RADIO AND SOCIETY: WOMEN’S RADIO LISTENING IN RURAL AREAS OF MANIPUR

Dr. M. Nawaz Khan*
*Assistant Professor,
Department of Mass Communication,
Rajiv Gandhi University, Extension Centre,
Arunachal Pradesh, India.

ABSTRACT

Due to poor communication infrastructure, many villages in Manipur continue to rely on word of mouth or the radio for the majority of their news. Various problems including insurgency, counter insurgency operations, ethnic tension, lawlessness, kidnapping for ransom etc. afflict the civilian population in the state. Besides, villages in the state are often isolated and disconnected from the resources and information that flow into the capital city of Imphal. Nevertheless, understanding women's radio access and listening, particularly in rural areas of Manipur is an important step in understanding the impact and effectiveness of the All India Radio Imphal. The study was conducted in Thoubal district of Manipur and focuses on understanding women's radio use in the Meitei Pangal settlement of Thoubal Moijing Leingoijin. The study, which used a quantitative survey of female heads of households, concludes that there exist significant gaps between the needs of the rural Meitei Pangal women and what the AIR Imphal delivered. Besides, cultural barriers, lack of relevance of radio programming and treating the radio set as part of the man’s world are some of the major factors behind the low listening pattern of Meitei Pangal women in rural areas of Manipur.

KEYWORDS: radio, insurgency, ethnic tension, Meitei Pangal, women.

INTRODUCTION

The All India Radio aims at strengthening democracy and building an informed citizenry in the country. From various perspective women comprise an important audience for radio
programming. This is true for the Meitei Pangal women in rural areas of Manipur. However, there is little radio reception research on Meitei Pangal community and the AIR Imphal has little reliable information to inform their programming decisions in regard to this community. There has been a general assumption that almost all the Meitei Pangal households in Manipur own radio sets and the community has a radio culture. This study raises questions on AIR Imphal’s operating with such assumption uncritically. Moreover, Meitei Pangal community in general and the Meitei Pangal women in particular have been a poorly understood demographic. Besides, Islamic regulations like the purdah system restrict the mobility of women in the rural areas thereby restricting their media exposure.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study, with an objective to explore various issues, examines Meitei Pangal women’s radio reception in rural areas of Manipur. The area of study is Thoubal Moijing Leingoijin, an ethnic Meitei Pangal settlement in Thoubal district of the state. With a population of about 550, the village settlement is about 23 kms from the capital city of Imphal. The inhabitants depend for water on Thoubal river which flows in the middle of Thoubal Moijing village. The settlement has an erratic electricity supply and no healthcare facility. The main economic activities of the villagers are rearing of animals, fishing and farming by men, and weaving by women. The study employed a quantitative survey of 100 female heads of households out of the 120 households in the settlement. Age of the respondents was in the range of 15 to 75 years. 70 of the respondents were illiterate while almost all had received some Madrassa schooling on the Koran. Though on average all the households had enough resource to have food every day, most did not have enough for the luxury of owning television or other media system.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Out of the total households surveyed, 65 percent owned working radio sets, 7 percent owned sets that worked but were out of batteries, and 4 percent owned broken sets. This was a different reality from the perception that everyone in the settlement owns a radio. Besides poverty and illiteracy there were many reasons for not owning a radio set. Out of the total households surveyed only 12 households owned television sets.

Meitei Pangal women’s lives are very hard and filled with continuous physical labour. Waking up early in the morning, they fetch water from the river. Then they cook rice. After feeding the children and other family members they attend to livestock, if they have any. After serving lunch, they sit for weaving cloth. Preparations of supper and cleanup take up the bulk of the night. Despite their engagement in household chores 30 percent of the respondents said they listened to the radio. They said they listened to the AIR Imphal and the Vivid Bharati for news, music and drama. In terms of radio listening preferences, there was perhaps a greater liking for Hindi music than before. They listened to radio for enjoyment and to find out what radio is saying about the world. All the women surveyed said they had difficulty understanding radio broadcasts particularly the news. Some of them complained that the radio use difficult words which only men understand. 20 respondents said they listened to AIR Imphal’s Khungangi Thouram and Khonjel Nachom with understanding. They do not understand the classical music
and Natsanskritan programmes. When they do not understand they simply did not listen to broadcasts.

