

# **Notes on Radio Alakal**

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## **Notes on Radio Alakal**

### **Background and Origin**

It is a fact well recognized that the fisheries sector is a prime contributor to the Indian economy. In terms of fish production, India ranks third in the world. India is home to several species of fish that command high foreign exchange. In spite of the substantive contribution made by the fisheries sector, the population that is engaged in this occupation remains in a state of social and economic backwardness, relegated to the margins with little interaction with the rest of the world.

Low levels of mainstreaming and lack of awareness of the developments in the world outside their own are cited as reasons behind the backwardness of this population despite the appreciable contribution that it makes to the exchequer. Though there has been a change in the illiteracy levels over the years, nevertheless the number of people who come forward to seek education from this sector is not high enough to make a positive and widespread dent in the backward nature of this population.

The pitiable way of life has caught the attention of community workers and civil society organisations who have tried various ways and means to improve the standard of living of this population by improving access to information and building awareness. One of the widely used tools for capacity building of grass root communities is the radio, which has made a successful and powerful comeback in spite of the popularity and reach of the television. Experience has shown that radio is a powerful mass medium for reaching large numbers, especially since the medium does not mandate intense concentration. Listening can happen even while carrying out other tasks.

It is with the explicit purpose of building the quality of life of the poor fishing communities and empowering them that Radio Alakal was launched on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2006<sup>1</sup>. With Society for Promotion of Alternative Computing and Employment (SPACE) as its technology solutions provider, this first-of-its kind community radio<sup>2</sup> project came up as a joint venture of a group of civil society and community based organisations including, South Indian Federation of Fishermen Societies (SIFFS), Kerala Swathanthra Matsya Thozhilali Federation (KSMTF), MJM Mavellikara and India Disaster Centre. Radio Alakal, previously Radio FM, was formally made public on 25<sup>th</sup> April 2006.

### **Objectives**

As indicated earlier, the community radio initiative was launched to build capacities of

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<sup>1</sup> The Government of India brought out the revised community radio guidelines in 2006 permitting civil society organisations to run community radio services.

<sup>2</sup> Community radio, which is a form of radio service catering to the interests of a certain area, is increasingly been seen as medium for developing and empowering communities that have been isolated and marginalized from the mainstream.

the poor fishing folk by improving their access to information. The two main objectives behind the Radio Alakal project are:

- To use the radio as an effective tool of communication for development of the fishermen population
- To use radio as a participatory method to empower communities and to address various issues that are of direct or indirect concern to the fishermen community

### **Activities**

In attempting to map the activities of Radio Alakal, two phases are being used for the purposes of this document, viz., SPACE phase and Vizhinjam phase.

#### **SPACE Phase**

In the initial months of the functioning of Radio Alakal and till December 2006 the production and programming aspects were carried out at the office of SPACE in Vellayambalam. Hence the name used herein, the SPACE phase.

#### *Selection and Training*

In keeping with the community aspect of the project, efforts were made from the beginning itself to ensure community participation in putting together the programmes aired through this medium. To facilitate this, youth from the fishing community between the ages of 20 and 25 were selected through a process of inviting applications followed by personal interviews. The basic expected qualification was graduation. In response to the call for applications, 27 youth applied, out of which seven were identified for training.

A three-day training programme was given to the selected youth. on The topics covered included radio production, reporting standards, technological aspects, script writing and interviewing skills. The sessions were handled by people with experience and expertise in the various facets of production, including Ms.Mini of All India Radio, Mr.L.Ajith, journalist, Mr.C.S.Sathish Babu, technology expert and Mr.Wilfred of MJM.

#### *Programme Production and Dissemination*

After the completion of training, the team was entrusted the task of producing the programmes for dissemination through Radio Alakal. The production aspect was carried out at the office of SPACE, wherein a studio was set up for this purpose. SPACE, which is a champion of free software, equipped the studio with freeware like Audacity, a sound software.. The voice recorder was supported by Linux. The studio was equipped with necessary infrastructure including two computers, mikes, headphones, UPS and music keyboard for carrying out programme production.

Planning formed a significant component of the production process. Planning was necessary both for charting out day-wise programmes and also for division of tasks between the team members. The team held Saturday meetings twice a month to discuss these aspects and to sort out any issues and concerns with regard to programming and production. Once charting was done, programmes were prepared in advance, with the team striving to maintain a two-week repository at any point. Tasks were rotated among the team members to equip them all in all aspects of managing the community radio, including information gathering, programming and dissemination. Switching tasks, over time all the team members were equipped with both field and studio responsibilities.

