

The Role of Radio in Empowering Marginalized Communities: An Analytical Study

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ABSTRACT

Radio continues to play a crucial role in reaching and empowering marginalized communities, especially in regions with limited access to mainstream media and digital technologies. This analytical study examines how radio, particularly community radio, functions as a participatory platform for amplifying local voices, addressing social issues, and promoting inclusive development. By analysing select case studies and programming content from rural and underrepresented regions, the study explores how radio facilitates access to critical information related to health, education, livelihoods, and rights. The research also highlights the importance of local language broadcasting and community involvement in program production as key factors in building trust and relevance. The findings underscore that radio is not merely a tool of communication, but a medium of empowerment that fosters awareness, dialogue, and agency among disadvantaged populations.

Keywords: Community Radio, Marginalized Communities, Media Empowerment, Inclusive Communication and Participatory Media

INTRODUCTION

In the current digital media ecosystem, radio might appear obsolete. Yet, for millions in marginalized and rural communities, it remains a critical conduit for information, education, and empowerment. Particularly where internet access is scarce and digital literacy is low, radio stands out as a cost-effective, inclusive, and culturally resonant medium. Community radio a decentralized, non-commercial broadcasting model has proven to be especially impactful in amplifying local voices and facilitating participatory development.

Unlike public and private broadcasters, community radio is managed by and for local populations. Its programming is hyperlocal, linguistically accessible, and socially inclusive, addressing gaps in representation and information. Community radio thereby challenges the exclusionary tendencies of mainstream media by prioritizing marginalized voices rural populations, linguistic minorities, women, and economically disadvantaged groups.

This study is grounded in participatory communication theory, which sees communication not as top-down dissemination, but as a dialogic, empowering process. Paulo Freire's concept of "dialogue" and Amartya Sen's "capabilities approach" frame the conceptual foundations of this research, highlighting the importance of voice, participation, and agency in development.

Previous research has underscored radio's capacity to promote governance, enable participatory democracy, and catalyse collective action. In India and across the Global South, community radio stations have enhanced awareness of health, agriculture, disaster management, and gender equity by translating complex knowledge into accessible, culturally resonant content.

This study investigates how community radio stations in India specifically in Karnataka empower marginalized communities by promoting access to information, enhancing participation, and enabling civic agency. It further examines challenges to operational sustainability and explores policy frameworks needed to scale community media.

This study aims to:

- Investigate how community radio enhances access to information among marginalized groups.
- Examine participatory practices and their impact on empowerment.
- Compare urban and rural community radio models in Karnataka.
- Identify operational and policy-level challenges facing community radio in India.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada (2002) characterize community radio as a medium rooted in grassroots participation and democratic dialogue. Their model emphasizes internal community communication aimed at problem-solving and mobilization. Tucker (2013) distinguishes between the diffusion of information and participatory strategies in community radio, arguing that both are essential for localized development.

Multiple studies reinforce the notion that community radio serves as the “voice of the voiceless.” In Nepal, Timalsina and Pradhan (2019) observed how rural communities used radio to engage with public services and educational content. In Ethiopia, Yemer (2020) noted the use of indigenous languages to enhance cultural relevance and community ownership.

In Karnataka, initiatives like NammaDhwani and Radio Siddhartha have enabled women and marginalized castes to transition from passive listeners to active broadcasters. Anaeto et al. (2013) argue that communication tools succeed in development only when rooted in local knowledge systems and capable of prompting behavioural change.

Community radio fosters transparency and responsiveness by linking citizens with local authorities. Hermansky (2022) illustrates how U.S. community radio stations promote civic critique and grassroots action. Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada’s model includes mechanisms such as public grievances aired on radio programs to influence policy.

Despite its potential, community radio faces operational challenges, including limited funding, bureaucratic licensing, and human resource deficits. O'Brien and Gaynor (2011) found that the lack of consistent engagement from community stakeholders often weakens radio’s social impact. In India, policy barriers to advertising and uneven station distribution remain major concerns.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study methodology to investigate the role of community radio in empowering marginalized communities in Karnataka. Two community radio stations were purposively selected to represent contrasting socio-geographic contexts: Radio Active 90.4 MHz, an urban-based station located in Bangalore, and NammaDhwani, a rural community radio initiative based in Budikote, Kolar District. These stations were chosen for their operational maturity, sustained community engagement, and explicit focus on marginalized populations.

