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Old radio in new guise: understanding relevance of amateur/ham radio in India


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Abstract. Development of information and communication technology in India has reached a new height with the successful landing of Chandrayan-3 to moon in August 2023. In such a developed milieu of communication, otherwise seen as obsolete medium of communication, amateur radio must be revisited and seen in the context of their present form of activities in India. Ham radio organizations are present in almost all countries of the world, but it was mainly seen as a means of communication in a pre-digital world. Ham radio organizations in Indian society with their exemplary activities in the resent millennium seems to be the silent servers of society cutting across communities without much media or academic attention as compared to community radio organizations which caters to specific communities with specific goals. The study aims to highlight such untapped potential of ham radio in Indian society which can be used as an alternative communication channel in emergency situations. It is concluded by arguing that ham radio resonates the spirit of logic, logistics and language of new digital media era and can be seen as a balanced communication form between old media and new media era.

Keywords: Indian media, emergency radio, radio broadcasting, radio amateurs, radio technology

Conflicts of interest. The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Старое радио в новом контексте: понимание актуальности любительского радио в Индии


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Аннотация. Развитие информационно-коммуникационных технологий в Индии достигло новой высоты с успешной посадкой аппарата «Чандраян-3» на Луну в августе 2023 г. В такой развитой среде коммуникаций любительское радио, которое нередко рассматривается как устаревшее средство связи, должно быть пересмотрено и переосмыслено в контексте его нынешней формы деятельности в Индии. Организации радиолюбителей существуют почти во всех странах мира, но в основном они рассматриваются как средство коммуникации доцифрового периода. В индийском обществе любительские организации радио с их образцовой деятельностью в новом тысячелетии кажутся своего рода молчаливыми служителями социума, они охватывают те сообщества, которые остались без внимания массмедиа и академических кругов. В этом их отличие от станций радиовещания, которое обслуживают конкретные аудитории с конкретными целями. В исследовании освещается неиспользованный потенциал любительского радио в индийском обществе, а именно применение в качестве альтернативного канала связи в чрезвычайных ситуациях. Делается вывод, что любительское радио отвечает духу логики, логистики и языка новой эпохи цифровых медиа и может рассматриваться как сбалансированная форма коммуникации между традиционными и новыми медиа.

Ключевые слова: индийские медиа, радио в чрезвычайных ситуациях, радиовещание, радиолюбители, технологии радио

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

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Introduction

Academic approach to radio communication is a linear approach from Ham radio to AM radio to FM radio signifying the phase wise evolution of radio communication in tune with technological advancement. Questioning this stereotype and with a first-hand field survey experience of research on contemporary scenario of Ham radio operation in India, this paper brings back ham radio as a contemporary and even strategic medium of radio communication with its continuous effort to update and upgrade in tune with technological advancement in radio antenna

preparation for catching signals even in remote locations to be effective during emergency situations of disaster. As electronic telecommunication system reached new heights several other forms of message dissemination channels emerged from television to private radio channels to the latest social media platforms. In the midst of these changes radio communication still remains most affordable and convenient channel of communication mostly in rural areas, wherein amateur radio figures.