The views of the community were given paramount importance in the choice of programmes. As such, they strove to provide content useful to the communities, including information on weather, sea safety tips, tips on maintaining engines, current news updates, special programmes on cookery besides programmes for recording and sharing experiences of the fishermen. The programmes also provided other information like prices of boats and engines, Government schemes for fishermen, alternative employment prospects, education loans for children, health information, child care practices and information on fisheries organisations. In the segment on entertainment, popular programmes were sea folk legends, folk songs, success stories from the community and cinema based on the fishing sector.

The programmes produced were disseminated in Vizhinjam, a coastal town in the outskirts of Trivandrum district. In the absence of the mandatory license to run the community radio service, dissemination of programmes was done through the format of narrow casting as against the accepted radio format of broadcasting. The programmes produced were written on compact discs and then hand-delivered to Vizhinjam. Seven radio clubs, equipped with CD players and loud speakers, served as points of dissemination. The radio clubs generally functioned in private shops and were spaced at a distance of at least 0.5 kilometres apart. To ensure that a large number of fishermen could listen to the programmes aired, private establishments located in common spaces near the sea/beach were identified as radio clubs. Of the seven radio clubs, one was located in Thenoorkonam area while the remaining six were located in Kottappuram.

The programmes were aired six days a week and twice daily; from six to seven in the morning and evenings. The morning programmes were generally a repeat of the previous evening.

#### *Choice of Vizhinjam*

Vizhinjam, as indicated earlier, is a coastal town in Trivandrum district. A dense fishermen settlement, with a population of 18566 according to the 2001 India Census<sup>3</sup>. The congested nature of this settlement has problems of drinking water scarcity and waste management. The lack of safe drinking water in required quantities coupled with

<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vizhinjam\\_\(village\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vizhinjam_(village))

improper waste and sewage management has made Vizhinjam a vulnerable and easy target for the outbreak of epidemics. The general lack of awareness among the population only accentuates problems.

Owing to these factors, Vizhinjam became a natural choice when launching a community radio project with the purpose of building awareness among the fisher folk.

### **Vizhinjam Phase**

According to the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters<sup>4</sup>, the three major elements of community radio should be: (1) Non profit making, (2) Community ownership and control and (3) Community participation.

Even though Radio Alakal had the character of community medium in its early days by virtue of its non profit making and community participation (through the participation of local youth), a greater step in attaining a community character in its strictest sense was taken in the December 2006 when programming and production aspects were transferred to Vizhinjam. The Vizhinjam phase was made possible by the identification of a suitable building in a residential area, about one kilometre away from the shore/harbour beach area. The Mother Teresa Grandhashala or Library was constructed with Panchayat funds in 1999. After remaining unused for about eight to nine months , it then came to be used for nefarious activities until December 2006, when the activities of Radio Alakal were shifted there.

The following paragraphs show the activities undertaken at Radio Alakal in the Vizhinjam phase

#### *Community Radio Training*

To begin with, 12 youth from the Vizhinjam area above the age of 18 and with a minimum qualification of graduation were given a two-month free training to enable them take up radio production and programming activities. Training was imparted to six male and female trainees each who responded favourably to an announcement regarding the same made in the Vizhinjam Church.

The sessions were held on weekends in two batches of six each, from 10 am to one noon and from 2 to 6 pm by trainers from Mediact, Trivandrum an NGO formed by journalists. Training was provided on script writing, recording, production, and editing with equal impetus on theoretical and practical sessions. Since then, training has been successfully imparted to 48 students in four batches. The trainees have also been asked to work on projects like identification of requirements from the community as part of their training. A nominal fee of Rs.100 was charged from each trainee.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.eindia.net.in/communityradio/abstract/full\\_paper\\_S\\_Sur.pdf](http://www.eindia.net.in/communityradio/abstract/full_paper_S_Sur.pdf)

In the past, the trained youth have been engaged for making programme announcements in radio clubs, wherever possible with a token remuneration of Rs.100 for females and Rs.150 for males.

#### *Programme Production and Dissemination*

Programme production is presently being carried out in a small room in the library which doubles as a studio. The studio is equipped with a computer installed with sound software Audacity, headset, amplifier and three speakers.