Data collection was carried out using qualitative methods to ensure depth and triangulation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 20 stakeholders¹⁰ at each station including station managers, technical staff, community reporters, program producers, and regular listeners from target communities. These interviews provided insight into programming strategies, participatory mechanisms, and perceived community impact. Additionally, two focus group discussions (FGDs), each comprising 6 to 8 participants, were held at the respective sites to explore collective perspectives on content relevance, empowerment outcomes, and listener engagement. The research also involved participant observation, with the researcher observing editorial meetings, program production, field reporting, and community interactions at both stations. This immersive approach allowed for a contextual understanding of the stations’ day-to-day functioning and participatory culture.

Furthermore, a document and content analysis was conducted using program archives, broadcast logs, listener feedback reports, and policy documents. Selected audio content on themes such as health, education,

agriculture, and local governance was reviewed to assess representation, accessibility, and alignment with developmental objectives.

The data collected through these various methods were analysed using thematic analysis. Transcripts, notes, and documents were inductively coded, and recurring themes were identified. The findings were then categorized across five key dimensions:

- (1) Access to Information,
- (2) Participation and Ownership,
- (3) Voice and Identity,
- (4) Local Governance, and
- (5) Operational Challenges.

This analytical framework enabled a comparative understanding of how the two community radio stations function as platforms for empowerment in their respective contexts.

Limitations of the Study

While the study offers in-depth insights, its scope is limited to two stations in Karnataka. The qualitative design, while rich in context, restricts generalizability. Additionally, the small sample size and regional focus may not reflect broader trends across India. Further research incorporating longitudinal and multi-regional perspectives would be valuable.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Table 1: Profile of Interview Participants

Stakeholder Category	Radio Active (Urban)	NammaDhwani (Rural)	Total
Station Managers	1	1	2
Technical Staff	2	2	4
Community Reporters	3	3	6
Program Producers	2	2	4
Regular Listeners	2	2	4
Total Interviews	10	10	20

Table 1: Interview Participants by Category

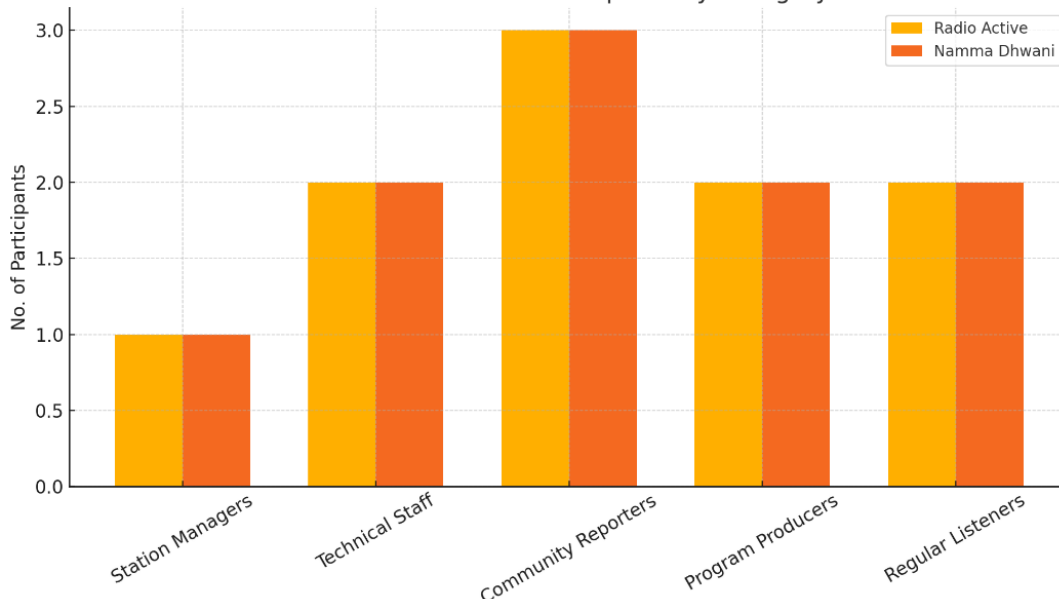


Table 1 presents a balanced sample of 20 interviewees across both Radio Active (urban) and NammaDhwani (rural). Each station contributed equally, with representation from key stakeholder groups: station managers,

