

# **DESI RADIO BY AND FOR THE PANJABI COMMUNITY: CITIZENS' MEDIA, GENDER, AND PARTICIPATION**

---

*Nazan Haydari*

Desi Radio, the project of the Panjabi Centre located in Southall, West London, was started in 2002 by Ajit Khera and his sister, Amarjit Khera, to promote Panjabi culture, language, and history, and build connection and communication among Panjabi community living in the area. The word, 'Desi', is derived from 'Des' "meaning a specific space, locality or homeland," refers to "Panjab: the Land of the Five Rivers," that sits along the border between India and Pakistan. In the 1947 partition of India, the region was divided between India (East Panjab) and Pakistan (West Panjab). The idea that Muslims should be in Pakistan and that Hindus and Sikhs should concentrate in India compelled many to migrate across the new border creating violence, resentment, hostility, and chaos. Since then Punjabis have been one of the most prominent South Asian groups living outside their cultural homeland, concentrated in the United Kingdom, North America, and the Middle East. Southall is a home to the Panjabi community of West London.

Desi Radio defines its mission as to "provide a service for the Panjabi community and the inclusion of Panjabi speakers particularly those facing disadvantage and exclusion," and challenge "social conventions, community racism and casteism, and social prejudice through live debates, alternative music and the social engagement."<sup>1</sup> Building dialogue constitutes the main philosophy of the station by questioning the political divide between East and West Panjab, religious divide of Muslim, Hindu and Sikh, gender inequality, and cast division.

Desi Radio is run by the volunteers, and Panjabi women of the community constitute the majority. This paper chapter is based on ten days of participant observation during a visit to Desi Radio and participation in the cultural activities of the Panjabi Centre in 2012; interviews with volunteering women

producers of radio, and the founders of the station.<sup>2</sup> By applying the citizens' media framework by Clemencia Rodriguez (2011), I address the question of how Panjabi women of Southall negotiate their gender, and Panjabi identities in interplay with their participation in radio production and community building.

The citizens' media approach presents a framework for the analysis of community media activities that encompass the lived experiences of the members. Rather than the final media product, this framework focuses on the media production process to see how participation transforms participating individuals and their communities. Rodriguez (2001) draws the concept of citizens' media from Mouffe's (1992) understandings of democracy and citizenship by daily political action and engagement. The notion perceives citizens as individuals in permanent interaction with their contexts, gaining and generating power from social relations. Media are not to communicate, express, or inform, but instead to perform local identities, values, ways of life, cultural practices, and forms of interaction. Through media citizens can learn to manipulate their own languages, codes, signs, and symbols, restructure their identities and connect to local cultures. Citizens' media allow people to not just talk about peace, but actually experience social interactions where non-violence is normalized in multiple ways, creating "the performance of peace building" (Rodriguez 2011: 255). Within this framework Desi Radio facilitates collective communication processes where women can build new relationships to reconstruct their gender and Panjabi identities beyond the divisions of cast, gender, politics, and religion. Music and language play a significant role in redefining and performing Panjabi identity.

Ethnographic research and its signature method of participant observation particularly make a fundamental contribution to how we understand radio as embodied in everyday life, and forms a significant tool to discuss the particulars of citizens' media (see Bessire & Fisher 2012). Ethnography opens a space for analysing the complexities between production, participation and performances of identities, and contextualizing radio as a medium that is culturally and historically inflected. Participant observation is particularly significant for transnational radio research to identify commonalities and intersectionalities in the experiences of communities and media across borders. As a woman of Turkey, the time I spent at Desi Radio, and continuing relationship I built

---

**2** | I am deeply thankful to my Desi Radio friends, Amarjit Khera, Ajit Khera, Anita Matharoo, Amar, Chhinder Dhimani, Paramjit Thind; Rani Surinder Sall for wholeheartedly welcoming me at Desi Radio, and sharing their stories. My relationship with Desi Radio continues since my initial visit in 2012. I visited Desi several times after, and invited Amarjit Khera and Taranjit Chana within the frame of the Erasmus exchange program to spend a week in Istanbul to share their experiences with my students and colleagues in 2014. I also read aloud an earlier draft of this paper in the presence of Amarjit, Anita, Paramjit, and several other volunteers for their feedback and approval during my visit to Desi Radio in July 2017.

with my Desi friends provided a cross-cultural understanding of how radio can function in a different media ecology and historical setting.