Working to produce the programmes are 15 trained youth who spend between an hour and an hour and a half for this purpose. The youth work on a voluntary basis and do not receive any monetary benefit for this activity. Programmes are prepared well in advance, about two or three weeks prior to their scheduled date of airing. Day/date wise directories are maintained in the computer for easy retrieval. The programmes are narrowcast twice a day from Monday to Saturday. The programmes are aired for an hour between six to seven, am and pm.

Unlike in the SPACE phase where morning programmes were generally a repeat of the previous evening, the Vizhinjam phase has developed a different programming format, in keeping with the interest of the listeners. The morning segment begins with the signature tune of Radio Alakal followed by weather forecast and religious programmes. Religious programmes including prayer songs and hymns occupy most of the time. Updates on weather are provided by Marine Enforcement and Coast Guard, Vizhinjam.

The programmes for the evening segment are more varied. It begins with the signature tune and is followed by weather forecast. To keep the illiterate listeners abreast of the various developments in the outside world and also in the fisheries sector, a section on news is included. Major developments that are reported in popular vernacular dailies like Malayala Manorama, Mathrubhumi and Janayugam are read or summarised in this section. The section on news is followed by special programmes, which include poem/story rendering by the local children, information on sea safety, boat registration, interviews with medical personnel etc. In the recent past, there has been growing interest in special programmes, especially when children in the community participate. Special programmes are followed by repeat of the weather forecast. In response to audience interest, Radio Alakal also airs film songs. The hourly programme is marked off with the Alakal signature tune.

Until recently, seven radio clubs supported the dissemination of programmes. The programmes produced were written on CDs and hand delivered to the radio clubs. While the rest of the programmes were the same across all radio clubs, they were given the liberty to air film songs in keeping with the audience interest. Given the financial implications of reproduction through CDs, this had to be discontinued and dissemination is being done only from the production centre at Mother Teresa Grandhashala.

### *Video Documentary*

Other than production of radio content, the team behind Radio Alakal has also put together a 15 minute video documentary titled 'Alakal' showcasing the changes in fishing sector that have happened in Vizhinjam over the past seven years. This documentary, which was completed within 15 days, was shot for two days using a hand-held video camera.

### **Mother Teresa Grandhashala**

The functioning of Radio Alakal has brought a new lease of life to the library which was defunct and mis-used for a long time. Other than production activities for Radio Alakal, the library supports other activities, some of which are listed below:

### *Computer Training*

Free<sup>5</sup> computer training is a major activity that is run presently at the Library. School children between the standards of four and 10 in groups of 6-7 visit the Library to get hands-on training in free software. The accent is however not strict training by curriculum but rather helping the children get sufficient hands-on practice. The children are trained in the Open Office suite by volunteers who are skilled at handling computers. The youth who have completed community radio training also support this training activity. Since December 2006, nearly 300 children have derived the benefit of this training programme. The computer training for children is conducted from 4 to 5.30 pm on all days of the week except Sunday. Extra sessions are also provided on Government holidays.

Apart from training for children, the Library is currently running a training/self-learning programme in Video Animation (using the free software Blender 3D Animation) for 12 youth (between the ages of 18-28). This session is held from 6 to 7.30 pm from Monday to Saturday and on other public holidays.

### *Inculcating the Habit of Reading*

The initiation of the community radio production activities and computer training has brought with it greater interest from the community. Thanks to subscription sponsorships from well-minded persons, the Grandhashala now regularly receives six periodicals/magazines and three newspapers. The periodicals are so selected with a view to cater to different segments of the population, viz., children, youth and adults. Members from the community visit the Library at varying times of the day to read the magazines and periodicals. The materials are now made available for reading at the Library alone and are not meant for circulatory lending.

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<sup>5</sup> Initially a fee of Rs.20 was charged per student, but now the training is given free of cost



Apart from periodicals, the Library now has a collection of nearly 860 books, which it plans to lend once it has approval from the Library Council. Efforts are on to get an approval from the Library Council at the earliest.

#### *Community and Recreation Centre*

The Library also functions as community space and recreation centre. Fishermen assemble here to discuss various issues, hold meetings and discussions. The Library has sports and games equipment including badminton, carrom board, chess board and snakes and ladders board, which are eagerly made use of by children and youth in the community.

Occasionally, the Library also screens documentary films and these are keenly watched by the community.

#### *Support to Self Help Groups*

The Library also supports the activities of women self help groups by providing its women members training in Malayalam computing.