technical staff, community reporters, program producers, and regular listeners. This diversity ensured a well-rounded understanding of each station's operations, programming strategies, and audience engagement. Community reporters offered grassroots perspectives on participation and empowerment, while technical staff and producers shed light on infrastructural and creative practices. Station managers provided strategic insights into sustainability and policy challenges. Notably, including regular listeners enriched the analysis with user-centric feedback on relevance and trust. The equal distribution across stakeholder types and locations enabled a meaningful urban-rural comparison, strengthening the study's core focus on participatory communication and media empowerment.

Table 2: Focus Group Discussion Composition

Station	No. of FGDs	Participants per FGD	Participant Profile
Radio Active	1	8	LGBTQIA+ members, youth volunteers, domestic workers
NammaDhwani	1	6	Rural women, SHG members, farmers, teachers

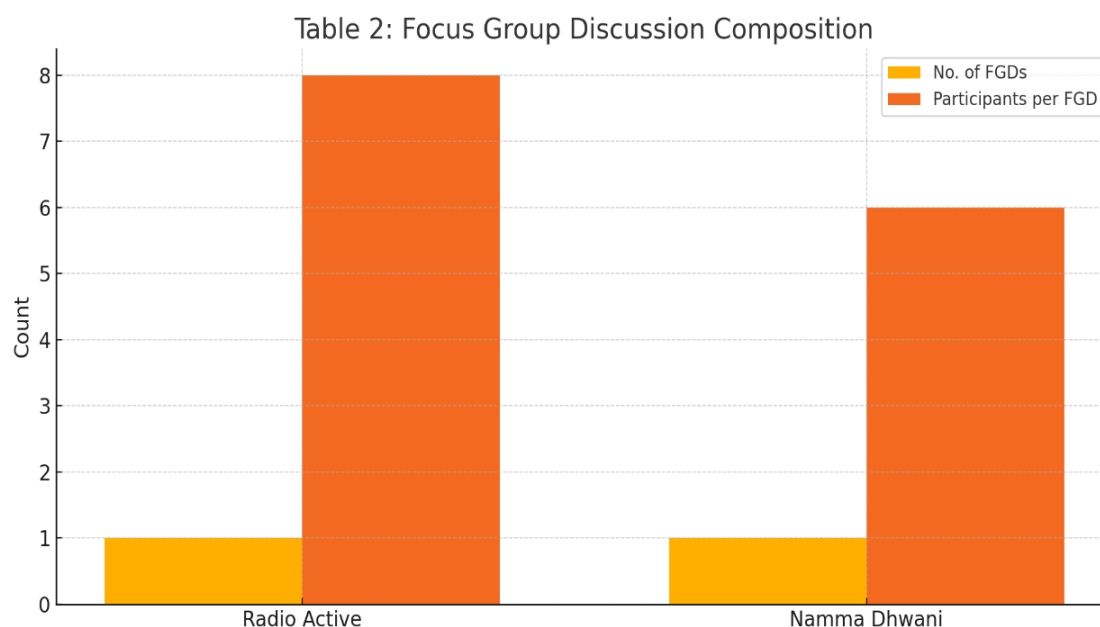


Table 2 outlines the composition of the two focus group discussions (FGDs), one at each station. Radio Active's FGD included 8 participants comprising LGBTQIA+ members, youth volunteers, and domestic workers reflecting the station's urban and socially inclusive focus. In contrast, NammaDhwani's FGD brought together 6 rural women, SHG members, farmers, and teachers, representing grassroots community stakeholders.