In the theorization of citizens' media framework, Davis argues that overemphasis on the production process might lead to overlooking the "mediating role of trainers, social movement activists, and others who might be influencing both the production of material and the way the material might be used later on". (2015: 230). The roles of Amarjit Khera and Ajit Khera, as founders and facilitators, are crucial in understanding the philosophy, organization, and structure of Desi Radio. With different strategies they both ensure continuation of the founding principles of the station. While Amarjit continuously discusses the philosophy of the station, history of Punjab, and significance of language during daily conversations, Ajit provides guidance about programming strategies and issues to be discussed in the radio. As a Panjabi who grew up and studied in the UK, Ajit Khera talked about how the idea of Desi Radio developed through his life experiences and was an extension of his dynamic political struggle:

I was very much outside of Panjabi culture. In 1984 as I was watching television with my children I saw a news: political conflict in Panjab. That to me was watershed. I do not know what happened to me. My connection with the Panjab, my roots and past was all in my subconscious, and all I needed was a spark! After that I got involved in the movements, and suddenly was in touch with the communities. During the struggles, I came to realize that Hindu, Muslim and Sikhs were all saying the same things. After ten years I walked out of the movement, and spent following ten years reading about political struggles, history, community, and postcolonial literature. If identities are constructed, why not reconstruct them. We started thinking about how to engage people to transcend the religions. First we thought about magazine but then we realized scripts are different and people have oral tradition. Somebody suggested the brilliant idea of radio. By then we approached Amarjit. She had worked in Southall, and knew all about Southall. She has done projects, training, and was very good with people.<sup>3</sup>

Building communication and relationship in the community is an important aspect of Desi Radio, and the role of Amarjit Khera in this is crucial. Feminist scholarship defines interpersonal communication as an essential dimension of generating politics. Scarpola conceptualizes interpersonal interactions as the "practice of relations" which "operates by valorizing the relationships we already have or by activating new ones". This practice, she argues, frees women "from the paradigm of equality and the politics of rights because it attempts to go beyond them." (2004:204) Depending on the people involved the practice of relationships takes different forms and entails rethinking and questioning

---

3 | Ajit Khera in discussion with the author, January 2012.

of knowledge through the change and consciousness the interaction brings. Located in the midst of the Panjabi neighbourhood in Southall, the physical location of the Centre, where Desi Radio is also located, facilitates community involvement by creating the feeling that casual visits at any time are welcome. Anybody who walked in was greeted with a warm welcome and made comfortable. Amarjit mediated the relationships among women, community and media. She has a deep understanding of gender inequality and women's realities, and advocates women's participation. Her warm and open communication style and judgement-free attitude made radio a space of comfort for women of the community.

Panjabi Centre and Desi Radio regularly organized workshops (e.g. radio production, and digital literacy) along with cultural activities, events, and festivals to create the spaces of interaction, practice and learning about histories and rituals. During my visit I participated in the Lohri Festival that was exclusively for women and children. Amarjit explained how important it was for women to have a space of their own where they could dance, perform, and act freely to connect with their inner self and body, and with each other. She defined dancing as a means of releasing emotions, and the festivals like Lohri as limited spaces women could freely move their bodies; the presence of men would prevent such free expression.<sup>4</sup> When several men insisted on entering the festival, the celebration itself became a means of collective struggle for women to claim their space and presence. Men were prevented from entering by the organizers, and a few stopped by with their complaints at the Centre the following day. Amarjit stood up for the decision and tirelessly explained why celebration was only for women and children.

Desi fulfilled a variety of emotional and practical roles for women volunteers, and functioned as a means of therapy, dealing with loneliness, or easing a new phase such as retirement, divorce, or children leaving home. Building relationships and friendships were very important aspect of this process. Radio specifically provided good environment for older women who felt quite isolated.<sup>5</sup> Anita, who was among the first volunteers of the radio, reflected on her experience:

I was very ill and depressed. My friend literally pushed me here. After the training I did not go to the station a while. At the time my son and daughter were still doing their shows. Amarjit and friends kept calling me and sending messages with my children: 'tell your mother to come.' Then Amarjit phoned and told me "just come and meet everybody and then you can go. I came and continued afterwards. I realized how important it is for women to come here.