Technology and radio communication in 21st century world. In our era new media have redefined in a considerable way the reception and consumption of radio communication through a system which is referred to as “produsage” (Bruns, 2007) to signify a drift from analogue system to transmission through digital mode. This drift, as scholars argue is “evidence of an ecological reconfiguration and a recasting roles evolving media landscape” (Gurevitch et al., 2009, p. 167). Based on digitised technology there is more scope for participation in amateur radio system as against the traditional system thereby strengthening participation of audience in the present generation of broadcast content. Radio production and deliberation was seen to be used for passive consumers but in this age of interaction can lead to collaborative radio production of communication. In fact, social network, website, mobile phone, can be seen today as the basis of going up to the mobile phone users, having no time for listening to radio broadcasts (Mare, 2013, p. 35). Digital technologies strengthen the position of radio as the most comfortable way of consuming information, which indicates a revolutionary rebirth of consumer attitudes towards radio. Audio content can be listened to at any time today, and its creation does not require financial expenses. Thus, the consumer attitude also corrects the scenario of the technological “birth” of radio content. Due to the emergence of podcasts as one of the genres of radio content based on amateur interest, radio in the modern global media landscape is becoming almost the most important phenomenon, interest in which is constantly growing. Today, live radio broadcasts from events are less interesting to consumers, urgent messages can be read by consumers on social media as the fastest instruments of mass communication. The concept of urgency and urgency today is more the responsibility of new and social media. The immersive component of radio thus fades into the background, it is not the effect of presence that is more important to consumers, but a more constructive discourse: recorded and pre-edited interviews, discussions etc. And podcasts are the most convenient format for such content. An example of such a change in the consumption of radio content, in particular in Russia, is the Russian Public Opinion Research Center survey in 2020. According to the results of the study, every second person in Russia listens to radio today, and every fifth listens to podcasts. Over the past 15 years, almost one in four has left the audience of the national radio. 24% of respondents report that they listen to the radio less than five-seven years ago, and 18% – that the same amount as before. One in five respondents listens to podcasts (19%), more often Russians aged 18–24 and 25–34 (26% each). A similar study in the same period in India also confirms this. As of 2020, about 12 percent of India's population (167,566,440 people) reported listening to podcasts. Podcasts are forming an emerging segment of the audio industry in India, despite the rapid trend that has swept the globe. Thus, the podcast format

is a bright competitor to classical radio. The main difference between the podcast is that you do not need to buy expensive technical solutions to make it. Placement of such content is possible immediately after editing, on any podcast platform, but unfortunately, as mentioned above, the podcast as a format lacks the effect of presence and immersiveness. The podcast absolutely excludes the simultaneity of the event and the information message, which indicates the uninformative nature of the format. Even after accepting the fact that radio transmitter is an old age communication model compared to digital communication system, amateur radio operators remain firm on their belief that amateur radio communications still serves an important educational and emergency role.

Amateur radio is interchangeably called ham radio but the word ham radio has a derogatory origin used by telegraph people with sound knowledge to those operators having lesser knowledge of communication techniques meaning that they are ham-fisted or constrained by poor skills. Irrespective of their origin, today amateur radio or ham radio has become the alternative communication channel during emergency. Every licensed ham operator has a call sign that they've either been assigned or have chosen for themselves (called a vanity call sign). Call signs usually have a prefix suggesting the country code and a suffix reflecting unique identification number of a ham operator. Through the International Amateur Radio Union (IARU), an ITU member, the radio amateur community makes important contributions to the preparatory studies for each World Radio communication Conference (WRC).

Methods

This study through a literature review of works on amateur radio finds a research gap about lack of materials on working of ham radio in India. This is a qualitative study based on field survey method and interview method with both ham radio operators in India (secretaries of Delhi Amateur Radio Society, West Bengal Radio Club, Indian Institute of Hams to name a few), of government officials dealing with ham radio regulations in India (chief dealing officer of Wireless Processing of Government of India and also with Eastern Regional Director of WPC wing in India), with field officers of National Disaster Relief Force (NDRF) who link up ham radio operators with disaster rescue mechanism in India and also through focus group discussion method with disaster affected persons in villages (Kultoli village in South 24 pargana district in West Bengal federal unit of India) in India where ham radio players second line of communication during natural disaster led emergencies. This study also includes a historical analytical method to underscore the position of Ham Radio in Russian federation as well.

Richard Barlett unravels (2015) that apart from being a mere hobby, radio theory, scientific knowledge, ability to build transistors and receivers with home-made materials are some of the passionate areas of ham operators. The work by Vindo Pavarala and Kanchan Malik (2007) traces the emergence and functioning of community radio in India. The book noted marginalisation as the independent variable but fails to highlight the relationship between community radio and ham radio and how community radio can truly become citizen communication involving citizens at individual level voluntarily as ham radio does.

Recent studies (Logvinov, Smolskiy, 2022, p. 21) highlight the evolution of modern radio receiver designing, alongside revealing the rationale and methodology for effective operation for various purpose in different networks. They highlight methods of generating and processing signals in the digital systems radio receivers with multiple accesses, with data transfer rates close to the maximum possible and try to ensure conditions for receiving signal in the era of information and communication technologies for amateur radio operators. In any analysis of radio communication an understanding of spectrum spread is very important. Various scholars (Xu et al., 2012; Wadhwa et al., 2012) indicate that radio spectrum is regarded as one of the most precious resources in wireless communications. Off late it is noticed by scholars that spectrum underutilisation is a major concern among the group of licensed networks those who are allotted fixed spectrum band. In order to utilise the advancement of radio communication technology to make spectrum allocation more effective and simple the spectrum allocation policy has underwent a major overhaul. Cognitive Radio (CR) is a system that can sense the boundaries of outside spectrum without making any interference to the primary radio user even when there is a transmission form moderate to high powers.