All the respondents perceived the radio set to be a tool of the educated and as belonging to the male head of the household. There was often a substantial gap between husbands and wives in terms of literacy skills, age, and range of experience. Where men often left town to work or conduct trade in outside towns or cities, women for the most part only knew the village environment. In 90 percent of the households with working radio sets, only men turned the radio set on and off while in the remaining 10 percent, women were secondary controllers. Children were usually not allowed to touch the radio dials, and while the radio was tuned to news they were forbidden from making noise. Thus, to some extent, women themselves may have contributed to the positioning of the radio set as part of the male domain.

63 percent of the women felt that it was not at all important to know about events in other places. They said frustration over not understanding, lack of time or opportunity, and family problems are the main reasons for lack of interest in news. Only 10 percent of them felt that it was important to keep abreast with the happenings in other places. Apart from music, educational and Islamic programming, they wanted broadcast of good news that they could understand while the remaining 27 percent had no opinion. The most common listening time for the women was 7 p.m. at night. According to the respondents listening times are synonymous with dinner times. 20 women also said that the radio was on for lunch around 9-11 a.m. in the morning. Five women said listening time is when their husbands switch on the radio.

Almost all of them were unable to give information on radio reception patterns in the household. The radio set was not an integral part of the women’s lives. However, women were responsible for the storage and safety of the radio set as they were more generally for all domestic goods, but otherwise had a limited relationship with the radio. They thought that owing to illiteracy they are unable to use the radio set. Out of the respondents, 10 educated women agreed that the radio set has importance in the households. Some of them felt that people who had radio sets were more knowledgeable than those who did not.

90 percent of the respondents said that they seldom heard of programming for Muslims. When asked what they would like to listen to, the respondents mentioned radio programmes that had lots of music, was funny, understandable, and had stories. The respondents wanted radio programming to help them learn something about raising children. They also wanted the radio to create awareness about early marriage of girls, woman’s rights, Islamic culture, healthcare, stories, recreation, and laughter. Political news and news of the world was not immediately relevant to Meitei Pangal women. They felt that their community could benefit from learning the importance of adult literacy programs.

CONCLUSION

This study is limited in scope to Thoubal Moijing Leingoijin, a Meitei Pangal settlement of 550, in Thoubal district of Manipur. In many ways, it raises more questions than it answers. However, its findings do strongly suggest that current radio programming of the All India Radio Imphal is not as effective as it could be in reaching Meitei Pangal women in rural areas of Manipur.
efforts of the radio station have been positive from many standpoints. However, it has also shown an unfortunate lack of accountability to its audience in some respects. It is very important that the All India Radio Imphal invest more time into feedback mechanisms and audience reception studies. Based on this investigation, it seems reasonable to suggest that significant numbers of rural Meitei Pangal women are cut off from the discourses and engagements of their society. The women respondents could identify issues like women’s rights, Islam, women’s health and family counselling as relevant to their lives. However, the All India Radio Imphal will have to review the programme packaging and timing of broadcast in order to engage and serve rural Meitei Pangal women more effectively.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the above findings some recommendations can be made to improve the AIR Imphal’s accessibility for rural Meitei Pangal women. Spoken Manipuri language is very different from the formal and very literary Manipuri used in AIR Imphal broadcasts. This alienates a substantial segment of the Meitei Pangal population including the women. An immediate and easy way to encourage rural Meitei Pangal women’s radio listening is to use simple and everyday words. The news stories are often on painful events rather than on joy. Painful subjects should not be avoided, but positive achievements and hope should also be given appropriate airtime.

For women to have access to radio programming and feel greater ownership of the radio set, it would be advisable to distribute radio sets for women in the rural areas making it theirs in name. This may encourage women to control the radio set more than they do at present. Factual information on women’s health and rights are crucial for women empowerment. Simple, easy to digest, and inclusive messages could be aired around 7-9 p.m. It seems reasonable to suggest that there may be opportunities for creating a strong future listening base among Meitei Pangal women by targeting programming at young girls.

REFERENCES