---

4 | Amarjit Khara in discussion with the author, January 2012.

5 | Andy Wass in discussion with the author, January 2012. Andy worked as administrative manager to find funding to create training opportunities. He received funds for Pearls and Go Desi projects.

If I see anybody I encourage them to come and tell their own story. The ladies need to be pushed. When you find a part you can work along, it is just somebody need to ring you. If you have good friends you can get on with your lives a lot easier. I think this radio is wonderful.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly Rani talked about how radio brought a change for her:

I finished working and did not know how to pass time at home. Children got married and left me. I knew that place and listened to the radio, but for some reason did not feel comfortable walking in for a long time. One day I decided to walk in. Amarjit is always very supportive and very positive, it does not matter whether she knows you or not. She asked me to come more often. I said I do not have a good voice, and I am not talkative, I cannot go to radio. I will just come here and make a cup of tea for you. I just want company. She said 'everybody starts like that but then they start presenting.' I have never thought I would do so one day, but now I am presenting a music program.<sup>7</sup>

Desi Radio consisted of music, poetry, news, and discussion programs presented by the volunteers, and call-ins facilitated community participation. Continuous support and training created the feelings of comfort and confidence to ensure the participation of women in producing and presenting the programs. The aural nature of radio technology and lack of visibility intrinsically nurtured the sense of comfort. Potential volunteers first participated in several weeks of training program, and spent time in the station before they started presenting. *Pearls* that was funded by *London Development Agency* and *Go Desi* that was supported by V, the national agency that supports young volunteers in the UK, were among two main training sessions of Desi Radio. For over three years, *Pearls* training in radio skills for women was given by *Women's Radio Group* (WRG)<sup>8</sup>, while *Go Desi* was a training program for young people 16 and 26 years old. Regularly organized trainings were also "a means of getting to know each other and be familiar with the community as there were people from all communities, not only from Panjabi community".<sup>9</sup> The training sessions took place in English and besides Panjabi women the participants consisted of the members of Somali, West Indian, and Afro Caribbean communities.<sup>10</sup>

6 | Anita Matharoo in discussion with the author, January 2012.

7 | Rani Surinder Sall in discussion with the author, January 2012.

8 | Women's Radio Group (WRG), previously named Women's Airwaves (WAW), was first established as Women's Radio Workshop in 1979 as a response to under-representation of women on air. WRG's activities included training women for mainstream and community radio stations. (see Mitchell 2000: 95)

9 | Rani Surinder Sall in discussion with the author, January 2012.

10 | Andy Wass in discussion with the author, January 2012

Music was the main tool for the station to construct Panjabi identities beyond religious differences, and divides: "People are always conscious of their identities as Muslim, Sikhs, Hindu or Christian. Music is one way of promoting Panjabi identity that transcends such religious division."<sup>11</sup> The station mobilized the community to bring their own music and recordings of Panjabi music, digitized them and compiled a large collection of Panjabi music with various categories of Shabad (spiritual), Quami Geets,<sup>12</sup> Sufi (e.g. Nusrat Ali Khan, Pathena Khan), Christian Songs, Mata Dian (old traditional songs), Anmol Geets (old melodies from 1940s and 50s), Melody (soft), Bhangra (dance).<sup>13</sup> When Pakistani Muslim music was played the first time the station was called-in with negative reactions and complaints. But the community slowly started seeing the similarities in music and liked it. Volunteers had their initial experience of presenting a music program by selecting songs from the list: as Anita pointed out "for one month all needed to say was the name of the song, we did not get any phone calls. This gave us a lot of practice. The first year we only do music program. It is a way of getting used to the idea, getting used to the desk."<sup>14</sup> All volunteers I talked to emphasized how much they learned through music, and how listening and doing music programs were significant ways of learning about the culture and history.<sup>15</sup>

Language is an important aspect of Panjabi identity. Desi Radio is solely in Panjabi with few English-speaking guests. Spending time at the Centre and doing radio programs made participants more conscious of their Panjabi identity, language and culture. Anita, who has been presenting discussion, poetry, and news programs for several years, commented, "I write poems. Since I started radio I became to realize my Panjabiness and started writing more in Panjabi. Here we have to speak in Panjabi that kind of made me realize. What is there and in me came out. There is so much I did not know before. Being here makes you think!"<sup>16</sup> The account of a long-time presenter like Anita illustrates how the radio production process facilitated a relationship between her identity as a program presenter, as a member of Panjabi community, and as a woman.

