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THE CURRENT STATUS OF SOUND BROADCASTING IN INDIA AND CHALLENGES AHEAD

Broadcasting, in its significance, reach and impact constitutes the most pervasive and powerful medium of mass communication of India. India is a classic case in heterogeneity with a population of 850 million people, with enormous diversity in terms of language, faith, life style, habits and tastes.

Organised broadcasting started in India in 1927 and All India Radio (AIR) came into existence in June, 1936 and when India became a free nation in August, 1947 AIR had 6 broadcasting centres with 18 transmitters. Today, after 50 years as an independent nation, the magnitude of AIR network is mind-boggling. The following gives a glimpse of current broadcasting situation:

**Broadcasting Stations**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Broadcast Centres</th>
<th>194</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transmitters</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reach**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Population covered</th>
<th>97.3%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Area covered</td>
<td>90.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of radio households</td>
<td>95 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Languages/dialects used in the Home Service**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Languages</th>
<th>24</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dialects</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Languages used in the External Services**

| Languages | 24 |

AIR has the requisite hardware and technical infrastructure to produce high quality radio programmes and to transmit through a vast network of medium wave, short wave and FM transmitters. The delivery system is reinforced through satellite-based radio networking.

The following gives an overview of AIR's capabilities, at present.
Transmitters:
- Medium wave: 141
- Short wave: 54
- VHF/FM: 103

Studio to Transmitter links:
- Microwave: 180
- VHF: 26

Satellite-based radio networking:
- Uplink captive earth stations: 16
- Radio networking carriers: 39
- Receive Radio networking terminals: 321

AIR has a dedicated Research and Development Wing to carry out R&D activities, test technological options to break new ground and take initiatives in broadcasting services, so that AIR is able to future challenges.

Programme fare offered by All India Radio on its Primary Channel network comprising 108 regional stations and 74 local community radio stations includes the following categories:

Music:
- Devotional
- Classical – Indian & Western
- Folk/Pop/Light
- Film
News and Current Affairs

Specific Audience Programme (for farmers, women, children, youth, industrial workers)

Formal and non-formal education.
Development oriented broadcasts in a variety of formats.
Sports Commentaries.

News Services Division of AIR produces 89 bulletins every day in 19 languages, which emanate from Delhi and are relayed by several AIR stations. There are also 41 Regional News Units, which bring about 134 bulletins every day, in 64 languages/dialects. The Division also produces current affairs programmes.

Recognising the inherent strength of the aural medium to cater effectively to the common man and to integrate local communities, All India Radio launched the 'Local Radio' blazing a new trail in broadcasting. There are 70 odd Local Radio Stations in different parts of the country, mostly operating on FM mode. Each local radio serves a small area reaching right into the heart of the community enabling its members to use the microphone to reflect and enrich their lives and artistic expression. The distinct character of local radio is its down-to-earth, intimate and uninhibited approach.

All India Radio has a popular light entertainment service known as Vividh Bharati. The service, with a preponderance of film musics, held sway over the listening public for more than three decades, and continues to do so. There are 32 Vividh Bharati centres at present, with eight more centres expected to be commissioned shortly. The new Vividh Bharati centres will operate on FM stereo. Vividh Bharati service is also available on short wave carrying it on synchronous mode i.e., on the same frequency across four transmitters and covering most parts of the country. Vividh Bharati Service is the principal carrier of commercials.

The External Services Division of AIR is the emissary extra-ordinary to project the Indian point of view on world affairs to listeners overseas and to acquaint them with the myriad facets of Indian life, thought, culture, tradition and heritage. There are, in all, 24 services 16 foreign and 8 Indian Languages directed to India's
neighbours, South East Asia, West Asia, UK and West Europe, North, West, and North-West Africa.

AIR has **FM Stereo Service** at six stations including four metropolitan cities. Plans are afoot to introduce such a stereo service at all the State capitals. At the four metros, AIR offers round-the-clock service which has become immensely popular especially with the youth bringing FM Stereo Broadcasting to the centre stage. This has also given an impetus to car radios.

All India Radio has a large **Audience Research Wing** catering to the research and feed back requirements of the organisation, including the commercial and external services. Audience Research Wing provides data on:

- (a) Audience size and composition,
- (b) Reaction of listeners,
- (c) Impact of programmes, especially the utility oriented programmes on the target audience.