Amateur radio in Russia has developed difficult. Amateur radio was legally recognized in the mid-20s in the USSR. By 1930, there were more than 450 amateur radio stations in the USSR. Radio was seen as a unidirectional media. “Accordingly, the task of the radio circles was not to communicate, but solely to receive the signal from the capital. This strong characteristic of radio clubs in the Soviet Union was not observed in other countries” (Rikitianskaia, 2017, p. 157). In the conditions of the ideological formation of the USSR, radio amateurs aroused the special interest of the state. And amateur radio was considered not only as a harmless activity, but also as a tool for spreading dangerous ideological information. Thus, by the end of the Soviet Union as an empire, the ways of circumventing legal restrictions by radio amateurs had reached phenomenal ingenuity. The capital of such an informal broadcast was the city of Leningrad, where the unofficial radio broadcast died only in the late 1990s. Researcher Natalia Konradova writes about this in detail in her book “The Archaeology of the Russian Internet” (2022). With the collapse of the USSR, Soviet amateur radio, it should be noted, did not end. Like the Indian ham radio, it is currently outside the attention of mass media researchers.

Results

In recent years, historiography of technology tries to focus attention on exploring interaction between technical, instrumental and service aspect of technology for socio-cultural and economic components of development suited to a particular culture. In pace of binaries of science and technology on one hand and on other hand of technological development and social preparedness, contemporary scholars argues for an interactive approach based on seamless web of networking in which the technology, science, social, economic and political are overlapping categories. In our times, radio operators increasingly gets knowledgeable about advancement of information and communication technology and sometimes depend more on computer transmissions to regulate and record their data for more

high frequency and very high frequency data transmissions. Far from being obsolete, ham radio is preparing itself for new usage in digitised media era, including as a backup to the communication media during natural disasters. Even after accepting the fact that radio transmitter is an old age communication model compared to digital communication system, amateur radio operators remain firm on their belief that amateur radio communications still serves an important educational and emergency role. In brief it can be said that in contemporary India ham radio is an innovative field of enquiry of research and development in normal times but it acts as second line of communication in times of emergency. In our time when ethos of commercialisation and profit motive drives the competitive radio communication in contemporary mediascape in Indian society and government radio channels sticks to the basic of providing information, the amateur radio operators individually and organizationally tries hard to provide selfless voluntary community service cutting across identity barriers thereby becoming true institutional representative of massification of society. The culture of radio consumption was formed in Russia due to amateur radio, the phenomenon of freaking and the harmonious displacement of “underground” channels for broadcasting radio information in modern ways – official radio stations and podcasts.

Discussion

Radio communication research can be understood properly from development communication theoretical perspective to find out the beneficial role of radio communication in society to break its cultural and social barriers. While community radio research are rooted in this paradigm (Malik, Pavarala, 2020, p. 25), Ham radio communication will be more effectively studied from participatory communication model (Servaes, Malikhao, 2005, p. 66) to note the degree of voluntary involvement of people turning citizen into Hams to play an important social role.

Amateur radio has 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. With the dawning of 21st century ham radio working in India started to focus on assisting civic administration not only in disaster management but also in mishap management. It is a learning experience for mainstream corporatised radio communication channels to draw the line between daily stylised communication and grounded specific communication pattern or in other words the distinction in media analysis between entertainment provider and service provider (Bonni, 2014, p. 15). In India, Government of India has established a dedicated Department of Vigyan Prasar with a dedicated scientific officer (Mr. Sanjeev Barua) for amateur radio services, rules and regulations under the Wireless Planning and Communication Wing, Ministry of Telecommunications. The National Institute of Amateur Radio in Bengaluru is the nodal organisation Ham radio in India with many other organizations spread across various states in India.

National Institute of Ham Radio (NIAR) in Hyderabad is the nodal organization receiving Govt funds to undertake awareness program activities of ham radio. It publishes a quarterly news magazine called Ham News having information

of ham activities across the country. S. Suri and S. Rammohan are prominent officials of NIAR.