Poetry is very common for the community. Women cannot really say much so poetry allow them say their words. In story you have to explain everything whereas in poetry you can say so much in short. I encourage people to come and read their own poems. What I write and the content of my poems has changed too. My identity as Panjabi, my language and roots I came

**11** | Ajit Khera in discussion with the author, January 2012.

**12** | 'Geets' meaning songs in Panjabi.

**13** | Amar in discussion with the author, January 2012.

**14** | Anita Matharoo in discussion with the author, January 2012.

**15** | Chhinder Dhiman and Paramjit Thind in discussion with the author, January 2012.

**16** | Anita Matharoo in discussion with the author, January 2012.

from are integrated into my poetry. I have written on being woman, missing my mother, betrayal (that is such a big theme in this community), and separation from your love, from your roots, and your motherland. In my news program, I re-write the news and pick what is relevant to our community and people, include some news from East and West Panjab, and from here, England. In my discussion programs, I try to create awareness on social issues such as honor killing, violence, black magic, children, cleaning and parking on the roads. As I do the program I introduce the issue at the beginning and then ask people to talk about their opinions. Sometimes in women's gathering, an issue comes up and I do a program on that. Now that I am doing the show my mind is always there. Now I can voice my opinion. I can raise my voice and literally shout. It does make a lot of difference. Above all you become more confident within yourself. Women should be confident; they have been suppressed for too long.<sup>17</sup>

Desi Radio creates a collective communication process for the Panjabi community of Southall by providing a space for women to build new relationships, gain new skills and perspectives about their own capabilities, feel empowered, and become more conscious of their gender and Panjabi identities. Speaking Panjabi, and listening and doing music programs make Desi volunteers more conscious of their Panjabi identities and history. Music and language also play an important role to claim and promote a Panjabi identity beyond the divisions of cast, gender, politics, and religion. The physical location of the radio in the midst of Southall, continuous training activities, and the process of radio production also facilitate connection and communication among all communities of Southall. Amarjit and Ajit acknowledge the significance of the UK broadcasting policies of community radio stations for giving voice to diverse communities. With technological developments, Desi started reaching out to the Panjabis beyond the borders of the UK. This is particularly important for wider dissemination of the issues and concerns to promote dialogue and bridge the divides within the communities. For example, while the population of Muslim Panjabis in Southall area is relatively low, online programming gives the opportunity to reach larger Muslim communities. Desi Radio aims to reach larger groups of listeners to promote Panjabi culture and language within and beyond the borders of the UK, but also prefers to remain local and act local to better serve to the communities of Southall.<sup>18</sup>

---

**17** | Anita Matharoo in discussion with the author, January 2012.

**18** | Ajit Khera in discussion with the author, January 2012.

## REFERENCES

- Bessire, Lucas, and Daniel Fisher (2012): *Radio Fields: Anthropology and Wireless Sound in the 21st Century*. New York: New York University Press.
- Davis, Stuart (2015): "Citizens' Media in the Favelas: Finding a Place for Community-Based Digital Media Production in Social Change Processes." In: *Communication Theory* 25, pp. 230-243.
- Mitchell, Caroline (ed.) (2000): *Women and Radio: Airing Differences*. London: Routledge.
- Mouffe, Chantal (1992): *Dimension of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community*, London: Verso.
- Rodriguez, Clemencia (2001): *Fissures in the Mediascapes: An International Study of Citizens' Media*, Cresskill N.J.: Hampton Press.
- Rodriguez, Clemencia (2011): *Citizens' Media against Armed Conflict*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Scarpura, Susanna (2004): "Feminist Intellectuals as Public Figures in Contemporary Italy." In: *Australian Feminist Studies* 19/44, pp. 201-212.