This in-house Wing consisting of six mobile units and 43 fields units located at different stations.

As a public service broadcasting organisation, AIR has undertaken several successful experiments for social communication and diffusion of innovation, creating tangible impact on the target audiences. AIR continues to play a significant role in development communication by addressing itself to social problems, through participative broadcasting.

**Expected changes, problems foreseen and responses planned:**

All India Radio is passing through a transitionary phase owing to:

- (i) Structural changes
- (ii) Paradigm Shifts
- (iii) Technological Innovations.
Structural Changes:

All India Radio till recently was controlled by the Government of India. While the Parliament and the Government were contemplating creation of autonomous electronic media free from political and other extraneous pressures, Satellite T.V. channels made their appearance. These channels proliferated rapidly and India was inexorably drawn into their purview. More and more satellite channels started bringing their programmes directly into Indian homes. The emergence of transnational broadcasting accentuated the need for creating autonomous broadcasting corporation, a non-partisan professional purveyor of information while serving the entertainment needs of the vast masses of India. Prasar Bharati (Broadcasting Corporation of India) was established last year and is managed by a Board constituted for the purpose in November 1997.

Paradigm Shifts:

Under the new dispensation also, AIR is envisaged as a public service broadcaster realising that in developing countries such as India it is essential for broadcasting to raise educational and living standards and lead the masses gently to more mature values. AIR is already under pressure from shortage of funds and from the incoming tide of new technology. It is feared that continued dependence for money from the Government might lead to an abridgement of the autonomy. The need for generating resources internally is emphasised while exhorting about the public service mandate. This is a major predicament and AIR is striving to evolve the golden mean.

AIR has carried out an experiment in limited deregulation of terrestrial broadcasting by leasing out slots to private operators on the FM stereo service on the four metropolitan cities of the country. This is looked upon as a precursor to full-fledged deregulation by some people. The Government is committed to setting up a Broadcasting Authority, which may issue licenses to private operators to establish radio/TV stations in the country. In the years to come, increasing domestic competition from privately owned radio stations might further accentuate the problems of financing.
public service broadcasting. All these years, AIR enjoyed a virtual monopoly in sound broadcasting. In the years to come, AIR may also face the problem of fragmentation of its audiences with private operators making a dent into its advertising revenue. AIR has the unenviable task of exploring ways and means of augmenting its revenue within the broad framework of public service broadcasting. This is a formidable challenge.

The spate of entertainment which is what most satellite networks offer has caused radio all over the World to alter its course. All institutions have to adapt to the changed circumstances, or else they become relics of the past. We in AIR are inheritors a great institution with hoary tradition of idealism, integrity and pursuit of excellence. All India Radio is determined to tackle head on the challenges posed by the sudden proliferation of media options. With its stupendous reach, AIR realises that its penetration into rural India is matchless. By offering area-specific programmes in the local dialect and idiom AIR is confident that it can continue to serve the vast rural masses and sustain their interest.

**Technological Innovations:**

Modernisation and adoption of new technology bring about new challenges. In recent years, AIR is engaged in the task of switching over to FM broadcasting. There was resistance from some segments of the listening public owing to non-availability of inexpensive FM receivers in the country. The situation is changing gradually. AIR has recently made available its popular entertainment programmes Vividh Bharati on the local Radio through satellite networking to give FM a shot in the arm. In the years to come, AIR is planning to launch its own brand of radio receivers in the market to facilitate smooth transition.

All India Radio has plans to have Digital Audio Broadcasting (DAB) transmitters in the four metropolitan cities, to begin with. Experimental DAB transmission of 2 hours duration every day in simulcast mode has already been launched in Delhi since March, 1997.
AIR has plans to supply its external services programmes to network companies abroad for dissemination through cable, satellite and terrestrial FM networks so that AIR emerges as a veritable global service. AIR has also plans to embed its General Overseas Service with Doordarshan’s International satellite channel in sub-carrier mode to provide better audio quality to Europe, Middle-East, South East Asia and parts of Africa and the Indian sub-continent.

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Dy. Director General
All India Radio