Indian Institute of Hams (IIH) in Bangalore with S. Satyapal as Director, uniquely had set up Ham Action Force to bring together young hams trained in virtual disaster communication to address emergency situation. The Institute can handle and provide communication network in service of the nation.

Based on the activities of these organisations the following new areas of amateur radio operations can be cited from Indian experience:

(a) Disaster Management and Rescue Operation – the website of Indian Academy of Communication and Disaster Management¹ highlight in detail the large number of events of disaster in which Hams kept alive communication system. Their tool kits are powered by solar energy apart from other back up technicalities and hence their communication channels remain intact.

(b) Mishap Management – Hams assists police and civic administrators to find out lost people and reunite them with family members.

(c) Assisting Detective Department – Hams are trained in ‘Fox Hunt’ – a technique to find out radio transmitting devices in a particular region which remain outside the radar of detective department. Reports are published about such incidents in last one decade. Wireless operator section in charge of Kolkata Police seconded this effort of ham operators.

(d) Assisting Election Commission – Particularly during 2019 Lok Sabha and 2021 State Assembly Election, Hams in West Bengal have been used by Election Commission of India to assist in ‘shadow zones’ area where mobile network not available to keep in touch with polling officers.

In an article a group of scholars (Kumar et al., 2020, p.1251) on “Live Streaming of Agriculture Market Statistics to the Remote Village Areas Using Amateur Radio” argues that in farming sector in rural areas ham radio operators help in dispersing knowledge among farmers across the country about the different experiences about productivity and profitability. Highlighting disaster communication role of amateur radio scholars (Kapur et al., 2017, p. 6) mention that communication pattern for disaster situation focuses on recovery and response. Sometimes power cut and power blockage and affected cellular service become hurdles before amateur radio operators. The communication system that amateur operators present at that time is seen as risk communication to prevent and resolve disaster related problems, provide information for recovery operations during and after disasters.

Conclusion

Indian political and social system at present is influenced by rapid development in the field of telecommunication and satellite communication. Space missions, jet planes with higher speeds, medical advancements, digitised communication world, tremendous development in telecommunication sector are some of the achievements of this era. Amateur Radio through their research have also triggered the telecommunication research in field of radio communication. Direction

¹ Indian Academy of Communication and Disaster Management. Retrieved from <https://www.iacdm.com/>

finding, Dexpeditions, ham-fests, JOTA, QRP operations, contestations, DX Communications, light house fox hunting operations and island expeditions are some of the major achievements of ham radio operators in these days. Amateur radio operators can now decode satellite images by using their technical knowhow to give updates on weather, rains, flood possibilities. Some years ago, India launched its own amateur radio satellite – VO52, which was extensively used by both Indian and foreign Ham operators. It must be said that ham radio services are among the most important national service for public purpose.

New media is not merely some new platforms of communications, but a value based on quick, transparent and seamless flow of communication at any level. Amateur radio or Ham radio is the only hobby in the world which requires license to operate it. As a result, every Ham (amateur radio operator) has some basic knowledge of radio circuit, radio spectrum allocation, transmitter antenna modalities and tools required for effective communication spread as they need to give an exam before securing their license. Hence every Ham remains passionately engaged in quest for developing new ways of technical advancement that at one end remain in tune with latest development in technological advancement but at the same time be cost effective and communication efficient. The goal of Hams is in tune with new media goals – to establish secured uninterrupted communication in all time even during disasters hen all communication channels break down. So mock drills with coast guards to make awareness to establish communication during cyclones, to engage with civil and police administration to find missing persons, to engage school and college students with scientific temperament towards building new ways of communication by awareness camps with boy and girl scouts, to introduce cheaper transmitter through continuous research and development works are the issues that keeps Hams engaged across the world and particularly in several federal units of India. According to Suri (2019), being a selfless and altruistic committed social service of communication that ham operators are engaged in, funding from government and NGOs remain the primary concern for the coming days. Despite such concerns it can be concluded that amateur/ham radio news appears every day in newspapers for their continuous social service based on their modern technical radio communication gadgets testify they amateur/ham radio are indeed active and lively may be in a new form of higher technical communication level in our times.

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