The FGDs provided valuable collective insights into content relevance, empowerment, and listener engagement. The diversity of participants ensured a grounded understanding of how each station addresses the unique needs of its target audience. These discussions enriched the study by capturing shared experiences and perceptions shaped by socio-cultural and geographic contexts.

Table 3: Key Themes Emerged from Data Collection

Theme	Description
Programming Strategies	How content is selected, produced, and localized for community relevance
Participatory Mechanisms	Community involvement in planning, production, and feedback
Empowerment Outcomes	Changes in confidence, identity assertion, and civic awareness
Listener Engagement	Listener habits, feedback processes, and perceived connection to programs
Organizational Culture	Internal dynamics, power structures, training practices

Table 3: Frequency of Key Themes Identified

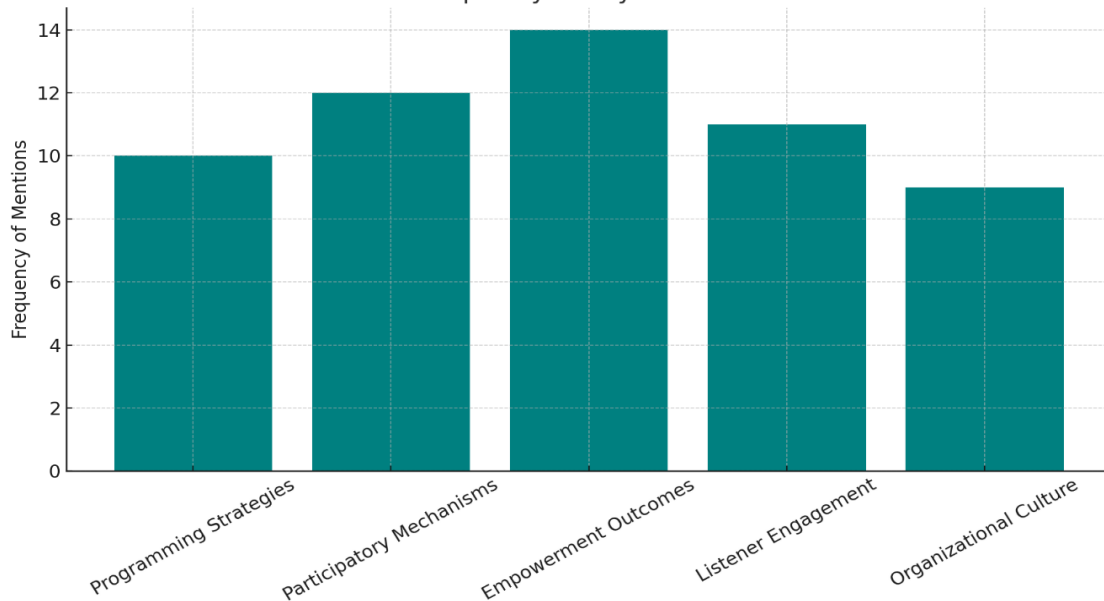


Table 3 highlights five core themes identified through thematic analysis. **Programming strategies** revealed how each station tailors content to local needs using accessible formats and culturally relevant messaging. **Participatory mechanisms** showed strong community involvement in planning, producing, and refining content central to the ethos of community radio. **Empowerment outcomes** emerged in the form of increased confidence, identity assertion, and civic engagement among marginalized groups. **Listener engagement** reflected the importance of trust, relevance, and feedback channels in building audience loyalty. Finally, **organizational culture** encompassed internal collaboration, decision-making processes, and ongoing training all of which influence the station's sustainability and inclusivity. These themes form the analytical backbone of the study, illustrating how community radio functions as both a media platform and a participatory development tool.