#### **Management of the Library**

As mentioned earlier, the Library functions in a Panchayat building in a residential area. The building consists of three rooms (a hall and two rooms) which supports the aforementioned activities. The Library has two computers, provided by SPACE, along with the equipment for carrying out radio production. It also has two cupboards, besides desks and benches, which have been bought with Panchayat funds.

The management of the Library is done by a by 11-member Committee comprising five Board Members and six Executive Members. The Committee meets weekly on Sundays to discuss various activities pertaining to the Library and to resolve any pending issues. The Library has also been recording minutes of Committee meetings for the past six months.

The Library functions between 7 am and 8 pm<sup>6</sup> on all days of the week. A staff member of SPACE, who is also a native of Vizhinjam, supports the activities of the Library and Radio Alakal, on a voluntary basis.

#### **Achievements**

The community radio project has the following noteworthy achievements:

- Radio Alakal is a first-of-its kind initiative for the fishing community, making it an achievement by itself. It seeks to empower local fishing communities by actively involving them in the process of content production and dissemination.

<sup>6</sup> The Library sees maximum activity from 4 to 8 pm

- SPACE was successful in identifying a suitable location to transfer the activities of Radio Alakal, within a span of eight months after its launch in May 2006. Transferring the activities to Vizhinjam has been a right move taking into account the sustainability of the project in the long term.
- Transfer of production related activities to Vizhinjam has given Radio Alakal greater community participation. The local fishermen now see it as their own medium and fully participate in its activities.
- Radio Alakal presently has a regular audience of fisherpeople in the coastal town of Vizhinjam. Being a non-obtrusive medium, radio enables listeners to carry out other tasks simultaneously. Besides this, it is also highly suitable for awareness building of illiterate and semi-literate fisher folk.
- The programmes included in Radio Alakal are put together by youth representatives from the community after soliciting the views from the audiences; a critical step towards in achieving audience appreciation. Segments like special programmes, which include content contribution from the local children, have brought wider interest and appreciation from the community.
- The functioning of Radio Alakal has paved the way for other positive spin-offs like free computer training and inculcating reading habit besides support to self help groups.
- The fact that youth and community members participate in the production of programmes on a voluntary basis is itself an indication of the acceptance of this medium among the community.

### **Challenges**

- While it is clear that the community has welcomed the radio initiative, it will be a while before they start understanding its full purport and give it an element of indispensability. Sustaining the interest of the community and keeping them motivated would be critical in achieving its long-term sustainability.
- Nearly three years into its functioning, Radio Alakal still continues to be narrowcast for it lacks the mandated license to broadcast. Though the Radio Alakal team has been endeavouring to obtain the license, it has not been successful so far.
- Programmes are being currently aired only from the main production centre at the library and are not aired through private radio clubs, primarily because of financial constraints.

- Various activities in the Library including radio content production and computer training are currently done on only one computer (with the other computer needing repair). This creates a severe block in the way activities can be taken forward.
- Erratic power supply is another problem that hinders regular airing of programmes. The narrowcasting has been disrupted on several days due to lack of power at the designated hour/s.
- The local youth contribute to the production activity without any economic imperative. Greater interest from the community and the youth can be generated if at least some of them can be engaged on a monetary basis.
- Even though SPACE has been making financial and manpower contribution towards the running of Radio Alakal, it is not enough to fructify many of activities planned. A single staff member of SPACE, who is also a native of Vizhinjam, makes singular attempts to expand the sphere of functioning of Radio Alakal and the Library. The efforts can generate better results if there is a cohesive team at the field level to manage the activities.

### **Future Plans**

The team behind Radio Alakal have ambitious plans for the future:

- Obtaining broadcasting rights that enable the transmission of Radio Alakal to a wider population remains high on the list of future plans. The team has been having interactions with persons with expertise in the field to obtain the license at the earliest.
- Setting up of a full-fledged studio is another item that is envisaged by the team for the future. With the present arrangement, recording is often subject to external sound disturbances.
- Starting computer based services like DTP has also been proposed by the team. However they are faced with the shortage of computer terminals and accessories like printers and scanners in carrying out on a commercial basis.
- The managing Committee of the Library has initiated steps to obtain approval from the Library Council, after which lending of books will commence.
- Since television is a preferred medium, the Radio Alakal team also has plans to branch out into television content production. To facilitate this, it proposes to conduct training in video content production for interested youth from the

locality. Training in video content production can also give rise to economically productive ancillary services like covering weddings and other local cultural events. The medium video can also be used to highlight social issues faced by the community and use it as a rallying point to discuss and generate solutions.