilling the altruistic value in its members (the value mantra is "if you give life, you can have life," which is inspired by Swami Vivekananda), it secured a club license in 2010 when it trained about 30 members, and it now has about 295 members in 2024. The goal of WBRC is for its members to be prepared to aid the police and local government, and as a result, the importance of altruism as well as the importance of maintaining secrecy should be learned. As a result, WBRC first has trainees who administer tests, and then, those who obtain licenses are accepted as provisional members who are employed as scouts in a variety of field tasks. Later, depending on the work culture, some are chosen in secret to serve on the WBRC's executive committee. But since WBRC has a strict code of conduct for its members' actions, any infraction can lead to membership being revoked permanently. WBRC is a self-training facility, not an NGO.

The founder of WBRC, Biswas, visited the Gangasagar pilgrim fair in the late 1980s. Every mid-January, thousands of pilgrims and tourists flock to Kapil Muni Temple in the Gangasagar region of West Bengal's South 24 Pargana district for the fair, one of the biggest festivals in eastern India. Biswas noticed that, like the rubbish left at the fairgrounds, every year after the fair concludes and tourists and pilgrims return, many unidentified individuals from different Indian states are discovered who were unable to communicate either due to linguistic barrier or illiteracy, but who became separated from their party during the fair. Biswas realised that it would be a novel social service if an attempt could be made to bring these individuals back together with their families. This is a humanitarian cause and a societal tragedy at first, and later a family catastrophe because, owing to non-identification and difficulties locating their family members, these missing people occasionally overcrowd hospital beds, resulting in a healthcare system collapse. By serving as the focal point for locating missing people, Biswas claims that WBRC has brought about a social transformation. WBRC began to do this incessantly throughout the years and gradually gained acknowledgement from the state department. WBRC is also adept at offering emergency

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communication support to the state disaster management department in addition to locating missing people. To create a persistent long-distance Ham-to-Ham link for social service, not for broadcasting, they have included a solar battery panel charger to their mobile devices. The installation of a radio station from the location where the network antenna is damaged to the fire brigade is not even possible for law enforcement. Thus, Ham operators handle all of this coordination communication, and in West Bengal, the WBRC is exceptional at it.

Conclusion

Since 2014, WBRC has been an essential component of state disaster management meetings because it is acknowledged as the second line of communication in all situations involving wireless communication. Despite the fact that Hams do not offer business services such as infotainment, they become the lifesaver of communication lines during emergencies when all conventional means of communication fail (Rajendran, 2004). For the last ten years, the actions of WBRC have mirrored those of emergency service providing government agencies like the fire brigade, police, medical units, and disaster relief teams. All of these agencies keep in touch with WBRC and utilize its services to communicate with the public during emergencies. The motivation for this study is the crucial need to comprehend the scarcity of published materials in West Bengal on amateur radio social service-based operations.

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