Access to Information

Indicator	Radio Active (Urban)	NammaDhwani (Rural)
Primary Themes	LGBTQIA+ rights, urban issues	Agriculture, health, rural livelihoods
Language	Kannada, Hindi, English, Tamil	Kannada
Formats	Podcasts, interviews, live shows	Radio dramas, jingles
Crisis Coverage	COVID-19 alerts, eviction issues	Drought updates, COVID-19
Feedback	WhatsApp, IVRS	Village meetings, suggestion boxes

Both stations serve as crucial hubs of information tailored to their respective contexts. Radio Active focuses on urban issues such as LGBTQIA+ rights and waste management, using multilingual content formats including podcasts and interviews. NammaDhwani, on the other hand, emphasizes agriculture, health, and rural livelihoods through accessible formats like radio dramas and jingles. The crisis response capacity of both stations is evident, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Feedback mechanisms differ: urban listeners rely on digital tools like WhatsApp and IVRS, while rural listeners engage through village meetings and physical suggestion boxes highlighting infrastructural disparities.

Participation and Ownership

Indicator	Radio Active	NammaDhwani
Community Contributors	~60%	>75%
Gender Inclusion	LGBTQIA+, women	Predominantly women
Youth Involvement	High (college students)	Moderate (local youth)
Training	Urban workshops	Field-based training
Content Planning	NGO oversight	Community committees

Participation is a cornerstone of both stations. NammaDhwani reports higher local content creation (>75%) due to deep integration with self-help groups and community committees. Gender inclusion is evident in both, though Radio Active stands out for its LGBTQIA+ inclusivity. Youth engagement is more prominent in Radio Active, driven by volunteerism and educational partnerships in Bangalore. Meanwhile, NammaDhwani relies on long-term local training programs, creating a sustainable but oldervolunteer base.

Voice and Identity

Indicator	Radio Active	NammaDhwani
Social Groups	LGBTQIA+, waste workers	Dalits, Adivasis, women
Culture	Urban folk, multilingual	Folk songs, caste narratives
Impact	Visibility, self-assertion	Confidence, inclusion
Engagement	Talk shows, IVR	Community singing, stories

Community radio helps marginalized groups articulate identity and foster inclusion. Radio Active focuses on the visibility of urban minority groupslike domestic workers and LGBTQIA+ individualsthrough talk shows and multilingual content. NammaDhwani foregrounds folk culture, caste narratives, and stories of rural women and youth. This deep cultural engagement strengthens community pride and ownership, while also challenging local hierarchies.

Governance and Accountability

Indicator	Radio Active	NammaDhwani
Issues Covered	Waste, RTI, civic concerns	Ration, schools, water
Officials on Air	Occasionally	Frequently
Feedback	Phone-ins, WhatsApp	On-air and offline forums
Impact	Waste management campaigns	Water tank repairs, teacher appointments
Trust Levels	Medium–High	Very High

Both stations play a civic role, acting as bridges between communities and authorities. Radio Active tackles urban civic issues such as waste management and RTI through sporadic engagement with municipal officials. In contrast, NammaDhwani frequently hosts panchayat leaders, health workers, and educators, providing a more consistent platform for civic dialogue. Impact is measurable: while Radio Active has influenced waste campaigns, NammaDhwani has catalysed tangible changes like infrastructure repairs and staff appointments showing higher levels of public trust and efficacy.

Operational Challenges

Indicator	Radio Active	NammaDhwani
Funding	Grants, NGOs	NGO-backed
Licensing	Renewal delays	Frequency challenges
Infrastructure	Studio, podcast tools	Basic gear, solar power
Volunteers	High turnover	Stable, but aging team
Partnerships	NGOs, universities	NGOs, local bodies

Despite their success, both stations face structural barriers. Radio Active struggles with high volunteer turnover and reliance on grant-based funding. Licensing renewal delays and regulatory red tape further complicate sustainability. NammaDhwani faces challenges typical of rural setups, including limited infrastructure and restricted frequency allocations. Yet, its strong community base and stable partnerships with rural NGOs offer resilience. The contrast underscores how local context shapes both vulnerabilities and solutions in community broadcasting.

