

Radio and Health

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As the slogan '*February Dus, Yaad Rakhna Baas*' echoed through the halls of the empty school building, few children playing in the yard were intrigued. What happens on February 10? What was so important? Unlike other forms of communication, Radio reigns supreme in the Bhadrak district of Odisha and large parts of the community still depend on it for their news and other information. The slogan aimed to create awareness among the public about the dangers of Filariasis - 10th February being the day when the health department planned to provide free medicines and treatment for filaria in the district.

Among other policies, the government comes up with several health schemes and programmes every year and radio plays a massive role in disseminating this valuable information among the public. The decentralisation of information in today's time is a necessity. Often it is observed that the masses for which most policies are created in India remain unaware of them. A country that suffers from some of the most troubling statistics on malnourishment, poverty, health and gender disparity needs to come together and deploy everything in its arsenal to change this picture.

There remains a rural-urban divide in the health status of the population. Rural India suffers from diarrhea, amoebiasis, typhoid, infectious hepatitis, worm infestations, measles, malaria, tuberculosis, whooping cough, respiratory infections, pneumonia and other diseases. Non-communicable diseases such as cancer, mental illness, hypertension, diabetes, accidents and injuries are also present in troubling numbers.

The National Family Health Survey 2019-2021 states that the Infant Mortality Rate of the country stands at 35.2%. 60.2% of women are anemic between the ages of 15 to 19 and 58.5% between the ages of 15 to 49. 3.1% of adults (men and women) get screened for cancer and 28.1% of adults (men and women) suffer from hypertension. While some improvements have been made in recent times, the numbers still remain troubling and can stand in comparison to Sub-Saharan Africa. Unsafe and unhygienic birth practices, unclean water, poor nutrition, subhuman habitats, and degraded and unsanitary environments are all pertinent challenges to the public health system. The National Population Policy 2000 was devised to improve quality of life including better access to healthcare and proper medical attention. The National Health Policy 2017 aimed to make healthcare more equitable and affordable for all.

In a huge and diverse country like India, community radio stations are vital when it comes to the health and safety of the population. Radio is why a child from Bhadrak recognises the dangers of stagnant water while another lady from a remote district of Bihar knows how to care for the health and nutrition of her pregnant sister. In India, radio and health go hand in hand.

Community radios are unique and very relevant today. Rural communities still rely on the medium to get their information on the day-to-day happenings/campaigns/policy information. The infrastructure of rural India does not allow for fancy smartphones and Flat-screen televisions to be used - the 'community' by and large still listens to the radio.

Listening to the radio is a social event and the force behind the act of congregating and listening to the radio should be acknowledged even in contemporary times. SMART nurtures and protects this very force. The organization is deeply committed to its audience and its medium of communication - community radio. Rooted firmly in the belief that audio is the best medium to provide information to the most vulnerable and marginalized communities in the country, it has undertaken multiple interventions related to public health.

When the world was reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic that left everyone with uncertainty and fear, SMART started a campaign to spread the importance of mask use across 568 villages in the country. When the vaccine was developed, SMART worked with 146 community radio stations across 14 states to spread information on the importance of vaccinating them.

SMART has worked extensively in Maharashtra and Bihar to increase awareness of the need for proper nutrition with its POSHAN project. It has done so in fun and engaging ways. It has made health fun and simple. SMART has worked on an awareness campaign on Kala Azar and the PM-Jay mission in Uttar Pradesh. It is involved extensively in 6 high burden states in India to realise India's commitment to a #TBMuktBharat by 2025. The programme called 'The TB Challenge' is an extremely vital programme that poses its own challenges. The need to establish liaisons with government officials, PHCs, and ASHA workers and more importantly to get one foot in the door within communities with these issues that face such serious social stigma is not an easy feat.

The work being done at SMART is not simply relaying information from one source to another. The team works hard to understand the profile of the communities they engage with and to create communication matrices that would have the most impact. Each programme is thoroughly researched and tested before implementation. With the increasing bureaucratisation of the social sector where numbers are more important than human stories, SMART is working tirelessly to keep the human ethos of listening to the radio alive. It stands by the belief that community radios are relevant and the pulse of rural India like the gospel truth.