Comparative Summary Table: Radio Active vs. NammaDhwani

Feature	Radio Active (Urban)	NammaDhwani (Rural)
Primary Audience	LGBTQIA+, youth, urban workers	Women, farmers, SHG groups
Content Style	Multilingual podcasts, interviews	Radio dramas, folk narratives
Community Participation	~60%	>75%
Infrastructure	Advanced studio, digital tools	Basic gear, solar-powered
Engagement Channels	WhatsApp, IVRS	Village meetings, suggestion boxes
Civic Impact	Municipal campaigns	Infrastructure repair, teacher appointments

DISCUSSION OF QUALITATIVE FINDINGS**1. Deep Community Engagement through Participatory Structures**

Interviews and FGDs revealed that both Radio Active and NammaDhwani have established participatory frameworks that encourage active community involvement. At Radio Active, participation is often volunteer-driven, supported by partnerships with NGOs and academic institutions. In contrast, NammaDhwani integrates local self-help groups and community committees into its content planning process, resulting in grassroots ownership and stronger local identity.

2. Programming Strategies Are Highly Contextualized

The stations adopt distinct programming models aligned with their audiences. Radio Active uses multilingual podcasts, expert interviews, and urban issue-based talk shows, catering to a diverse and mobile urban audience. NammaDhwani leverages radio dramas, jingles, and folk storytelling in Kannada to resonate with rural listeners, including non-literate and older populations. These strategies were consistently appreciated in FGDs as being relatable and easy to understand.

3. Perceived Empowerment through Voice and Representation

Respondents across both stations reported increased self-confidence and a sense of pride from participating in radio content. Community reporters, especially women at NammaDhwani and LGBTQIA+ participants at Radio Active, expressed that the platform allowed them to "speak without fear" and "be heard by society." This empowerment extended beyond media spaces into greater social visibility and community leadership.

4. Listener Engagement Is Driven by Trust and Relevance

Participant observation showed that listeners tune in regularly not only for entertainment but for reliable information. Radio Active listeners appreciated updates on municipal services, while NammaDhwani listeners valued programs on crop prices, health tips, and educational advice. Listener feedback mechanisms (WhatsApp, phone-ins, village meetings) reinforce the stations' responsiveness and accountability.

5. Organizational Practices Reflect Participatory Culture

Field notes from participant observation highlight that both stations foster a collaborative working culture. Editorial meetings at Radio Active involve NGO advisors and volunteer producers, whereas NammaDhwani follows a more community-centric model with decisions often taken by local committees. Training sessions and informal mentoring were commonly observed, indicating investment in capacity building and knowledge sharing.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that community radio plays a powerful role in empowering marginalized groups through participatory communication. Both Radio Active and NammaDhwani highlight how access to the airwaves can democratize information, encourage civic engagement, and build community agency.

Radio Active exemplifies how urban community radio can serve as an inclusive platform for gender and sexual minorities, waste workers, and other socially excluded groups, using diverse languages and digital integration to enhance outreach. In contrast, NammaDhwani demonstrates the power of community-led broadcasting in rural India to promote health awareness, agricultural knowledge, and civic accountability through culturally resonant and linguistically accessible formats. Despite differing operational contexts, both stations succeed in challenging social hierarchies, enabling dialogue, and enhancing the agency of historically silenced populations.

Nevertheless, significant structural challenges hinder the long-term sustainability of community radio in India. Irregular funding streams, bureaucratic licensing procedures, lack of technical infrastructure, and policy-level neglect continue to undermine the sector's growth and resilience. Without strategic policy reforms and institutional support including capacity building, regulatory simplification, and financial incentives the transformative potential of community radio will remain constrained.

To harness community radio's full potential as a tool of inclusive development and democratic engagement, it is imperative for stakeholders' governments, civil society, academia, and development agencies to recognize and invest in its future. Strengthening this medium is not only a communication imperative but a broader commitment to equity, representation, and the right to be heard.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Streamline CR application and renewal processes.
2. Permit limited ads or local sponsorships.
3. Support capacity-building for women and youth reporters.
4. Fund technology and digital integration.
5. Encourage partnerships with academia, NGOs, and government.

In a time dominated by digital media monopolies and algorithmic curation, community radio remains one of the few truly people-powered media platforms. It is not just a relic of analogue technology, but a vibrant, adaptive, and transformative force. Investing in community radio is a step toward realizing equitable communication rights and strengthening participatory democracy in India.

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